

# Healing Words: Poetry, Presence, and the Capacity for Happiness

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the potential of poetry therapy for healing and the development and enhancement of capacities for happiness. It is written from both professional and personal perspectives. Poetry therapy encourages hope, creativity, imagination, empathy, the identification and articulation of inner experience, and engagement with the self, others, and the world. It promotes the integration of past and present, and strengthens the sense of a positive, competent self.

**Key words:** poetry, therapy, happiness, creativity, imagination, empathy

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## 1. Introduction

This paper will explore the potential of Poetry Therapy for healing and for the development and enhancement of capacities for happiness. My belief in the power of this modality is rooted in my experience both as a poetry therapy practitioner and as a person who has received healing through poetry and words. I will focus primarily on healing, with the understanding that the work of healing is what opens the way for happiness. Healing involves identifying and releasing maladaptive beliefs, patterns, and introjects, and freeing psychic energy for the development of new skills and attitudes, including empathy and creativity, and for the greater integration of thinking, feeling, and behavior. Poetry therapy is

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uniquely beneficial because of the many ways it can bring about a newly liberated and empowered experience of language, which can lead to greater abilities to both articulate one's internal experience, and engage in more effective communication and connection with others, itself an important component of well-being and happiness.

Happiness of course is notoriously difficult to define, although recently it has been the subject of much scientific inquiry. For the purposes of this paper it can be understood as essentially interchangeable with the experience of well-being. It is always perceived through an idiosyncratic lens. As a goal of therapy it is clearly not ecstasy, nor bliss, nor protection from life's vicissitudes and misfortunes, nor return to an idealized former state. People beginning therapy often seem to think of happiness as a thing, a prize to be awarded following a certain accomplishment or event, a gift capriciously given to some but not others, or a mirage pursued but continually disappearing. Rather than an event, or an achieved stable state, happiness is more likely to involve a particular orientation toward one's own life. Momentary happiness or pleasure is more easily come by; enduring happiness seems to require effort and tapping deeper internal resources such as optimism, resilience, generosity of spirit. Increasingly, more attention is being paid in both professional and popular publications and venues to positive psychology's emphasis on happiness and well-being as attainable states. I find it useful to think in terms of increasing capacity for happiness, an approach which de-objectifies happiness and suggests greater potentials for initiative, self-awareness and choice.

Like the various forms of positive psychology poetry therapy also is a treatment approach based on strengths rather than pathology. The qualities which I most associate with a capacity for happiness are connection to others, vitality and sensory awareness, the ability to be fully present and to both give and receive, imaginative and creative freedom, and responsiveness - to beauty, to nature, to something larger than the self. The happiness that poetry therapy strives for is characterized by self-awareness, a sense of personal agency and potentiality, and an experience of openness

and spaciousness within the self.

The overall purpose of poetry therapy sessions is to provide clients with an emotional experience in response to carefully chosen poems that elicit self-observation and insight, and to provide a safe nonjudgmental environment in which to share those experiences. The following four main goals, as formulated by Sister Arleen Hynes, one of the great poetry therapy pioneers - to improve the capacity to respond, to increase self-understanding, to increase awareness of interpersonal relations, and to improve reality orientation - all serve "one comprehensive purpose - to improve the participants' self-esteem and morale."<sup>1</sup> Through literature and expressive writing, the client is helped to release blocks and develop those qualities which enhance capacities for happiness, including sensory awareness, mindfulness, compassion, creativity, and flexibility.

This paper will note many kinds of presence: to one's self, to others, to the world, and especially the therapist's empathic presence which constitutes the emotional environment in which healing and growth take place. I would like to begin by referring to two poems that capture for me ideas about poetry and presence in the service of healing. The first is "At Blackwater Pond", by Mary Oliver<sup>2</sup> a description of the experience of cupping one's hands to take a cool drink of pond water, and experiencing this through almost all of the bodily senses. The poem ends with the body itself wonder-struck at the beauty of the event. This poem renders the experience of presence, the heightened awareness at the juncture between inner and outer and the permeability of that boundary. There is a literal and metaphorical taking in, and the poem itself gives out or gives back to the world and the reader the mystery and wonder of the "beautiful thing" that just happened. There are multiple sensory images: the visual observation of the pond, the physicality of dipping cupped hands into the water - touch, the taste of the water, the listening and hearing the whispering of the bones deep in the body. One of the great gifts of poetry in the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Hynes & M. Hynes-Berry (1986)(1994), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> M. Oliver (1992).

therapeutic context is the way it can help develop or restore sensory awareness and vitality, a fuller sense of aliveness. The poem also ends with a direct reference to beauty, and an appreciation of beauty, particularly the hidden or unnoticed beauty in commonplace objects and events, is also linked to the capacity for happiness.

The next poem, “The First Poem,” by Mark Van Doren<sup>3</sup> is essentially an impassioned declaration about creativity and newness, ending with the essential experience of being “there with words.” With this poem we enter the realm of presence infused with exhilaration, a moment not only of attention, but of complete newness, potentiality, creativity, the possibility of transformation and new life. The poem also captures a core aspect of the psychotherapeutic experience: the participants strive to be present with words. Words are the critical medium of exchange. In psychotherapy nonverbal communications and the unspoken emotional and physical environment are of course enormously important, but even in the expressive arts therapies, often those are not enough, and nonverbal experiences may need to be translated into the verbal. Words are the delicate but powerful bridges between the people in the room. And through this combination of presence and words, the client present with his fear and courage and wish to express and the healer present with her compassion and empathy and wish to understand and make better, something as new and life-affirming as a heartbeat may happen. The therapeutic process builds upon moments in which something new with the potential to transform occurs. It may be a new insight, a sudden recognition, a new closeness through shared laughter, an illuminating memory. Or it may be the slow and gradual accumulation of words that are spoken and heard that leads to incremental development and growth, a new or liberated maturational process. Because of course part of the beauty of the process is that the safe release of words into the presence of an accepting other leads to more words, braver words, deeper words that speak core truths. This process is in turn nourished and stimulated by the sense of accomplishment and

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<sup>3</sup> M. Van Doren (1963).

self-esteem that derives from authentic self-expression, and enhances the experience of well-being and optimism.

