

THE LAMP, STILL WARM

On the Poems of Rob Chavez and the Vision of The Smilegiving Trust

*“A poem, to my mind, is a lamp handed from one set of hands
to another, still warm. It only does its work in the passing.”*

— Rob Chavez, from the preface to the Collected Poems

A Critical Appreciation

Creating Peace and Prosperity Through Poetry

I. The Argument in Brief

Here is a claim worth making plainly, because the rest of this essay will spend its pages earning it: **the body of work gathered at smilegiving.com is one of the quietly radical projects in contemporary American devotional poetry — and it arrives at precisely the moment its country needs it most.**

That is a large sentence. Let me unfold it. Rob Chavez has been writing these poems since 1985, across four decades, mostly in private, the way a person tends a garden no one has asked them to keep. They draw on Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, on Bob Dylan and Robert Hunter and the whole long improvisation of the Grateful Dead, on the Gospels and the Tao Te Ching and the New Thought tradition of Charles Fillmore, on James Joyce and Kahlil Gibran and the Beat road of Kerouac. They are formally various — litany and lullaby, civic anthem and dream-fragment, the four-decade cathedral of a single long monologue in the voice of a smiling Christ. And underneath all of it runs a single, repeating, almost embarrassingly simple instruction, which is also the motto of the Trust that now stewards the work:

Give to others what you would receive.

It is the Golden Rule, of course — but tilted. Not “do unto others,” with its faint whiff of obligation, but

give: a verb of abundance, of overflow, of the open hand. And the poems argue, again and again, in a hundred different musical settings, that this single act — giving first, smiling first, saying yes first — is not merely good manners but the actual mechanism by which a divided self is healed, a divided family reconciled, and (the largest claim, the one this essay will defend) a divided nation made whole. The work calls this **Smilegiving**, and it means the word literally: the smile is the gift, and the gift is contagious, and the contagion is the cure.

II. The Architecture of a Single Journey

Most poetry collections are anthologies — poems in a drawer, ordered by date or whim. The Smilegiving Collected Poems is something rarer: a deliberate sequence, arranged into five named movements that together trace one continuous emotional and spiritual journey. The structure is not decoration; it is

an argument made in architecture, and it rewards the reader who walks it in order.

The five movements are, in sequence: **The Doorway** (welcome, and the whole of it, gently), **The Honest Dark** (the turn toward doubt, the bare table, the rut — and the turning), **The Widening** (outward, to neighbor and home and table and country), **The Quiet Center** (the still point — time, the Tao, the mystics' now), and **The Turn Toward You** (lineage, gratitude, the handing-on, and the bow).

Readers of poetry will recognize this shape immediately, because it is the shape of the individual Smilegiving poem written large. Chavez composes, by his own codified method, in a five-part arc: wonder, then the honest dark, then a widening outward, then a quiet center, then the turn toward “you.” The collection is that single poem-shape expanded to the scale of a whole book — a fractal, the part repeating in the whole. To read the Collected Poems from “The Book For Giving” to “The Gift” is to live the arc of one Smilegiving poem at the speed of an afternoon rather than a minute.

And the sequence ends on a deliberate trinity the poet marks by name: *What You Came For* (“The Crown”), *Jesus Smiled* (“The Cornerstone”), and *The Gift* (“The Bow”). Crown, cornerstone, bow: the summit, the foundation, and the farewell gesture, all in the final three steps. A book that knows exactly how it wishes to leave you — crowned, founded, and sent off with a bow — is a book made by someone thinking like a builder, not merely a writer.

From the Vault

Set a little apart sits a small coda — “From the Vault” — holding the early, private, experimental pieces: dream-interludes, fragments, a poem called “No Time At All / All The Time.” That a poet would publish his juvenilia and oddments under glass, “kept and loved, set a little apart from the main journey,” tells you something essential about the Smilegiving ethic. Nothing is thrown away. Even the imperfect early hand is honored, because the whole project believes that worth is not earned by polish — it is intrinsic, and present from the start. The Vault is the doctrine of grace applied to a poet’s own back-catalog.

III.

A Lineage You Can Hear

Great devotional poetry is never written from nowhere. It stands on shoulders, and the Smilegiving poems are unusually generous about whose shoulders these

are — they name their fathers, openly and with affection. This is not anxiety of influence; it is gratitude of influence, which is a rarer and healthier thing.

