

# Weathering Paradoxes Through Poetic Healing

A courageous way to understand and soothe yourself during times of crisis.

By Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

Posted on PSYCHOLOGY TODAY on Jan 04, 2021

*"One ought every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words."*

—Goethe



It is no surprise that most problems emanating from within our culture can be traced to an inability to work through paradoxes. Carl Jung recognized that this was an impediment to "comprehending the fullness of life."

A paradox consists of statements or situations that may seem to contradict each other but are different parts of a larger perspective that have an element of truth. They offer a means for healing and enlightenment and are the soul and source for comedy, conflict, and aesthetic creations. We learn and unlearn from their inevitable presence. A classic example is the statement: "This sentence is false," or Bob

Dylan's, "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now."

Getting through a paradox is like having a satori moment or a breath of fresh air since they point to a wider reality; it is both a mystery and a joy when it is celebrated. However, when they are not, (e.g., "Do you love me, but why do I have to ask you") they can be dangerous, produce injurious polarization, and those unenviable no-win double binds of "stuck between a rock and a hard place."

These feelings are not uncommon during stressful times, as exemplified by the current pandemic. This results in sabotaging relationships and the overuse of the "fight or flight" part of our nervous system. It eventually compromises the Vagus Nerve, the nerve of compassion and security, creating ongoing stress which is at the root of all chronic emotional and physical illnesses.

In nature, for instance, there are no dichotomies, seemingly contradictory forces eventually come together in an ecologically balanced manner. This can seem messy, but nature constantly moves towards an optimal existence, especially if human interference is curtailed. Yet in our Western-based culture, we easily miss how nature works, as seen presently in our current socio-environmental crises. Its origins are from the overuse of cause-and-effect thinking that emphasizes content over context. This is in stark contrast to the basis of Eastern cultural thinking and many indigenous cultures whose world views support systemic collaboration that is more aligned with nature.

Just as ignorance can misguide us, the grasping of one's potential through understanding the limitless possibilities that are available to us can be the path to our enlightenment. Paradoxes are just another tool to make your life work the way you want it to. When we confront the core of our paradoxes and respect our interdependency with nature the result is that we can find the true meaning of our lives.

John Fox, author of the book "Poetic Medicine," asserts that "... a way to weather the storm of paradoxes is to express one's self courageously through poetry." Poems are a profound segue to mutually share and learn from each other when feeling down and/or having the sensation of being stuck, especially in times of crisis. They can take the form of a simile, which makes comparisons between two quite different things using "like" ("I am like a \_\_\_\_") or "as" ("I feel as if I am\_\_\_\_") and focuses on creative tension that may be useful for emotional and physical healing.

You can also try composing a metaphor, which consists of words and symbols to unite two different things into a new reality. This becomes clear if you make two columns: one list of things that you may need for your personal sustenance, and another with words that nourish you. For example, you may need a "healthy diet" and connect it to a nurturing word like "peaceful." Now think of ways that create connections between those needs and nurturing words, such as in this case, creating a "stress-free atmosphere" during dinner. There are no formal rules, judgments, or grammar restrictions.

After making several of these connections, imagine yourself in a comfortable place where you can process this exercise and best describe your feelings and things you can touch. Look at your present immediate environment. Then, as if you have a zoom lens, widen your view to include a peripheral perspective.

Pause for some Coherent Breathing, developed by Stephen Elliott. Take a few deep breaths by inhaling for six seconds then exhale for six seconds accompanied by a positive thought. Then zoom back to your original view.

Write down how you felt about your needs and the ways that will make you feel more whole and healthier. Make note of any possible insights that arise from your subconscious which can evoke positive energy from your own background. Pay heed to all you have ever experienced which is also part of the collective unconscious reservoir of how others made these connections.

Try answering these questions in a poetic form that relate to John Fox's assertion:

- What painful things do you most want to speak out about?
- What is it you can no longer avoid?
- What do you want to courageously sing about?
- How can you share your insights on working through paradoxes?

Write a short poem based on the first line of your answers to each of the above questions. After writing your poems, create an affirmation that reinforces your sense of self and what directions are available to you. Examples of affirmations can be I am creative; I respect my power to communicate; I am passionate toward others and life. Use your own words, mostly verbs to express the active inner dreams and aspirations that you may have deep within yourself.

Sharing the poetic gift of challenging paradoxes is the recognition of who you are and how to enhance your relationships. The expanding contexts resulting from this journey is your liminal opportunity to understand and explore your interdependence with others, nature, and all that you encounter, especially now as we work through life's inevitable conflicts.