I would like to note, both as practitioner and as someone who has written poetry and kept journals on and off since childhood, some thoughts about the differences I perceive between poetry therapy and other forms of expressive writing. In recent years there has been tremendous growth in the recognition of the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing, which may be either entirely self-generated or aided by suggestions made by others, such as various kind of practitioners, teachers, writers, self-help books and so on. Some of the latter offer ideas and techniques are similar to those employed by practitioners of poetry therapy. However, self-generated writing efforts sometimes run the risk of feeling repetitive, as though the ruminative mind cannot break out of its well-worn paths. While I do believe that many forms of expressive writing can be enormously helpful, I also believe that the intentional use of poetry, language in the service of art, with its sound, imagery, capacity to surprise and to stir both mind and heart, is uniquely effective both in reaching the participant at a deep level, and in calling forth from him or her words that are not only true but in some way transcendent. Art bypasses much of the cognitive apparatus; the language of poetry rises from one fertile unconscious to find its way directly into the receptive fertile unconscious of another. The imagistic and metaphorical leaps found in poetry give permission to the client to be equally imaginative and unconstrained in expressing his or her truth. This use of language as art is a defining feature of the poetry therapy modality.

My career as a poetry therapist began over 30 years ago when I was working in an outpatient psychiatric clinic for the chronically mentally ill with high-risk patients who would otherwise have been hospitalized. My mandate was to provide an activity which would be immediately therapeutic but would also lend itself to independent use outside clinical hours, when patients returned to their essentially isolated lives. I brought in poems and short stories and, like many other practitioners, thought I invented poetry therapy. Soon a colleague and I developed an ongoing weekly

group and wrote an article on poem selection. I discovered the NAPT and have been actively involved in the field ever since, as practitioner, mentor/supervisor, Board member, and recently president of the Association.

In my personal life, at around the same time that I began clinical use of poetry, I entered an intensive psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy. Although I had written poetry and kept journals intermittently since childhood, I found myself so emotionally and mentally stirred up that I relied upon constant journal-writing to help me contain and metabolize the experience. At some point it became clear that certain passages of my journal were demanding separate existences, and a wholly different kind of attention. I was no longer merely releasing and containing, though those were important benefits. I was attending to sound and imagery, seeking language that was precise in its truthfulness but that also created something more significant than the original impulse or thought – in short, poems. I sometimes translated my dreams into poetry, and subsequently my dreams and my poems became primary vehicles moving the therapy forward. Both led to important insights, allowing unconscious material to flow into conscious understanding and inspire change. For example, I recognized that I was moving toward termination when I spontaneously began a poem “When I leave you.” In the years after treatment ended I continued journaling but poetry-writing became more sporadic, although poetry therapy workshops always inspired satisfying work.

Everything changed in 1997, when my son was killed in a car crash in South Africa while he was serving in the U.S. Peace Corps. I was vacationing with him at the time and suffered injuries which required a lengthy hospitalization back in the United States. My friends kept asking if I was writing and I kept saying I had no words. Now I understand that wordlessness as partly grief, partly trauma, partly how mentally and physically concentrated I had to be on physical recovery, and partly the dulling effects of pain medication. When before discharge the medication was discontinued, words returned. I had a mission: to write a poem to read at my son’s memorial service, which I did. I know now that that

poem also marked an important personal transition: leaving the safety of the hospital and re-entering a world which no longer held my son. I continued writing and collecting poems for and about him and finally early in 2003 my chapbook of poems dedicated to my son was published. In retrospect I can see that this event was pivotal for me in my journey of healing. There was a great sense of satisfaction in having done something significant to honor him and keep his presence alive in the world. To this day rereading these poems I re-experience closeness with him. There was also a new recognition and acceptance of myself as a poet, and as a resilient woman who could not only survive but bring forth something new and good out of pain and misfortune. That inner knowledge still helps me open doors to my own happiness. So I write today out of my experience as a healer and bringer of words, and also as a wounded person whose healing has in great part come about through healing words, and through “being there with words”.

Let me turn now to a brief description of the actual practice of poetry therapy. In my work I have typically brought in a published poem or lyric to be used as a prompt or stimulus for both discussion and clients’ personal writing. The power of poetry therapy is greatly enhanced in group settings, but it is also effective in individual work. It is important to read the work aloud, often more than once so that the full physical impact of the poem (sound, rhythm, meter) as well as the content, may be received. This experience of taking in is very important. Clients are then asked to respond verbally to the poem, and in a group, depending on size and time, to each other, and finally to do some personal writing, which they are encouraged to share. I may give a specific prompt such as “start with the first line of this poem” or “pick an image or a phrase that speaks to you and write from it.” In reading and responding to the poem it is crucial that the emphasis is on personal meanings rather than academic concerns such as aesthetic judgments or deducing what the author intended. Most importantly, there are no rights or wrong interpretations. Similarly, responses to the client’s written work avoid analysis and aesthetic judgment but focus on authenticity and effective, emotionally powerful communication about

something of personal significance. The consistent focus is on identifying and supporting client strengths, and sessions are structured so as to end on a hopeful note.