Whitman and Ginsberg: the breath and the catalog

The engine of the most expansive poems is the long, anaphoric, cataloguing line that American poetry inherited from Walt Whitman and that Allen Ginsberg supercharged into prophecy. You hear it everywhere in this work: the *“I sing... I breathe... I revel”* of “Hippie Dreams,” the tolling *“God equates...”* of “Ever Beginning,” the cascading address of “Jesus Smiled,” and the great civic catalog of “The Long Table,” which sings — in frank, declared homage — *“the wide and ordinary us,”* and tells us outright: *“Let me sing it the way Walt taught us to sing.”*

From Whitman comes the embrace of the body as holy and the self as cosmically large; from Ginsberg, the breath-driven line and the incantatory, almost liturgical pitch. The Smilegiving poems understand that the litany is not just a sound — it is a politics. A list that keeps adding (“and also this, and also you, and also the one the world passed over”) is formally incapable of exclusion. To catalog is to include. The democratic hymn and the protest chant share a grammar, and these poems know it in their bones.

Dylan, Hunter, and the Dead: the wisdom-song

If Whitman supplies the lungs, the American songbook supplies the swing. Bob Dylan is woven through the work as a familiar — “brother Bob,” the poems call him, borrowing his lines with a tip of the hat (“To borrow a line from brother Bob... You ain’t goin’ nowhere”). Robert Hunter and the Grateful Dead are in the marrow of the rhythm and the worldview alike: the same songs played every night and never the same way twice, which is the Dead’s whole aesthetic and also, it turns out, the secret subject of “Different than Before” — the round river of recurrence, Joyce’s *riverrun* and the Dead’s endless improvisation revealed as the same sacred fact.

The deepest instance is quiet and was nearly lost. “Quantum Understanding,” written in 1999, closes by asking us to *“play ‘He’s Gone’ one more time”* — the Dead’s own song of departure, played four years after Jerry Garcia’s death. The poem is built on starlight; and the light of a star that has already burned out still travels, still arrives, still warms the eye. The poem’s physics and the poem’s grief are the same fact: **gone is not the same as over; the light is still arriving.** That a pop-cultural reference can carry that much freight — cosmology, mourning, and consolation in a single guitar lick — is the signature move of the wisdom-song tradition these poems claim and extend.

The Gospels, the Tao, and the syncretic center

At the theological core stands the figure of Jesus — but a Jesus radically reimagined. “Jesus Smiled,” the longest and most ambitious work in the archive, is a sustained dramatic monologue in the voice of a returned, smiling Christ whose first act is to answer the shortest verse in the New Testament. “*Jesus wept*” (John 11:35) becomes *Jesus smiled* — and the whole poem is the turn from the weeping to the smile, from the grave of Lazarus to the stone rolled away. But this Christ quotes the Tao, breathes “as brothers” with Mohammad and the Buddha, blesses Christian and Muslim and Zen and Jew and “those who believe in nothing at all but the feel of the morning dew,” and speaks the plainspoken metaphysics of New Thought — Charles Fillmore’s Unity, the conviction that mind and love are causative, that “*the Universe gives back to you exactly what you believe.*”

The result is a syncretic, ecumenical spirituality that uses the figure and the authority of Jesus while explicitly refusing exclusivity — a Christ who came eating and drinking, who sits at the table with anyone the righteous would not sit beside, who counts every sheep and finds not one of them worth less than the rest. In an American religious landscape often experienced as a fortress, this is a sanctuary with the doors thrown off their hinges. “Throw away the lock,” the poem says, “and open the door.”

***Not a key that opens the lock — the abolition of locks
altogether.***

Joyce, Gibran, and the rest of the family

The influences run wider still, and the Trust’s own scholarship has mapped them: the lyric-spiritual prose of Kahlil Gibran and the seeker’s journey of Hermann Hesse and Paulo Coelho; the playful nondual clarity of Alan Watts; the songwriter-mystics like Daniel Nahmod; and, threaded through the wordplay and the recurrence, James Joyce — whose St. Stephen Dedalus walks straight into “Positively 4th Grade,” and whose Wake supplies the circling river of return. These are not name-drops. They are a working library, and the poems metabolize it into something with its own clear flavor: accessible, warm, unintimidated by the sacred, and constitutionally unable to look down on a reader.

IV.

