



POETRY AS THERAPY

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It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day for
lack of what is found there.

--William Carlos Williams

Since 1991, I have been conducting group poetry reading and writing sessions at Sanctuary Centers. My interest in this field began as far back as I can remember, before I ever knew there was such a thing as poetry therapy. As a child I remember sitting in school daydreaming. My mind would wander out the window, and as it did, my feet would begin to tap a rhythm. The more I would fall into the rhythm, the more complex it would become, and then words and images would swim to mind. Before I could write them down, however, the teacher would call me back to the classroom, where shame would quickly replace ecstasy, having lost one focus for another. Only years later would I understand that entering the space of rhythm was the place where poetry dwelt, and that place resisted the mind of everyone but the individual, the creative Self, the "I."

In the years that I have been writing poetry with many different groups, I have come to respect more and more the indefinable place from which the poem comes (which I like to call "The Secret Place"), the ability of each individual to travel to that source of creativity easily and naturally, and how much the poem has to teach us about ourselves and the world, as form and sound give rise to silence. One of the benefits of poetry reading and writing is not only does it help define the "I", but strengthen it. This is necessary if we are to be a part of the world. The process attaches us to the greater part of ourselves, to all that is whole and good and beautiful. And when we feel ourselves as not alone in the world, but a part of and

integrated with all that exists, self-esteem grows. The good news is we discover we are the same heroes and heroines of the old mythology, and in writing ourselves we extend it into the present, and forward, creating new stories to mark us.

Some of the members of the poetry groups at Sanctuary Centers have been coming for two to three years. Each week their poems are typed and added to a notebook. Some of them have several volumes. It seemed important to me to fasten their poems down, so that when they moved from place to place, they could take their poems with them to provide some continuity. When this activity first started I asked a group how it felt to have their creations in this form. One young man, who dictated all his words, clutching his book to his heart said, "I feel like I am somebody, finally."

It is important to mention here that the focus of poetry for healing is self-expression and growth of the individual whereas the focus of poetry as art is the poem itself. But both use the same tools and techniques; language, rhythm, metaphor, sound, and image, to name a few. In the end, the result often is the same. The word therapy, after all, comes from the Greek word *therapeia* meaning to nurse or cure through dance, song, poem and drama, that is the expressive arts. The Greeks have told us that Asclepius, the god of healing, was the son of Apollo, god of poetry, medicine and the arts historically entwined.

History of Poetry Therapy

Though poetry as therapy is a relatively new development in the expressive arts, it is as old as the first chants sung around the tribal fires of primitive peoples. The chant/song/poem is what heals the heart and soul. Even the word psychology suggests that, *psyche* meaning soul and *logos* speech or word. In mythology Oceanus told Prometheus, "Words are the physician of the mind diseased."

Though it was recorded there was a Roman physician named Soranus in the first century A.D. who prescribed poetry and drama for his patients, the link between poetry and medicine has not been well documented. It is interesting to note, however, that the first hospital in the American colonies to care for the mentally ill, Pennsylvania Hospital founded in 1751 by Benjamin Franklin, employed several ancillary treatments for their patients including reading, writing and the publishing of their writings in a newspaper they titled *The*

Illuminator.

The term “bibliotherapy” is a more common term than poetry therapy, which became popular in the 1960’s and 1970’s, which literally means the use of literature to serve or help. Freud once wrote, “Not I, but the poet discovered the unconscious.”

Another time he said, “The mind is a poetry-making organ.” Later on, many other theoreticians such as Adler, Jung, Arieti and Reik wrote of how much science had to gain from the study of poets.

In the 1950’s, Eli Greifer, a poet, pharmacist and lawyer began a “poemtherapy” group at Creedmore State Hospital in New York City and in 1959 at Cumberland Hospital in Brooklyn, facilitated by psychiatrists Dr. Jack J. Leedy and Dr. Sam Spector. Dr. Leedy published the first definitive book on poetry therapy in 1969, *Poetry Therapy*, which includes essays by many of the early pioneers in the field. About this time more and more people in the helping professions began to use poetry integrated with group process. Among them was Arthur Lerner, Ph.D. of Los Angeles who founded the Poetry Therapy Institute in the 1970’s on the west coast and in 1976 authored *Poetry in the Therapeutic Experience*.

Finally, in 1980, a meeting was called to bring together those active in the field working all over the country to formulate guidelines for training and certification in poetry therapy and form what is now called the National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT Guide to Training, 1997). For more information on this organization you may visit their website at <http://www.poetrytherapy.org>.