Very briefly, as formulated by Sister Arleen Hynes, the potential for healing from biblio/poetry therapy (the broader term includes the use of different kinds of literature) comes from a 4-step process, as follows. The first is recognition, when the client identifies personally with some part of the literature – “yes, I have felt that.” Secondly follows an examination, or intensification of that recognition. Thirdly, this new information or experience is held in juxtaposition with something else, for example an attitude or memory or self-image. These seeing things side by side in new relationship to each other, can startle and shake loose unhelpfully rigid perceptions. The juxtaposition creates a new context which prompts the 4<sup>th</sup> step, application to self, leading to re-evaluation and ultimately integration of the new understanding. Ideally this in turn can bring about a healthy modification of thoughts, feelings, and behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Therapeutic benefit also derives from the parallels and overlaps between poetry, creativity and art-making, therapy, and dream. All help us understand ourselves. The key element is imagination. The first and most crucial step in a beginning therapeutic relationship is the identification or instillation of hope, and hope is an act of imagination. If one cannot imagine, cannot even remotely conceive of feeling better, there is no motivation for change. Imagination is required at almost every therapeutic step and task, such as imagining how someone else might feel in a given circumstance, imagining different choices or outcomes to one’s past behavior, and crucially, imagining a more comfortable or happier future. Imagination allows one to safely practice. One can imagine options, choices. Don Quixote states: “I know who I am, and who I may be if I choose.”<sup>5</sup> “Who I may be” is an imagined construct. Imagination is the great mediator between primary process, the irrational chaos of the unconscious, and secondary process, with

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<sup>4</sup> A. Hynes & M. Hynes-Berry (1986, 1994), pp. 44-54.

<sup>5</sup> M. Cervantes Saavedra (1616), in the public domain



its linear logical structures and rationality. For all participants in the treatment setting, imagination is the necessary motivator, and imagination linked with emotional receptivity the basis for empathy. Imagination unites fantasy and reason, transcending both. It links head and heart, cognition and affect, inside and outside, past, present, and future. Besides fear and anxiety the unconscious can also hold treasures of richness, mystery, and wonder which enliven and beautify our lives; the reassuringly rational mind can become rigid and constricting. Imagination – and poetry - borrow freely from both, thereby moving, delighting, and illuminating us. Of course in the purposeful co-creation that is psychotherapy, the power of imagination is most beneficial when it is guided and directed in the service of psychological and emotional well-being. A client's repetitive anxious ruminations, those familiar persistent negative "what if's" represent a detrimental use of imagination that needs to be modified in order to allow the client to move toward wellness, vitality, and an enduring capacity for happiness.

Art in general and poetry in particular have the capacity to bypass the cognitive apparatus and speak directly to the heart. Students of literature and psychology have noted that many poetic devices which enable such powerful poetic communication are also present in dream and stream-of-consciousness writing. Among these are the use of symbol, including metaphor, one thing standing for another, personification, the fluidity of time, place, and person boundaries, condensation, in which one thing contains many, and its opposite, the way a fragment stands for the whole. Poems, like dreams, can suggest both mystery and familiarity, can offer glimpses into worlds unknown yet strangely familiar. It is often easier for clients to accept personal truths that emerge in poems and dreams, when somehow the creative process seems disconnected from deliberate intention: clients may say "well, yes, but I didn't do it, it just happened" and yet the poem or dream is undeniably their own. In both cases, much of the startling illuminating power of these images and sequences relies on juxtaposition, things in unexpected relation to each other, itself one of the ways in which the therapeutic process illuminates.

## 2. Empathy and Creativity

Two of the most important benefits of Poetry Therapy that deserve special attention are the development or enhancement of the capacity for empathy, and the activation of the client's creativity. The vivid characters and situations brought to life in poetry elicit various kinds of empathic responses from clients who find themselves moved in unexpected ways.

Stephen Crane's poem "There was a Man with Tongue of Wood"<sup>6</sup> gives us the startling image of a man with a tongue of wood who tries to sing, with "lamentable" result, and a listener who knows what the man wishes to sing, so that the singer is "content." We can think of this poem as a metaphor for therapy – we as therapists trying to understand what the singers in our offices wish to sing, especially those whose songs are indeed lamentable, tragic, terrifying – people who hide, who hurt themselves & others, who hurt their children, who choose addiction, who suffocate for fear of the air.

This poem both describes and evokes empathy – itself an act of imagination. Through imagination we develop empathy for our clients and most importantly help our clients develop empathy for others and for themselves, for the stifled singers within. A poem such as this one sparks clients' imaginations and provokes exploration and greater understanding and acceptance of themselves and each other.

