

## POETRY AND TRANSFORMATION: Psychological Healing

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Is poetry back? Hey, it's never been gone. Kids still love to play with sounds and images. Hopscotch and jump-rope rhymes are older than governments. We still call up poetry for funerals and weddings, for big chief inaugurals; we still incant to gods and goddesses, still invoke the dimensions of the heavens to speak of love. Romeo and Juliet are box-office once more. We still need poetry for the keenings of despair and to celebrate victories of the spirit. And the body. Just now across the land football, soccer, and basketball seasons overlap, and tribal chants empower your local team.

But some fresh excitements are surfacing. Poetry in psychology is coming around again. Poetry "Slams" feature in news magazines; Cowboy Poetry Days fill Elko, Nevada beyond capacity, and rap gets the attention of congressional committees. More books of poetry are published now than ever before, and more people crowd into poetry readings.

In September/October's American Poetry Review, 1996 Pulitzer poet Jorie Graham commented on the number of students flooding into Iowa's writing program, when they might be preparing for employment.

Could it be that they have intuited that poetry can put them in contact with some necessary mystery, or value (or set of values), or sense of reality, that this narcotized culture has increasingly deprived them of? Maybe they just want to wake up.

At the August AHP conference in Tacoma, in the workshop on "Poetry as Ceremony: Personal and Social Transformation," participants' tears and laughter attested poetry's powers once again, this time including psychologists. Asked to bring a favorite poem of personal meaning, each APHER chose a poem embodying a transformation.

How does poetry heal? In a presentation hour I offered examples and theories. Then, as if in answer to that question, participants commented and presented on poetry's "usefulness." They say that poetry heals:

- by locating us "in place," physical and internal;
- by embodying sacred encounters;
- by reconciling loss;
- by diffusing our fears;
- by restoring our experienced connections.

These categories I surmise. Participants made explicit the "transformation" theme. One workshopper said, "poems help, going through transformations without disowning truth that was . . ." quoting HD:

*I did not cheat or fake inspiration.*

*What I said was right, then . . .*

Poetry writ down at the stage-stops in the path with heart remember: life is journey, not destination.

Tria Reed's poem "Finding My Way," a forgiveness exercise, led to a spiritual-practice

reawakening “hard to talk about. And poetry has been a bridge for me.” Marietta Barney observed that bringing poetry into varied places “transforms those settings.” In her work, psychotherapy sessions “are a matter of poetic exchange.” Dan Keller’s sojourn at an India ashram was punctuated by a vision-poem in a frigid 4 am walk, where attention joined the immediate and the all:

*Moon  
Full circle  
Through bare branches  
Starkly*

Anna Benson commemorated menopause’s transformation with Lucille Clifton’s “To My Last Period,” ending

*Now it’s done.  
And I feel just like the grandmothers  
who after the hussy has gone  
sit holding her photograph and sighing,  
“Wasn’t she beautiful?  
Wasn’t she beautiful?”*

Anna claims she’s not a poet, only a person who writes poems in difficult times. After a “brutal” marathon with disturbed teenagers at her agency, she came home in the wee hours, frustrated and confused. “I wrote a poem about the experience. . . and I understood it! It was still a brutal experience, but I understood it.” And so did her supervisor and group, for whom the poem became a second transformation.

A father in the group turned to poetry when his daughter ran away from home. Not only was he able to name his feelings, but his daughter, reading it, came home. We heard a moving poem by an artist whose mother’s death left her unable to sculpt. She turned to poetry to reconcile, to heal, and to reclaim her powers. “I couldn’t do art then; I needed to do something with language--I’m not a poet--I thought if I could put things into words, they would somehow help me work this through.” Her metaphor from a snapshot on her parents’ honeymoon, of a hewed-out drive-through Sequoia, provided a transcendent image for her mother’ cancer-riven organicity. For Rick Harlen, poems are “pieces of wisdom . . . stripping away pretense or the way we normally see things.”

Madronna Holden suggested that poems of commemoration and of healing may be identical, noting that “we say things in poems we might not otherwise say; from the deepest part of ourselves they somehow come out.” Poems are vehicles for respect and care. Without respect and care things disappear, including animals and our environment. Madronna’s poem “Badger Woman: How to Fight” explicitly was a woman’s healing medicine poem, but its directives were transformative for all:

*Fight like the sun fights for the day, the inevitable.  
Get everything to open its eyes. . .*

*Suck out the poison, persist even when blood is bitter.  
Spit it out and start again  
Spit it out and start again. . .  
Until you have spit out a waterfall  
Where salmon can leap their way home*

*from the other side. . .*

*All secrets have storms in their eyes,  
Go there . . .*

*Grow too many leaves to go without hope . . .*

Poetry's traditions and the aims of humanistic psychology aims cross so explicitly--and unconsciously as well--that to name them again might help rejoin their services.

In 1982 Rollo May said, "Psychology has moved into matters that used to be left to poetry." A lot of cross-fertilization has gone both ways since then, if I know poets or psychologists.

I know poets read psychology. The study of lonely men's heart attacks: "Hearts really can be broken!" Poets knew that! But because of the milieu of psychological inquiry, poetry is riskier, deepened and more honest. Uses multiple voices. Psychology convinced the dominant culture, and lots of marginalized poets, that being "different" from the norm wasn't to be cured. One's personal obsessions, gender, or trauma could even be a window with a view. When poets read psychology, they worm around for correspondences, studying it like a foreign language maybe. More countries to be heard from, in the world and in the self.