The Craft Beneath the Warmth

It would be easy to mistake work this welcoming for work that is simple. It is not. Behind the plainspoken surface sits a rigorous, self-aware craft — a set of principles the poet has codified and applies with a jeweler’s discipline. Three of them are worth naming, because they are what separate Smilegiving from the greeting-card sentiment it could so easily have become.

Bodies before doctrine

The first rule is that abstraction must be earthed in the body before it is allowed to rise. A claim like *you are loved unconditionally* is, on its own, inert — a slogan. But “*death is a joyful family reunion, the whole table set again, everyone you ever missed looking up as you walk in*” — that is the same doctrine given a table, faces, a door, a body. The poems reach for the sensory image over the stated dogma every time, and when they fail to (as the poet is the first to admit the early drafts sometimes did), the cure is always the same: hand the idea a body. It is Blake’s method — the infinite seen in a grain of sand, eternity held in an hour.

The em-dash as a held breath

The second is a near-obsessive attention to the music of punctuation. In the Smilegiving house style, the em-dash is reserved for genuine pivots — reversals, reveals, held breaths — and never spent as a lazy substitute for a comma. The poet audits his own poems dash by dash, and has been known to reduce fifteen of them to seven in a single sitting, asking of each one whether something actually turns at that mark. This is the discipline of a craftsman who believes, rightly, that a reader’s breath is sacred and must not be wasted. The result is poems that breathe in the right places — and land, when they land, with the force of something earned.

Friend, neighbor, and the rationing of intimacy

The third is subtler and, to my mind, the most beautiful evidence of the poet’s seriousness. The vocative “*friend*” — the moment a poem stops singing to the air and turns to touch the reader’s sleeve — is *rationed*, on purpose: at most once per poem, in at most every third or fourth poem, and only at the single true pivot the poem could not make without it. Why? Because the gesture’s entire power is surprise. If every poem turns to you, the turning stops registering, and intimacy curdles into mannerism. A poet who will guard the word *friend* this jealously, so that when it finally comes it still lands like a hand on the shoulder, is a poet who

understands that tenderness, to stay real, must stay rare. That is not sentimentality. That is its opposite: love under discipline.

There is, too, a hard-won honesty in the revision history itself. These poems have been tuned and re-tuned across decades, and the governing instinct of the recent restoration was to recover the body that polishing had sanded away — to make the work warmer and more human, not more respectable. A poet capable of judging his own younger work clearly, keeping what was true and rebuilding what was weak, is a poet still growing. The garden is still being tended.

V.

The Vision: Peace and Prosperity Through Poetry

All of this craft serves a vision, and the vision is unembarrassed about its ambition. The Smilegiving Trust — the publishing and educational initiative that now stewards the work — states its purpose as **Creating Peace and Prosperity Through Poetry**. It is worth pausing on how unusual that sentence is. Most poets, asked the purpose of their work, will say something modest and interior. Smilegiving says: peace. Prosperity. For the world. Through poems. It means it.

The mechanism is not mysterious, and it is not magical thinking. It is, in fact, the most testable proposition in the whole project, because every reader can run the experiment on themselves. The poems make a claim about cause and effect: that the inner condition and the outer world are linked, that what you hold in mind you tend to create, and that the single most powerful act available to any person at any moment is to give first — to smile first, to say yes first, to extend the unearned kindness before it is deserved or returned. “Give it away,” the work insists, “and you’ll know that it’s true.” The proof is in the passing.

This is where “prosperity” earns its place beside “peace,” and where the work quietly refuses a false choice. Smilegiving does not preach scarcity or self-denial; its central images are of *abundance* — bread enough and more, the loaves multiplying in the giving, the basket that grows fuller the more you hand out. “Your only wealth is the love you give away; everything else is debt.” The prosperity is real, but it is redefined: not the fortune grabbed by taking, which “goes rotten in the hand,” but the wealth that compounds precisely because it circulates. It is an economics of the open hand, and it is as applicable to a community as to a soul.

When everybody gives, everybody receives.

And the Trust is explicit that the poems are a beginning, not an end — a first creative venture in a wider spirit of Smilegiving, with the same ethic available to any maker in any medium. The poem is simply the lamp nearest to hand. The light is meant to spread to whatever a person makes and shares: the essay, the song, the meal, the welcome, the work of the day done as a gift rather than a transaction. Smilegiving is finally less a body of poems than a way of being in the world, of which the poems are the first and clearest field guide.