Alfred Margulies, in his excellent book, *The Empathic Imagination* describes a 2-step process, beginning with not-knowing, or un-knowing, a clearing of the therapist's internal space, which then allows the more active imaginative step. In this context he refers to Keats and the concept of "negative capability," and notes that Keats was seeking an empathic goal:

"feeling himself into the reality of the other, as if to illuminate the object contemplated from within. The goal of the poetic

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<sup>6</sup> S. Crane, "There was a Man with Tongue of Wood" in the public domain

imagination was to chart the interior terrain.”<sup>7</sup>

This parallels the psychotherapeutic process itself in which removing the blocks to growth frees psychic energy for seeking new learning and enrichment. He conceptually divides empathy into passive and active modes, although both may exist simultaneously, and discusses four different aspects of empathy in the treatment context, as follows: 1) The conceptual aspect is based upon cognitive understanding. 2) The self-experiential aspect is based upon the therapist’s own experiences, memories, feelings and associations. 3) The third aspect, imaginative imitative empathy, is the most challenging and important aspect which stretches the imagination – ours in relation to clients, theirs in relation to poems, as well as to others in their lives. This is an active, seeking, searching mode. 4) The fourth is resonant empathy, basically an affective contagion, such as tears at the movies. This mode is more passive, it is an echoing or reflecting back. What we as poetry therapists have observed is that the introduction of carefully chosen lively, accessible poetry into the therapeutic space offers endless opportunities for developing empathy in any one of these forms, and that poetry therapy groups in particular offer clients invaluable opportunities for practicing empathic communication. The capacity for empathy greatly contributes to meaningful human connections and positive relationships, thereby increasing the potential for well-being and happiness. The etymology of the word empathy is in-feeling, feeling into someone or something, feeling oneself into the reality of another. The actual definition is: “the imaginative projection of one’s own consciousness into another being.” Empathy has its roots in mimicry, the earliest responses in infant-mother bonding. Mimicry is at the core of learning self-soothing, through mutually empathic responses of comfort and pleasure. The capacity for empathy lies in the giving and receiving of solace. In poetry therapy settings the physical poem can represent a transitional object – and transitional objects represent both soother and soothed.

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<sup>7</sup> A. Margulies (1989), p. 15.

Let us turn now to the ways in which poetry therapy benefits clients through the activation or restoration of the client's creativity. We know that people who are depressed, traumatized or in the grip of some other mental or emotional affliction often report an inability to problem-solve, to imagine solutions, as well as a general loss of initiative and creativity. Poetry therapy can re-ignite that creative capacity. Creativity involves the production of something new, an ability not to get stuck in what works or doesn't, a willingness to accept and seek new juxtapositions and relationships. However, novelty must be joined in some way to another element such as relevance which gives meaning to what is new. Creativity also often involves the ability to avoid rigid "either/or" "all/or/nothing" thinking and formulations, to come up with fresh solutions. It includes a capacity for homospatial thinking, in which more than one thing occupies the same space, and janusian thinking, after the Roman god Janus, typically portrayed as looking in opposite directions at once, thus the ability to contain paradox, contradiction, opposites and opposite-looking visions. As we know, the ability to simultaneously hold positive and negative feelings toward someone is a crucial developmental step, and difficulties accomplishing that step are a widely recognized source of internal conflict and distress. Creativity also involves risk-taking. The poem "To Write" by Renata Pallottini <sup>8</sup> which closes with an image of writing "the keys" and "only later" finding "what they open" exemplifies this, suggesting the risks that accompany releasing one's creativity, but also promoting the courage to actively explore the unknown, including the unknown which resides within. The poetry therapist invites clients to write the keys to self-knowledge and later, whether moments later in a session or much later, in a moment of personal reflection, discover what may be opened.

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<sup>8</sup> R. Pallotini (1988).

### 3. The Poem as Model

In poetry therapy, the importance of the poem as model cannot be overestimated. The poem can model an infinite range of attitudes, experiences, and ways of being with self, with others, and in the world. The poem also offers itself as container for the paradoxes and contradictions within the self, in relationships, and in the world. Most importantly, the poem models communication. Thoughts or feelings that were once only inside a person now live in the world and reach the reader or listener. When I did a poetry therapy group in a psychiatric hospital the informational flyer taped in the elevator said “A poem is only half a message. The other half is you.” The poem itself gives permission to think, feel, and express. Identifying with the story, or situation, or character in a poem may help a client understand his or her action or inaction, thereby inspiring more thoughtful, healthier choices.

The poem may teach or model making connections, especially connections between past and present. Understanding how the effects of childhood trauma or pain linger in the adult is a crucial step in the process of self-understanding which can bring about change. There are a great many poems which can be very effectively used to help clients acknowledge the presence of childhood pain in their current lives. One is “The Whip” by Robert Phillips, in which the poet, himself a master builder, reconstructs in words his childhood home, complete with the whip employed by his rageful father. The ending of the poem teaches us how the body’s senses remember fear and pain, as he experiences “pounding feet” and “flicked lightning in the air” even when the adult interaction appears quite untroubled<sup>9</sup>. The poem is a container for so much: history and memory both detailed, deliberate, and conscious, and unwilling and unconscious. In the reconstruction there is a striving toward mastery. Identification with the poem’s narrative and emotions prompts new consideration of participants’ own histories, attitudes, and actions, including future actions. What do their bodies tell them, and how do they choose to live with the unspoken

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<sup>9</sup> R. Phillips (1986).

parts of themselves? Can speaking in a poem help? Would it be enough? Through this poem one may learn a good deal about clients and they about themselves and about not feeling so alone. It often elicits the disclosure of similar experiences. One young woman who had previously been extremely withdrawn said very quietly "My father hurt me in other ways. It was incest." These discussions strengthen the potentials for the development of capacities for initiative and choice, increasing the likelihood of well-being and emotional satisfaction. A poem such as this one opens memory to examination and exploration which can help detoxify the past and lead to empowering choices about the present and future. Examples of choices that might flow from such discussion of this poem for example might be 1) to never whip one's children; 2) to write a letter or poem to the hurtful parent (or the one who colluded and hid) seeking some kind of accountability for the pain inflicted - and to choose to send it, or not; 3) to try to release anger and bitterness through compassion for the parents; 4) to examine the impact of old fear and intimidation upon the client's current experience, and determine to make appropriate changes.