Healing Components of Poetry

Poetry is the response of our innermost being to the ecstasy, the agony and the all-embracing mystery of life. It is a song, or a sigh, or a cry, often all of them together.

--Charles Angoff (Lerner, 1994)

Poetry humanizes because it links the individual by its distilled experience, its rhythms, its words to another in a way which no other form of communication can. Poetry also helps to ease the aloneness which we all share in common.

--Myra Cohn Livingston (Lerner, 1994)

I believe that a poem is an emotional-intellectual-physical construct that is meant to touch the heart of the reader, that it is meant to be re-experienced by the reader. I believe that a poem is a window that hangs between two or more human beings who otherwise live in darkened rooms. I also believe that a poem is a noise and that noise is shaped.

--Stephen Dobyns (Dobyns, 1997)

The above quotations encompass some of the therapeutic aspects of poetry mentioned in the opening of this article. Often those in a therapy group have never written a poem, or if they have, it was unsuccessful and they feel they are “no good” at writing and want to leave the group. It is important to explain they do not have to write, they need only join in the discussion when they are ready. It is also important to mention that this is not a class as in school and there are no grades, no editing unless they want to do so on their own. This is a space not for criticism, but self-expression and exploration. And then we begin.

Each session, a poem is presented. Selection of material is based on the “isoprinciple” also effective in music therapy. This means that the emotion of the poem is one that hopefully captures the mood of the group. If depression is a dominant mood, then a poem about depression is helpful, as long as there are lines that reflect hope and optimism. This principle is very comforting, because it allows the participant to realize they are not the only ones who suffer, that someone understands them because they have experienced it and written about it. They can share in their despair (Leedy, 1985).

The facilitator can present a reason for the poem choice for that day. Or wait until someone reads it, and let the group decide if it has anything to do with them. Often the poem is read twice by one or two of the members so that the rhythm, the music of the poem will enter their minds to help focus, replacing the chaos of thought. Usually there will be a silence after the reading, as members survey the field of words as if it is a lake or meadow or scene to absorb.

The silence gives way to a breeze, as members begin to discuss lines that appeal to them, or images. Maybe only a word will call to them. Or maybe they won't like it at all. The mystery of the poem is discussed. They love to ask “what does it mean...” and we try to

respond, not for the correct answer, for there never is one, but for the possibilities that can exist. And the possibility becomes an avenue for seeing things in a new way, even a predicament they can be experiencing. Whatever they have to say, or not say, is heard and accepted, never judged. A poem does not have to rhyme, but it must have rhythm, and does. I find when people speak from their heart, there is usually a rhythm, subtle though it may be.

Rhythm comes in many forms in a poem and often carries with it repressed feelings integrating chaotic inner and outer events into one's own experience. (Meerlo, 1985) A change in rhythm can often help move a participant from one place to another, or help them be aware of the feelings that are causing pain or fatigue or withdrawal. Often rhythm will release the tension in the beginning of a group. The rhythm is carried in the beat of the words, the repetition of certain sounds. And it is that repetition that has its hypnotic quality that helps create "the secret place," the bridge to the unconscious, from which the poem springs. As participants respond to the gentle suggestions of what they see in the poem, they see more and begin to speak to each other. Isolation is broken. The poem brings them not only in touch with their own music, but each other's.

Poet Donald Hall describes the primitive pleasures of rhythm in poetry as "Goatfoot, Milktongue, and Twinbird" (Hall, 1980) saying they are the ancestors, the psychic origins of poetic form. The infant kicks rhythmically, without thought; experiments with sound, babbling vowels and consonants, plays with its hands, seeks nourishment from the mother, bonding in repetitive motions. There is the pleasure of appearance-disappearance as in the peek-a-boo play, words appearing and disappearing again. The ability to be poetic is natural in our system of survival, and it is the facilitator's task to ease participants into this birthright to catch their thoughts and write them down, or have someone write them down, in a form that unlocks the mind.

Form is an important component of the therapeutic value of poetry. Sometimes, if the issue at hand is too frightening, we can actually draw a box in the middle of the page and limit words to that space. Emotion will not run amok in this way, but be protected in the frame natural to the order of poetry. In free verse, the constraints of couplets and quatrains no longer exist, with rhyme removed, but still we know poetry has shape and form, and we

can impose that naturally with the workings of our mind and the natural rhythms and images that come forth. "Form makes arrangement out of derangement, harmony out of disharmony, and order out of chaos." (Heninger, 1994) When strong emotions can be expressed in an acceptable, safe manner, these feelings can subside. There is great release, and enjoyment in sharing with others, who identify. Balance is restored.