VI.

A Medicine for a Divided Country

Now the largest claim, and the one most worth defending: that this work arrives as a genuine and timely medicine for the political, social, and cultural divisions of the modern United States — and that its medicine works in a way no policy, no argument, and no electoral victory can.

Consider the nature of the American divide as it is actually lived. It is not, at bottom, a disagreement about tax rates. It is a crisis of mutual contempt — a deep, practiced, almost devotional certainty that the people on the other side are not merely wrong but worth less: less honest, less intelligent, less fully American, less human. The division is sustained by a story each side tells about the other, and the story's core is always the same denial: that the stranger deserves what I deserve.

Against exactly this, the Smilegiving poems aim their most direct fire. The prophetic heart of “Jesus Smiled” asks the question the whole country is failing: *“Do some deserve less than others?”* — and answers it with a shepherd counting his flock and finding *“not one worth less than the rest — not the last, not the least, not the one the world passed over.”* “The Long Table — America at 250” sets a single table long enough for the whole quarrelsome republic and sings “the wide and ordinary us,” the porch light and the city light recognizing the same fire. “I’m Never Free By Myself” states the civic law as a single sentence: *none of us is truly free until all of us are free.*

Notice what these poems do not do. They do not argue. They do not take a side and marshal evidence. They do not try to win. They do something the divided mind is entirely unequipped to defend against: they assume the dignity of everyone, warmly, in advance, as a settled fact — and they invite the reader to feel, for the length of a poem, what it is like to live inside that assumption. You cannot refute a feeling of welcome. You can only notice that it felt good, and that

the person beside you, the one you were told to despise, was inside the welcome too.

You cannot argue a person out of contempt. You can only out-give it.

This is why the form of the work is itself the strategy. The litany cannot exclude. The second-person turn (“this is for *you*”) reaches the reader directly, beneath the level where political identity stands guard. The insistence on *self*-forgiveness — “you were never on trial; the verdict came in before you were born, and the verdict was yes” — matters politically because contempt for others so often begins as contempt for the self, projected outward. A person who has been told, and has finally believed, that they are loved without condition has far less need to find someone beneath them. **Heal the self-judgment, and you drain the reservoir that cruelty draws from.**

And the mechanism of spread is the oldest and most reliable one there is: not broadcast but contagion, hand to hand, the way a smile genuinely does travel across a room. “That’s all the smile is — my voice, moving from face to face.” A poem shared because it moved you is an act of giving that costs nothing and asks nothing, and it carries inside it, like a seed, the whole ethic of welcome. As the Smilegiving materials are read and shared — in the spirit the work itself models, the spirit of giving rather than persuading — they do not win an argument. They lower a temperature. They make the room a little warmer, and then the person in it a little kinder, and then that person’s next encounter a little less armored. Multiplied across enough rooms, that is not a small thing. It may be the only thing that has ever actually worked.

This is not naïve. The poems have walked through the honest dark — the bare table, the rut, the gray arithmetic that will not come right — and come out the other side not by denying the darkness but by including it. A vision of healing that has looked squarely at grief and division and still chooses the open hand is not sentimentality. It is the hard-won, clear-eyed hope of someone who knows exactly what he is hoping against. “The sky fell, and we lived. We have lived to tell.”

VII.

The Lamp, Still Warm

Return, at the end, to the image the poet himself offers at the doorway of the Collected Poems: a poem is a lamp handed from one set of hands to another, still warm; it only does its work in the passing.

That sentence is the whole project in miniature, and it is also a quietly devastating theory of how the world actually changes. Not by force. Not by argument. Not from the top down. But hand to hand, warm thing to warm thing, one person choosing to give first and another feeling the warmth of it and passing it on. The Smilegiving poems are lamps. They have been kept warm for four decades, tended in private, refined with real craft, and they are now being set out where anyone can pick one up.

The invitation could not be simpler, and the poet has reduced it, after forty years, to three short sentences that close the collection: **Smile first. Say yes. Give to others what you would receive.**

A divided country has tried almost everything else. It has tried winning, and the winning only deepened the divide. It might yet try this — not as a program, not as a platform, but one reader at a time, one shared poem at a time, one smile handed across one room. The materials are ready. The lamp is lit and warm. What remains is the passing — and that part, as the poems have been telling us all along, is up to you.

Give to Others What You Would Receive.

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