Another powerful poem for exploring the impact of the past upon the present is "Wolves" by Kathryn Kerr<sup>10</sup>. In this poem the parental behavior is less dramatic, because it was the neglect of the child's need for reassurance and the suppression of the child's emotion that did lasting damage. The vivid image of "caged cries," like untamed wolves lends itself beautifully to an exploration of what untamed caged cries clients may be holding inside themselves and what they might do to tame them. Choices might include intentions regarding participants' own parenting behavior, or writing a list of current fears, or a list of fears that have been tamed, or a story about a child who magically transforms a wolf into a protective pet, or a poem about unlocking cages and all the different songs that might pour out. It is often therapeutic to encourage the writing of both a darker and a more positive response. Exploration might also reveal whether there are still areas in the

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<sup>10</sup> K. Kerr (1985).

client's life in which she feels given enough to stay "alive and hungry," and what her role might be in that repetition. Discussion about responses to this poem can teach us much about enduring, withholding, and it's opposite, generosity.

Another very effective poem for exploring the presence of the past in the present is "My Mother Once Told Me", by Yehuda Amichai<sup>11</sup>. The title is also the first line, which I suggest participants use to begin their own writing. The poem describes the lasting internalization of the mother's inhibiting prohibitions, the speaker's increasing withdrawal and isolation, and closes with the image of both his childhood hands and his present hands "still clinging." All three of these powerfully evocative poems evoke a sense of stifled emotion and of endurance, which may sometimes help develop strength and resilience, but what we learn in clinical work is that the clinging and caged cries may also endure. Translating them and the "lightning overhead" into words, and allowing an empathic other "to be there with words" can contribute greatly to healing and the freedom to grow into a revitalized self, a self newly or once again capable of sustaining optimism, of making positive choices, and of experiencing happiness.

#### **4. Grief and Loss**

Unrecognized or disavowed angers, resentments, longings, internalized conflicts, guilt, low self-esteem – all of these may form significant internal blocks to personal fulfillment and well-being, and there is a world of poems available to evoke client exploration of these difficult experiences and contribute to healing and growth. However, I have found that one of the most common and limiting of obstacles to well-being and happiness is the persistence of unresolved grief. It may be a current overwhelming grief, or perhaps a well-known grief that has been clung to and allowed to dominate the grieving person's psyche and life, or an older grief that for

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<sup>11</sup> Y. Amichai (1996).

many possible reasons, the person was unable to mourn. It may be grief that has been buried for so long it may no longer even be recognizable as such, whose emergence may be accompanied by surprise and dismay. In many cases the unacknowledged or disallowed grief may have hardened into destructive forces such as anger, envy, and pessimism or coagulated into depression, with its accompanying burdens of guilt, apathy and self-defeating behaviors. Healing for people in these circumstances is often described in terms of a softening, a letting go of the rigidly imposed need to guard against tears or anger or any kind of break-through emotion. In my experience early sibling loss frequently results in the limiting consequences of unresolved grief; one may speculate that parents were too mired in their own sorrow to sufficiently attend to that of the surviving child or children.

In working with grief and loss it is essential to note the situational context, especially when selecting literature: how recent was the loss, was it sudden or anticipated, what supports have been available. Deaths inevitably command some degree of attention, but there are many losses that often society offers little or no help with: divorces, miscarriages, loss of employment, loss of home, illness, loss of body parts or functions, loss of status or important aspects of identity.

In the aftermath of traumatic loss the normal symptoms of grief are exacerbated and intensified. Some characteristics common to traumatic loss include suddenness, witnessing, violence, malice or intentionality – what we would recognize as the element of evil – and culpability, or realistic guilt. I had the privilege and profoundly moving experience of conducting poetry therapy workshops with the family members and survivors of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York. It was deeply affecting to see how courageously and soulfully the participants responded, the words that emerged out of their broken hearts. It was also amazingly affirming to bring this modality to these people in the wake of their anguish and to experience so fully the power and efficacy and beauty of poetry therapy. I worked with both English- and Spanish-speaking adults,



adolescents, and children. In general, the commonalities were greater than the differences. I should note that whenever one is working in a bicultural or cross-cultural context the cultural differences and potential conflicts must be taken into careful consideration. In the groups following the 9/11 attacks, there was clearly an experienced tension in Latino participants between culturally approved manifestations of grief “at home” and what was seen as appropriate in the larger American culture, such as at work in an office setting. One woman for example felt criticized by her family for being “cold and indifferent,” implying a lack of love for her dead sister, when she no longer cried every day and went somewhat numbly about the tasks of maintaining herself, while at work her non-Hispanic supervisor and co-workers urged her to “get it together” and “move on” when she became quietly sad or tearful. For such participants it is important to choose poems and make interventions that also acknowledge the cultural and contextual conflicts.

At times of grief, whether fresh or stubbornly buried, sudden or expected, the reading and writing of poetry, and especially poetry therapy, can be enormously helpful. There are countless poems whose tone or content can evoke responses which move the reader toward some healing and acceptance or resolution, and the past 20 years have seen the publication of numerous anthologies and collections of poetry and writings with themes of grief and loss and recovery.

