

# AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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## American Life in Poetry: Column 060

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

Most of us have taken at least a moment or two to reflect upon what we have learned from our mothers. Through a catalog of meaningful actions that range from spiritual to domestic, Pennsylvanian Julia Kasdorf evokes the imprint of her mother's life on her own. As the poem closes, the speaker invites us to learn these actions of compassion.

### What I Learned From My Mother

I learned from my mother how to love  
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand  
in case you have to rush to the hospital  
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants  
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars  
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole  
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears  
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins  
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.  
I learned to attend viewing even if I didn't know  
the deceased, to press the moist hands  
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer  
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.  
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,  
what anyone will remember is that we came.  
I learned to believe I had the power to ease  
awful pains materially like an angel.  
Like a doctor, I learned to create  
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once  
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.  
To every house you enter, you must offer  
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,  
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.

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