



Neville and Geri Johnston

BROCKVILLE LAWYER

NEVILLE JOHNSTON

FINDS PEACE IN POETRY

By Lorraine Payette

“I am not a numerologist,” says Brockville’s lawyer/poet Neville Johnston. “But there is something about the number three in my life.”

Threes and their multiples follow him, lead him, and seem to be everywhere in his life. Born at 12:15 a.m. on the 30th day of the 6th month in the 39th year of the last century, he was blessed with three older siblings and three younger, all born three years apart in the joined municipality of Kingston/St. Andrew, Jamaica. He has three children, three sisters and three children. He practices three types of law. Perhaps there is something special in the threes, perhaps not, but they may give an insight into the man and his magic. Of course, there are the three Muses, the goddesses of poetry.

“I wrote my first poem after Hurricane Charlie hit Jamaica on August 17, 1951,” says Johnston. “That was when I was at the age of 12, and it just came to me.”

Johnston was not a willing student, and admits that he hated school when he first started. But he went regularly and did his best, and the teachers introduced him to poetry.

“I still have the book from all that time ago, the poems that I first wrote,” he says. “They were all rhyming things and when I read some of them now I have to laugh.”

But time and the system were generous, and he grew to know the works of great poets. Burns and Wordsworth both spoke to him with a beauty of language and flow of words, but it was Shakespeare who showed him where he truly wanted to be. The glory of the language and the freedom of blank verse captured him as nothing had before.

“Free verse allows for the powers of full expression without the circumscription of being a slave to rhyme, which too often causes a poet to sacrifice the message for the rhyme,” says Johnston.

“Sometimes, though, I lose the poems. It isn’t uncommon to wake up at three or four o’clock in the morning and hear one in my head, or I may be in a crowded room and suddenly a poem is there. Poetry comes with tranquility, but even in the noise, there can be that peace, and the mind just starts working.”

But no matter how beautiful the soul or grand the art, people have to eat. “Real” careers must be chosen and training

undertaken in order to keep life in the body, so he found himself in the position of choosing a field of training.

"Even though I didn't like school to start with, at a very early age I decided that I wanted to be either a doctor or a lawyer," he says. "Medicine was always in the forefront, probably because my mother was ill with colitis at a very early age. When you see that happen to someone you love, you feel that you want to do something to cure them. Sometimes in my teenage years, I'd go to the courthouse and just sit in and listen to cases. I developed a fascination for it, so it was either law or medicine. It was always a choice between these professions."

He was better in the humanities than the sciences, and in Jamaica at that time, you could take one or the other for the last two years of high school, but not both. Being a lover of language, he went with humanities, assuming he could make the rest up later and head on to medical school.

Johnston did apply to medical school in London, England, and was accepted even without the sciences, but he couldn't afford to go. He later moved to Toronto, and approached the medical faculty at the University of Toronto.

"When I arrived in Canada, I had five dollars in my pocket," he says. "They said that if I took one year of Bachelor of Science and passed it, they would guarantee my acceptance into medicine. But for law, because we went to the equivalent of grade 14 in Jamaica, they said they would give me an exemption of one year for my Bachelor of Arts, so I would start in the second year. So the choice was pretty easy."

He worked his way through university and law school and went on to specialize in three areas: civil litigation, real estate and wills/estates. For some years, he did a lot of personal injury cases. This allowed him to study how the human body worked as he researched each one, letting him get a taste of medicine while still practicing law.

The three areas blend nicely for him; allowing him better insight into each and helping him avoid the pitfalls that could come along without that extra knowledge.

"The law lives in civil litigation," he says. "Our system is built on precedents, which help to determine a case. By arguing some cases, you may be able to change the law

in certain aspects, and it all comes down according to the decisions of the courts. You have to be completely cognizant of what the law is, and you take it to court and see what the judge thinks. It keeps you pretty up to date on what the law is saying."

From there the law passes on, and the case may or may not set up new rules and ways of thinking. The law is always alive, always vital, but at the same time it remains structured and intense. There is very little room for tranquility or creative thought.

"The practice of law, working on a client's case, the conscious consumes you and buries the subconscious," said Johnston. "Poetry comes from the creative part of the brain: and for it to really work; it can't come artificially, the way coming up with a brief in law works. For the brief, you have to apply conscious thought and reason: while the exercising of the creative part of the brain has to be natural. It just flows. That's why Keats said that poetry must come like leaves falling from a tree or it's not poetry."

He is married to Geri Johnston, local theologian who spends much of her time helping churches with the delicate task of asking parishioners to set up estate plans and bequests to benefit the churches later on. Neville helps with the legal paperwork for all of this.

Geri is also his publisher. Neville put out his first book, "Songs of My Seasons", nearly forty years ago, then spent thirty years being a lawyer and raising a family before publishing again. However, he kept writing, and Geri couldn't keep it all to themselves any longer. She started a publishing company specifically to see him back in print.

Since then she has published three more of his books – "Rimes of Passion", "Wild as Whippoorwills in the Night", and "The Chalice Full: Poems for the Common Man". Each book is a careful compilation of the works Neville has produced over time, and each has its own particular flavour. They are available for \$10 each from Leeds County Books, 73 King St. W, in Brockville.

"Geri is my greatest critic," he says. "She keeps it all honest."

When asked to define poetry, Johnston smiles and laughs before he answers.

"Poetry is freedom." **LH**

... THE HURRICANE ...

(written September 8, 1951)

On August seventeen,
nineteen fifty-one
People had their radios on,
To listen to the latest reports
Of the hurricane that was about
To strike Jamaica, Isle of Springs,
People could not sleep, nor sing;
It was about to strike
Hills and plains and rough-waved sea
Like an ogre sent out quite free;
When the hour was nearly come,
The air was a cool and charming one;
Then suddenly, there was a puff of
unfriendly breeze,
It was then ready to kill and seize
The lives of good and innocent ones.
The rain came forth, and hence
started the hurricane;
That night, minutes went like hours,
They had to stop all electric powers,
Then we went back to olden days,
With the lantern and those ways;
"It" went on, and could not stop
Everybody's heart went "bip-bop";
People started to cry in vain,
But their voices could not be heard,
In the midst of the wind and rain.
The animals were out
in the wet and cold,
But many of them were quite bold;
We all had to help one-another,
We could not say "I can't bother";
When morning came we were glad
Except for some who were so sad
Because they lost someone dear,
Down their cheeks came tear by tear;
We were glad because
many of us are still living,
So let's give God a hearty
Thanksgiving.

Neville Johnston
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