The following are some ways in which poetry therapy advances the healing work. Grief often isolates: we are all familiar with the image of the wounded animal retreating to his cave to lick his wounds. The bereaved tend to keep their lights off or dimmed, their shades drawn. They are equally uncomfortable alone and with others. Often they “have no words” and cannot summon the energy to even seek them. When a bereaved person is feeling alone and overwhelmed, there can be great value in allowing another’s words to articulate what is presently unsayable, to speak the unspeakable. The other’s words may offer comfort enough for the moment and may even be more comforting when written small

enough to keep in a pocket or corner of a purse. Often the recently bereaved report an inability to engage in former pleasures such as reading or listening to music, but one or two lines of a poem or a lyric or a simple phrase or quote may be small enough to sink in and remain accessible as a kind of internal affirmation or prayer, a resonating note of hope. It has been said that the mission of art is to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. The great power of art lies in its integrating capacity simultaneously to capture and express the unique and the universal. So a poem may offer a grieving client the opportunity to experience both a deeply personal truth and a commonality with another, the poet, or group members, or with all of suffering humanity. This is why in grief work I like to use poems from a wide range of times and cultures. There is a special kind of relief that comes from exclaiming “yes! That’s exactly how I feel” when the speaker may have lived in a far distant land or 2000 years earlier. Another benefit of written words as tools in the grief process is that poems demand nothing from the client, unlike real people in the client’s life who may be suffering their own complicated losses and often have limited tolerance for someone else’s sorrow.

A poem or quote also functions to contain not only the loss itself, but the essential paradox of the grief process, the core contradictory task of bereavement, of recovery from trauma, and of healthy living itself: the need to remember and to forget, to hold on and to let go. A poem can acknowledge the sorrow while simultaneously holding out hope, both of which the grieving person badly needs. In the poem “Island” by Langston Hughes<sup>12</sup>, the metaphor for overwhelming sorrow is a wave which the poet begs to carry him to the safety of an island he can see in the distance. The poem models the capacity to both surrender and fight on, and the underlying message to the reader is “you can do this too.” This poem’s power rests in many elements, but especially in the way both the enormity of grief and the presence of hope are simultaneously contained in 8 short lines. The rhythm and meter, the simplicity of language, also contribute to the sense of wavelike motion, of sur-

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<sup>12</sup> L. Hughes (1987).

render to something dangerously larger than oneself, while at the same time keeping the longed-for place of safety in sight. This perfect poem acknowledges the strength of pain so great it seems to threaten life itself, while holding a course toward comfort and safety. Most importantly, it understands that pain cannot be avoided, that “the only way out is through.”

The written word also functions to honor and memorialize, to create a story or a picture of the lost person, or place, or experience of self that outlives the person or the experience. Poems that honor or memorialize can inspire a grieving person to a similar creative act which might not have occurred without the external stimulus. The new words live, go on to have potential impact and influence of their own and in that sense offer a limited but extremely meaningful mastery over the loss. When someone writes a memoir or poem about someone who has died or is no longer reachable in some irrevocable way, the new work is not only life-affirming in that it comes from a source of inner creativity and vitality, it becomes itself almost a living thing, capable of touching and moving another person’s heart and mind. Most importantly, this kind of writing provides the lost person with a place and a lively enduring presence in the left-behind world. It is a gift both to the lost person and to the writer, for whom it may soften the weight of things unsaid. When after my son’s death I decided to try to publish poems written for and about him, it was with the clear desire and intent that others who knew him should be helped to remember and those who never got to know him should still have that opportunity, thereby somehow keeping him among the living in the physical plane he no longer inhabited. It was a way of expanding his circle of human connections, and of keeping his presence in the world.

We know that one of the major grief-work tasks is for the bereaved to come to a new relationship with the lost person. There are many poems that offer a multiplicity of attitudes and experiences for others to respond and react to as they struggle with remembering and forgetting, with living with the presence of absence. For example, my poem “The Road” ends with

“..... and every day I too rise,  
and through survivor’s eyes  
I look, and see, and tell him.”<sup>13</sup>

Another of my poems, “Hiking with Mary,” (a close friend who also lost a son) ends like this:

“ And there it is: . . .  
. . . the fine balance  
of absence and presence  
that allows not mere survival  
but vitality, pleasure, joy.  
The lost boys, the eagles soaring.”<sup>14</sup>

Many poems suitable for grief work employ direct address to the lost person, a literary device which gives the reader a very powerful and intimate experience. Although it was not conscious at the time, these poems were helping me work through various aspects of grief work, to move from enveloping sorrow toward an openness to happiness. Through them I can trace a poetic progression from protest to a quieter internalization to a larger more encompassing sense of unity, connection, and enduring presence, as seen in the following sequence:

First

“Jeremy – your death –  
so wrong!”<sup>15</sup>

Then later

“I am still your mother, and right now,  
grief-soaked under weeping skies,

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<sup>13</sup> A. M. Rolfs (2003a).

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* (2003b).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* (2003c).

to shelter you once more in the  
rocking watery homeworld of my body  
is the best that I can do.”<sup>16</sup>

And finally

“Yes, I am here,  
feeling it all, loving  
the deepfelt connection  
to the green that springs anew  
from air and earth and water,  
to the same exchange of oxygen  
in my lungs and in the leaves  
all around me, to the eternal  
cycles of falling and growing,  
to the waters that never stop flowing,  
to my own creaturely being,  
and to you.”<sup>17</sup>

Direct address can also be very useful even for addressing non-human losses. One woman mourning a garden she had to leave seemed stuck in the conviction that it would be neglected and that all her loving care would be undone. An invitation to write to the garden allowed her to not only imagine some of the fruits of that labor persisting but reconnected her to her own capacities for patience and nurturing, for making and appreciating beauty, and for finding opportunities to develop and express those qualities. Writing exercises that invite persons to directly address the missing person are extremely useful, especially when there are very conflictual emotions involved. Such writing offers the benefit of unburdening while also helping to clarify and challenge emotions and beliefs. For many people writing is frightening because it “makes real” and they find the idea of putting words on paper deeply alarming. This is especially true if what needs to be written has been prohibited in the formative past. Overcoming this fear is

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<sup>16</sup> A. M. Rolfs (2003d).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* (2003e).

deeply empowering.

