

The Value Of Poetic Expression

Personal Perspective: A path to understand, celebrate, and heal.

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KEY POINTS

- There is overlap between poetry and psychotherapy.
- Poetry allows us to express a difference that will make a difference.
- Poetic prompts can help one improvise and attain clarity of expression.

Poems are made for the express purpose of re-figuring the world. They have no other reason for being. In them, metaphors are completely at home. In poems, metaphors subtly materialize or dynamically burst out of their contexts and make readers see the world anew. —Frederick Buell

In honor of April's designation as Poetry Month, I would like to share what I have experienced using poetry for my own solace and with others in my practice of psychotherapy. Poetry is an aesthetic segue to sharing personal narratives beyond certain cultural constraints. There is always a tension between our natural abilities of intuitive thinking and how we are forced in many instances to deny that capability. It is as the late anthropologist Gregory Bateson asserted: "The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think."

Why We Need Poetry

Culture is defined as "The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group." It is supported by subtle and not-so-subtle psychologies within such institutions as schooling, politics, medicine, economics and media. The problems that Bateson alludes to occur when these institutions are seen as separate or fragmented. This can produce patterns of dysfunctional pain such as when a child may be having problems at school yet is not getting the benefit of collaborative dialogues between the family, health services, and other relevant resources. What are the consequences when there is a lack of

interconnection between different aspects of our culture? How does economics and distribution of wealth influence climate? What is the connection of polarized politics to interpersonal relations? How does stress relate to illness and so on?



How Poetry Can Provide A Way To Encourage Our Interdependency

As a therapist I ask those that I am working with (as well as myself) to articulate a difference that can *make* a difference in our lives. Poetry through stories and narratives provides many answers. How does poetry transcend constraints? It is an expression from the heart.

As Maria Mazziotti Gillian suggests "...start from a different place, a place controlled by instinct rather than by intelligence." In her book, *Write Poetry to Save Your Life*, an effective prompt that she uses with her students, which I have borrowed in my practice, is to have them write about a person who is very important to them. Thinking about that person using all your senses brings up what has occurred in different contexts and offers a vehicle to new relational possibilities. Frederick Buell, author of *From Apocalypse To Way Of Life*, believes that poems "...come both by and with gentle or dramatic surprise—surprise that indicates they exceed the will even of their creator."

Poetic expression allows you to use your distinct abilities to remove obstacles to clarity. It widens your perspective in a peripheral manner and nurtures our potential to learn from each other. John Fox, author of *Poetic Medicine*, states "... a way to weather the storm of paradoxes is to express oneself courageously through poetry." Poems are a profound means to help focus on creativity or emotional and physical healing.

There are a multitude of prompts (see Maria Mazziotti Gillian's book mentioned above) that can be made available for individuals and family members as well as for organizational healing. Here are a few examples; continue to express yourself based on the first line of your response to the following:

Who are you at work?

How do you want to bravely sing out?

In what ways do you regret?

How do you relate to others?

I search for what?

How is my role at home?

How is joy attained by me?

Poetic response can take the form of a simile, which makes comparisons between two different things using "like" ("I am like a _____") or "as" ("I feel as if I am_____"). You can also try composing a metaphor, which consists of words and symbols to unite two different things into a new reality.

The most important thing is to know that we are all poets. Be confident in your intent, writing down how you can 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 that connects us to our inherent interdependency. Share your newfound insights.

Here is a poem I wrote that helped me put my adult children in a present relational perspective. I used the prompt, "what is parenting?"

When my now adult children were young

I made their school lunches

Three brown paper bags

Three different needs.

My son was the oldest

He would eventually get his food in the cafeteria

Not sure if he missed my combinations

Of tofu with miso on homemade bread

Umeboshi plums, seaweed plus other macrobiotic stuff

That he later told me stunted his growth.
What they remember most
Were the one inch by two-inch post-it notes
Of which I tried a different quote, hug or advice
About their day-to-day development
Little pre-twitter narratives
Talking to their shared emotions
Of being excluded, breaking through physical growth changes,
Teacher misunderstandings, peer challenges.
I did try to integrate them culturally
With meatless hot dogs,
Mimicked the gravy of the famous Paterson wiener
All the way with organic onions
To avoid having them suffer
The indigestion of my childhood
That my parents alleviated with Italian Brioski
Which I thought came from Garfield New Jersey
Where everyone's name ended in ski
They recall these notes after they
Remind me of my shortcomings
To make me feel better
As a parent forever.

(Poem originally published in the Paterson Literary Review #47, 2019).