Shapes can also be invented as in concrete poetry. Children often love dancing the words on the page in circles and spirals, drawing arrows where one word leads to another in a sort of map. There is great feeling and release in that playfulness. Poetry does not have to be the serious business we were once taught. Rules can fly out the window and we can make up our own as we go along.

Often I will take a phrase from a poem and repeat it for each group member to orally fill in their thoughts, before they write their own poem. One day I began with such a phrase, "I have the right." As we went around the circle seated in the living room, most touching lines were being spoken: I have the right to get a cup of milk in the middle of the night; I have the right to breathe; I have the right to play my guitar; I have the right to comb my hair, etc. Suddenly one young man who was suicidal said, "I have the right to get a gun to shoot myself." A woman, who had sat quite silently lost in herself each time she came to group, which was not often, spoke up. Turning to him she said softly but firmly, "And I have the right to take it from you." In that moment the silence was stunning. Everyone felt the impact of these simple words: certainly a poem. A sound and shape that still resonates with all of us.

The sounds of words themselves are healing not only in and of themselves but in conjunction and juxtaposition with each other. Constantine Stanislavski, founder of the method school of acting once wrote "Vowels are the rivers of the soul and consonants are the banks." Poetry is language and language is what humans do with air, I once heard from a Native American speaking the Cherokee language which sounded like a woodpecker to me with its repetitive *k* sounds. How we define words, defines us. How we use them also defines us and when we realize they are notes like drops of rain we can have a little storm or a big one, make a composition of our interior life.

As we speak our emotion, sadness may roll out in long *o* sounds as in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* by Langston Hughes: “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than/the flow of human blood in human veins./My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” In the same poem, the line “I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep” uses sharper sounds. These allow the soul to flow. They also give tension to the sound, conveying stress, anger, struggle. And so a woman can write of losing her baby in a poem expressing her pain and grief through the sound of vowels, and her anger through the firmness of consonants. Poetry has the ability to carry many emotions at once, and hold them intact. Often that is exactly what is needed in the therapeutic environment.

One of the most often quoted poems in American literature in conjunction with literary genius and word sounds is Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” It is also used often in poetry for healing, focusing on the intent to keep going with the journey, no matter how rough it gets, how cold the weather, or how enticing the moment of wanting to linger in the woods, “lovely, dark and deep.” Mary Oliver in her *Poetry Handbook* discusses the beauty and repetition of the sounds of the poem, the repetition of *w*’s and *th*’s, the double *ll*’s. The sounds set the quietness of the tone in the first stanza (“Whose woods these are I think I know./His house is in the village though;”) In the second and third stanza the horse is the focus of the poem: “He gives his harness bells a shake/To ask if there is some mistake.” The *k* sounds give the snap, the tension, carrying the conflict of hesitation. (Oliver, 1994) This is how sound works in writing, but often it is subconscious.

In an essay “Sing It Rough” poet Tess Gallagher says in writing poetry, nothing is more important than the heart, for there is the passion and the struggle. Often this comes about by hitting the “wrong notes,” not just making pretty music. She quotes a poem by Cahil McConnel:

You can sing sweet and get
the song sung but to get to
the third
dimension you have to sing it rough,
hurt the tune a little. Put enough
strength to it
that the notes slip. Then something

else happens. The song gets large.
(Gallagher, 1986)

Each time I come away from poetry groups for healing, I carry the immense songs sung by the members, spoken or written, with what has happened. They have the courage that Gallagher describes, maybe because the focus is on the emotion rather than craft, and artifice is never stressed. There is a natural drive to survive and the language, the sounds of the words help achieve that.

A client I had a few years ago in private practice started coming to me because she had things to say and wanted me to help her get them down. She loved poetry, and wanted to participate more freely in it. For five months we saw each other almost on a weekly basis. As a child of seven, she had contracted equine encephalitis in Mexico from mosquito bites and gone into a coma for six weeks after complete cardiac arrest following wild convulsions. That she recovered was a miracle. That she could talk and walk again took years of work. When I started seeing her, she was almost thirty, though her brain had suffered severe damage so that her thought processes were still as a young child. Because she could barely write, her right arm and hand with limited motion, I would write down what she spoke. One day she had a massive convulsion and left without warning. But she left a legacy of poems that portray how words can lift someone from despair to hope. One of her poems, engraved on her grave site reads: "I cry not/For if I die, I go as one/The body, spirit, mind and soul/Connected now/Set free." (Longo, 1996) Perhaps that is the main therapeutic benefit of poetry; words remain forever for they are sound waves. Wherever we go, they follow us, from room to room, unconsciousness to consciousness, denial to acceptance, sorrow to joy. And hopefully to health.

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