Finally, another great benefit of poetry therapy generally, but especially in the context of grief and loss is that it helps the participant find an authentic voice, thereby strengthening and helping restore a shaken or lost identity. The voice of the poem may model for the client an adaptive stance which includes acceptance, self-compassion, and hope, illuminating a way forward. Often however as they begin to reclaim a capacity for peacefulness and pleasure people recovering from great loss will struggle against these positive experiences, as though they constitute a kind of betrayal. At such times I express my belief, either in poems or directly, that though no one would ever wish for the dark and terrible events that inevitably shape us, the ability to find or draw good out of bad is the highest expression of our humanity. I also believe that this ability is closely linked to the capacity for happiness. The following tiny poem by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese poet Masahide expresses this in 8 small words.<sup>18</sup>

“Barn burned down.  
Now I can see the moon.”

This evocative juxtaposition can open a remarkably useful exploration of the many startling side-by-side experiences life brings, prompting exclamations such as “I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.” The struggle after loss to allow oneself positive experiences, pleasure, excitement, happy moments often manifests itself in extremes of black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking: “if I’m having a beautiful moment now with the moon, it must mean it was a good thing the barn burned down.” Well, no. Emotional well-being and happiness involve balance, inclusivity, allowing both the burned barn and the moon fully into consciousness, opening eyes and heart to both misfortune and joy, and accepting the presence of life’s inherent, unavoidable paradoxes.

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<sup>18</sup> M. Masahide, 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the public domain.

## **5. Present: Practitioner, Participant, Poem**

At the heart of this healing transformative work we find the concept of presence, used broadly in all its evocative meanings. Firstly, whether the poetry therapy treatment is individual or group-based, the quality of the therapist's presence is crucial. She must be accepting, nonjudgmental but unwavering in her commitment to the client's best interest, open enough to the client's emotional experience that she can truly feel it, but not so close that it hurts her or threatens her equilibrium or her boundaries. She must protect clients from themselves and each other, and protect herself as well. She must listen with head and heart to clients' words, with both receptive and active empathy, and must offer her own words in this extraordinary co-created living poetic and therapeutic encounter. The literature she brings must be thoughtfully and carefully chosen to help clients stretch and grow toward their healthier, stronger, imagined selves. Poems that not only evoke some important relationship experience but reflect in some way the therapeutic relationship itself can be especially useful, especially around issues of trust and engagement. Bringing feelings about the treatment itself into the field of vision can affirm the learning and deepen the corrective experience.

The second important presence is that of the client or client group. Literature chosen with the goal of engagement can help clients bring their own alert, active, receptive presence to the meeting of client, therapist, and poem. This requires establishing an emotional climate of safety and respect. Clients with limited education or language facility may need extra reassurance that poetry therapy is not "school" and that all participants have what they need to come away with a positive experience. In poetry therapy group work, although the facilitator may need to manage very disparate responses, therapeutic benefit is greatly enhanced by the attentive and accepting presence of the group. For example when every poem reminded an unremittingly psychotic patient of death, another member reassured him "it's ok, John, we know you always see death in poems even when we don't." In a program for

chemically addicted post-partum mothers the group members provided powerful affirming responses to personal writings, ranging from sighs to gasps to laughter to outright applause. The experience of spontaneously bringing forth something totally new which has the power to galvanize a whole group is itself galvanizing. This was particularly true for these women, for whom words had primarily been sources of rejection, humiliation, and shame. A positive experience of “being there with words” was stunningly new. The supportive community of the group reduces isolation, increases self-esteem and is itself a dynamic source of potential healing. Tracking and responding to verbal and nonverbal shifts in the clients’ presence is one of the tasks of the poetry therapist. Since poetry therapy is such an effective modality across the spectrum of age, socio-economic status, diagnostic categories, and educational levels, clients bring an endless array of struggles and issues to the poetry therapy context. However, the therapist’s task throughout the treatment, is to establish and sustain an emotional climate of safety and respect.

We turn now to the third presence in the room: the poem. As we have noted, poems can be effective tools in demonstrating connections between past and present, in giving permission to feel and to express emotions, in working through grief, and in modeling a whole range of possible attitudes and behavior. J. Ruth Gendler has written that art is both mirror and window.<sup>19</sup> The poems used in poetry therapy are windows to limitless new experiences, and invitations to expand heart and mind and soul, as well as mirrors the participant is free to look into as little or as much as he wishes. Of course clients’ poems are also windows and mirrors, to be treated with great respect. The poem as third presence focuses clients’ attention on the poem and on themselves, rather than on the therapist as the agent of healing or the repository of knowledge. As one patient said, “*It makes the therapy about what I can do, not what I can get.*” The poem’s characters, and even the poem itself, rather than the therapist, offer themselves as useful magnets for intense positive and negative transference reactions. It is some-

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<sup>19</sup> J. R. Gendler (2007), pp. 55-73.



times far more effective, for example, to offer an evocative poem depicting a mother than to ask directly about clients' mothers. In response, clients' own true stories and experiences emerge. Lisa Marie Smith, a physician and poetry therapist in training, wrote the following about the poem as presence.

