

# [***Opinion: The magic art of changing your mind***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BY8-RHX1-JBSS-S1VV-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; When I'm teaching new poets about how to think about where a poem might be inside themselves, I often offer up the sonnet "Bright Star," by John Keats. It begins:

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art-Not in lone splendour hung aloft the nightAnd watching, with eternal lids apart, Like nature's patient, sleepless ...

I invite students to this sonnet not just because it's technically gorgeous, but also because it embodies one of poetry's great powers: to show a human being having a quarrel with themselves, demonstrating indecision, lingering in the throes of an unresolvable problem. The poem shows a human speaker in the vulnerable act of changing their mind.

For those who don't know the sonnet well, despite his opening salvo, Keats ends up, at the end of 14 lines, changing his position entirely. Keats' speaker opens by saying how much he'd like to resemble a star, but very soon (by line two, in fact) that same speaker begins to unravel the wish, to wish against it. Keats doesn't want to be in the sky, eternally (and probably uncomfortably) unblinking, or even to be an "Eremite," - which is just a fancy word for hermit. Instead, by the end of the poem, Keats' speaker affirms the opposite: though he admires the permanence of the star, he'd also like to be mortal, connected and "pillowed on (his) fair love's ripening breast" - the breast changing, both by ripening, and by rising and falling on his lover's breath.

Keats doesn't want to be distant at all, it turns out. The only eternity he desires is at the side of his fragile, changeable love. Keats, in other words, is living inside a paradox. He's laid out a problem that his poem - and our lives - cannot resolve.

It seems to me that this change is part of the point. Poetry has many joys: They include music, density, heft, shape, mystery, rhyme. But one of them - one that gives poetry its staying power - is the ability to language a space by which we can alter, even slightly, our hearts, our minds. One of the main units of the poem is the volta, a term that also comes to us from the sonnet. The volta is where the logic of the poem turns, and the poetic voice turns its attention. The poem might change its frame of reference, widen its gaze, alter the terms of its argument. The poem thinks aloud, thinks in motion.

As it happens, we can trace the term volta to the 13th century. The word "volta" also makes an audible pun on the word "volto" - the act of making a face. It was the job of the poem to turn, to change its face in a way that demonstrated its humanity. It was the poem's role to change its mind out loud, by setting out one way and then changing course. The poem did this by disagreeing with itself.

The volta is still one of the vital units of poetry. It holds an argument for surprise, an argument for the unexpected, an argument against certainty. It's a reminder that to be human is to turn, to reconsider, to be undecided, to see anew. To be human is to be willing to change.

Having just concluded National Poetry Month in April, and amid a national climate marked by conflict, I want to affirm this fact: that poems are a place where we can perform the art of uncertainty, the art of changing the frame, the art of growing humble before what may never be resolved. I am grateful that poems help us name what's ultimately vulnerable in our lives.

We live in an era of furious certainties, of heightened division, a time when we are daily urged to know the world in absolutes. We hear these scripts around us all the time: "Anyone who supports x is y," might go one logic. "Who among you doesn't think x / hasn't made a statement about y / hasbeen silent about z?"asks another familiar social media voice. "If you don't / haven't/ won't, I unfriend you!" I'm paraphrasing here, but I am sure most readers can supply their own causes, certainties or angers. We may all also recognize moments when we are asked to perform our certainty in language handed to us by others.

We live in a moment when there is crisis upon crisis. We are urged to know, to act, to solve. Yet even and especially when it is politically urgent to know, feel and act, certainty is only one of the textures of human experience. And lingering in the humbling, human experience of paradox may give us the empathy we need - with ourselves and others - to begin and continue the great work of repair. Where can we find powerful language that affirms our bafflement, our fathoming, our vulnerability, our human indecision? Where can we find the language in which we are curious, wonder, grow humble knowing that we haven't solved it yet? How do we affirm the places where we live in confusion?

I think if we are honest with ourselves, we will find that these spaces are many, and that where we feel them, they are tender. Poetry helps us excavate these feelings, to live inside their ambivalence.

"Out of quarrels with others we make ***politics***," said WB Yeats, famously. "Out of quarrels with the self, we make poetry." As my students write, I ask them to chart these internal quarrels. I ask, "How can your writing explore this complexity? How can your poem surprise and delight you by changing its mind?" I hold up the joy of this surprise, the turn which helps us discover something new within ourselves. This discovery can help us enter more delighted and compassionate relationshipswith our own stories, and with one another. And in difficult times, it can make space for hope.

I'm not saying that poetry doesn't have a place to hold our rage. What I am saying is that poetry doesn't end on the same note it starts on, that it has the capacity to transform that rage and also whatever else might seem fixed in our hearts. When we are in touch with this kind of transformation, when we are attuned to these paradoxes within and around us, it might just give us more patience with ourselves, and others, and awareness of transformation itself. Our certainties are not all that they seem. Sometimes out of this vulnerable place of not knowing, deeper answers can begin.

Opinion by Tess Taylor

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