Maybe psychologists could read more poetry. Write down some words of power, feel and think their meanings, recommend a poem for a client, even. I propose no programmed poetry therapy.

On the other hand, psychologists are doing the work of traditional poets, and have the chance to hand the power of poetry on to their clients. The obsession of poets has always been: meaning-making (or, questioning "meaning" or playing with it. Not much different than what goes on with a client in session.) Viktor Frankel proposed that meaning can be obtained three ways: in an immediate experience, in an attitude taken, or in the creative.

The making and the eating of a poem involves all three. Consider the poem a machine for meaning-making. A poem gives creative expression to experience, and transforms by an attitude of full attention, which in itself is life-affirming.

A clothes-line  
Under the bougainvillaea--  
That's the way it is!

C. G. Jung suggests (**Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature**) that poems arise to compensate for a one-sided attitude in the person or in the culture, as "A vehicle and mold of the unconscious life of mankind." He goes on to suggest how a poem can be read to do the psychological work of psychic balance:

*To grasp its meaning we must allow it to shape us as it shaped the artist.  
[He] has plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective  
psyche, where we are not lost in the isolation of consciousness. . .*

That is, not identified with the ego, we can "plunge" to the depths where we are "caught in a

common rhythm.” And speaking to our bridge between psychology and poetry, Jung also writes, “The creative quality . . . and its authentic expression are in fact the basic problem of all psychotherapy.”

In Tacoma I tried to present poems that parallel the traditional functions of healing. Traditional healers (quite like humanistic psychologists) seek to restore 1) relationship, 2) harmony, 3) courage and 4) peace, whatever the other cures. Their ceremonies work these psychological transformations through various ritualized elements, including powerful language. I like to think of poems as little ceremonies, where words are tools handled with care, even reverence.

On a physiological level, I believe power words (**MOON, TREE, SHADOW, DARK, CRY**), along with poetry’s drum and trumpet music, stimulate the vertical connections between the more primitive limbic systems and the newer, more rational neocortex. These connections are usually slow, few and indirect. Poetry also leaps “horizontal” connections between the verbal hemisphere and the image-making hemisphere, giving pleasure. Images provide the means to bypass the constructs and defenses of the rational mind, and habit. Poetry is a sort of “laying on of hands” using images to restore what Robert Bly calls “the emotional body.”

First, relationship. For poetry which seeks to restore relationship, we need to go deeper than song lyrics. A poetry which aspires to such healing has many domains, however: to reconnect us with the natural world, with our place in ancestral purpose, with a community of values, and with our niche in cosmology. A Navajo Chantway healing ceremony, for example, aspires to all of these at once (and aspires to harmony, courage and peace as well!) A fifth and perhaps the most difficult and necessary relationship in our time involves healing connections to our “other,” to our cultural and collective shadow, in a political poetry. In her long poem “The Pool that Swims in Us,” Marge Piercy writes of all these relationships, asking:

How can we feel part of one another?  
How can we count the children of the trout  
and the coyote and the humpback whale  
as our relatives, when we cannot  
believe somebody who makes half what  
we do has as many feelings, that when small  
black-haired people bleed, it’s blood.

Harmony, the great theme in artists and literature, the goal of spiritual seekers, does not mean bliss. Rather we should say, poetry can make conscious the struggle for harmony in life’s contradictions and “tension of opposites.” Artistic expressions become healing when they go beyond portraying the struggle for order, to provide the means for the individual to participate and experience. It’s good to have a pocketful of poems which celebrate having everything right. But harmony includes the legitimate suffering of holding in balance the disparate parts of human nature and aspiration, inner life and outer experience. Forget audience. Write a poem about your suffering. Robert Johnson proposes that poetry is a mandala: a container for all our parts.

Courage may simply be “Taking cognizance of the world and adapting to it” (Jung, Letters, II, p.36). And even when we open ourselves to the conflict and ambiguity which make us legitimate practitioners of our unique life, “the wholeness we can reach is very relative.” In poetry we can take

heart, using language at its most precise, in the profound examination of the human condition. Full awareness of the human condition can help us let go of fears, help us face the pain and rigor of life, and help us create beauty out of chaos. That's a poet's courageous responsibility. And who is the poet? Poet Wallace Stevens says, "every person of active imagination." He adds (Opus Posthumous), then "literature is the better part of life. Provided it is based on life itself. From this point of view the meaning of poetry involves us profoundly."

Peace requires both active soul-making and acceptance. On the active side, "integration" is a good psychologist's word, suggesting "integrity," the "integral," and in its Greek roots "to touch." Poetry puts the restless mind in touch with satisfactory meanings. Soul-making is inherent whenever we open up and speak of what profoundly matters. In Anglo-Saxon the bard was said to speak from the "word-ward." Psyche or soul also means "breath," so that in poetic naming we breathe meaning into raw life and thus find peace. Then comes acceptance, exemplified by Wendell Berry's poem "The Peace of Wild Things."

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives might be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
or grief. I come into the presence of still waters.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Finally of course poetry is not the only creative form that transforms and heals in the ways described. But poetry's tools are close at hand. Words link to everyday experience and private memory and aspirations deeply known by all. And in language's oldest embodiments, notes poet W.C. Williams, M.D. healer, "our only actions are to prance, to cheer and to point. All of which are one thing: Praise!"

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