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## National Poetry Month in the Time of Coronavirus — Smerconish

Steven Biondolillo April 28, 2020

4-5 minutes

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"Amid Coronavirus Surge, Massachusetts Now at Center of Nationwide Outbreak": yesterday's headline, today's impetus to share a poem.

While the Coronavirus has eclipsed National Poetry Month, checking my Inbox I'm reminded that human tragedy, distress, and drama still share the same fast friend: poetry.

Most of us older than 30 remember that, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the only thing that surpassed the global *philanthropic* outpouring was the outpouring of *poetry*.

The reason: to mourn, to make sense, and to move us forward. When humanity grinds to a halt, poetry is the lubrication we reach for to help get our gears going.

A poem is a "made thing." As such, it has often been suggested that it's entirely unnecessary to know the maker of a poem in order to enjoy or be moved by it, just as it's unnecessary to know the maker of a rocking chair to appreciate its beauty or usefulness.

However, while a poem should certainly be able to "stand alone," it also stands to reason that knowing a little bit about the maker

might increase one's appreciation of the piece.

Accordingly, here's some relevant personal information: my academic background is in English literature and religious studies, I was a competitive wrestler and college coach, I'm a father and (young!) grandfather, and for 24 years I've been a poet to various groups of business professionals, athletes, first responders, and other "men and women of action."

Connecting the dots, then, the piece I'll share today is derived from the Old Testament and history's greatest-ever imagined wrestling match, signals the seminal challenge faced by all progenitors, and communicates in clear, powerful, and meaningful poetry.

You might ask, what is "clear, powerful, and meaningful" poetry? You wouldn't be the first. Rather than decry the state of what Canadian critic and poet Carmine Starnino has ironically called "the apex art," here are some characteristics that resonate with my aforementioned "audiences of action":

- Narrative line, some form of storyline, however brief or oblique
- Meter and rhyme, to sound and feel like poetry
- Literary or other artistic allusion, to provide texture, strength, resonance, and context
- Meaning and/or moral, either subtly conveyed or delivered in a knockout punch

While the piece I've selected to share from my volume, *Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto*, speaks directly to the kind of staggering challenge represented by the unfolding pandemic, it neither mourns nor tries to "make sense."

Instead, the poem insists we move forward, and uses God's

command to Israelite Patriarch Jacob--a critical figure in all Abrahamic religions--to make the point: "Lekh-L'kha."

Packed into these three Hebrew syllables is the most-profound-ever existential warning and directive, and utterly uncompromising and life-changing imperative: God's command to "dig deep and get moving," His "size-infinity" shoe square in your pants!

I have the privilege at this point in my "poetry career" of knowing that every one of my published pieces has at least a single person somewhere who claims it to be a favorite. "The lekh l'kha imperative" is no exception.

In fact, the first individual to claim it as "favorite" was a 6'3" 230 lb. former Division I defensive lineman who described it this way: "frightening."

One more thing: "The lekh l'kha imperative" will introduce to some listeners another "nuclear bit" of Hebrew--perhaps the language's other most-famous call to action--a single syllable heralding where engagement, life itself should always begin: "Sh'ma"--listen, hear, understand! The magic and power of Hebrew is that it says so much in so few syllables... like poetry.

Here's the two-minute piece (please copy and paste into your browser): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smZX8cwg-vQ>

And here's [The Jacob Challenge website](#), in which the piece is embedded.



Steven H. Biondolillo is the founder and president of Biondolillo Associates, Inc., a marketing and development consulting firm dedicated to helping nonprofit organizations build special-events and other creative fundraising programs. Biondolillo is widely recognized both for sparking the national renaissance in walkathons and other peer-to-peer fundraisers, and for coining the term "signature event." Additionally, he has developed what is regarded to be the nation's premiere training program in the field of special-event fundraising. Fundraisers developed by Biondolillo have raised over \$1.4 billion.

Biondolillo was an elite freestyle wrestler and medalist in national and international competition. He was a member of the coaching staff of Boston College's NCAA Division 1 wrestling program. His op-ed pieces on amateur sports and child welfare have appeared in publications throughout the United States, including The Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Miami Herald, Philadelphia Inquirer, Boston Herald, New York Daily News, Boston Business Journal and Union Leader. The third edition of his book, *Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto*, which Biondolillo uses in team building programs and retreats, was published in 2018.

Biondolillo completed graduate work in English Literature at McGill University and language studies at the University of Grenoble. He received his BA in English Language & Literature from Boston University, where he was president of the National Senior Honor Society and all-university valedictorian. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Army War College's National Security Seminar.

In 2013 Biondolillo was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame as an "Outstanding American from Massachusetts."