Free

Poem, set free  
by its author, alights –  
a centering presence  
among us.  
It invites,  
Invites all voices  
To speak it, all sensitivities  
to feel it, all experiences  
to come to it. It is not wounded  
by rejection, or pained  
by a fresh response.  
It welcomes all, all possibilities,  
as new breaths  
in its life. It neither guards  
its seeds, nor force-feeds  
and we are free, free  
to take and create,  
or not.<sup>20</sup>

Significantly, the poem can also be an ongoing presence, outside and beyond the poetry therapy session, a tangible gift which the client may keep and return to at will, over and over again. As a transitional object it represents whatever the client needs it to – hope, continuity, commitment to change, the therapist's knowledge and caring, the therapeutic alliance. This function of the poem is a powerful aid in sustaining optimism and connection to the therapy between sessions and after termination. Poems given or written at the end of therapy are therefore especially important.

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<sup>20</sup> L. M. Smith, with permission from the author.

This is true both for published poems and for the client's own writings, which help the client sustain the experience of an effective, competent, creative self. The following haiku by Basho, often used at termination, reflects both transition and transformation:

The temple bell stops  
but the sound  
keeps coming out of the flowers.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Presence and Happiness

Considering now the larger meanings of the word “presence” we are immediately drawn into realms of philosophy and spirituality. The very word evokes a felt awareness of something larger than oneself; we speak of being in the presence of grandeur, or of holy presence, the presence of the divine. There is a wealth of poems about the self in relation to the natural world that vividly and beautifully offer this experience of deep happiness in communion with nature. Increasingly writings on wellness, health, and happiness in both professional and popular literature refer to the benefits of mindfulness, meditation, learning to be fully present in the moment, an appreciation for beauty, enhanced awareness of the self in connection with others, with nature, with something large and encompassing. Healing old wounds and releasing blocks is essential, but poetry therapy also encourages clients to learn a new kind of noticing, a newly appreciative way of paying attention. To move toward wholeness and happiness requires new skills, perspectives, intentions and habits. Wholeness implies balance – that no part of the personality overwhelmingly dominates the others. Mark Twain observed “Good friends, good books, and a sleepy conscience – this is the good life”.<sup>22</sup> We are amused, and yet the wisdom contained here is in the balance – the presence of emotional engagement, intellectual engagement, and an inner life

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<sup>21</sup> M. Basho, in the public domain.

<sup>22</sup> M. Twain (Samuel Clemens)(1993), p. 12.

free of overactive self-criticism and accusation. Wholeness and well-being involve being genuinely present to ourselves, in relationships, and in the world, with its wonders, both tiny - the delicate intricacy of a single leaf - and vast - the limitless starry expanse of a night sky. Receptivity to this kind of presence, when deeply felt, is a form of happiness which enriches one's life. In my view Mary Oliver is the unequalled poet of presence, teaching us about engagement with nature and spirit and ourselves. Her poem "Wild Geese"<sup>23</sup> is widely used and beloved for its compassion and wisdom. It is remarkable how many factors promoting emotional and spiritual well-being are contained in this poem – the stunning first lines, releasing the reader from the punishing demands of guilt and high expectations, the tender accepting reference to the animal life of the body, the realistic acknowledgment of despair and loneliness, the ongoing life of the world offering itself to the imagination, and finally the connection to it all, the "place in the family." It could be - it is, perhaps - a prescription for happiness.

Just as the word "presence" evokes mystery, depth, grandeur, so the word "happiness" evokes a stream of other words such as well-being, fulfillment, joy, contentment, vitality, serenity, peacefulness. Poetry therapy can move us closer to all of these, and also to optimism, and the willingness to commit to meaningful relationships and work. Martin Seligman in his book, *Authentic Happiness*<sup>24</sup> distinguishes between temporary pleasures and deeper gratifications which lead to growth because built upon strengths and virtues. Both are important in developing capacities for happiness, and both are promoted by poetry therapy. The initial experience of the poem can give immediate pleasure; the discussion and writing are directed toward strengths, optimism, and self-directed change, all essential components of happiness. Poetry therapy offers uniquely fertile opportunities for helping people grow through the recognition, development, and enhancement of many of the strengths Seligman identifies. This is especially true in the areas of wisdom and knowledge, courage, love and humanity,

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<sup>23</sup> M. Oliver (2004).

<sup>24</sup> M. Seligman (2002).

and spirituality and transcendence. Mary Oliver writes in “The Ponds”<sup>25</sup> that what she wants in this world is to be “willing to be dazzled.” Healing brings us to that point of willingness; happiness requires receptivity to joys, small and great. Supporting the capacity to be fully present to the entire range of life’s experiences and to find beauty and transcendence in ordinary moments is one of the great benefits of poetry therapy on the healing journey toward happiness.

Galway Kinnell, in “Saint Francis and the Sow”<sup>26</sup> describes beautifully much of what poetry therapists strive to do when he speaks of the necessity of reteaching a thing its own loveliness “in word and in touch” until there is a flowering “from within, of self-blessing.” Surely this is also a description of happiness: the ability to flower from within, of self-blessing. As practitioner and fellow-human, I have found that “being there with words” can and does help bring about this self-blessing. I have both witnessed and personally experienced the many ways in which the qualities that contribute to the capacity for happiness have been nourished and enhanced by the reading and writing of poetry. I am a better and happier person for it.

In Li-Young Lee’s poem “From Blossoms”<sup>27</sup> he writes of taking “what we love” inside us, the sensuous pleasure of adoring and eating not just the “round jubilation of peach” but the summer days, the days lived “from joy to joy to joy.” This then is poetry’s gift to us, and ours to our poetry therapy participants. The poet brings us words so we too can “be there with words,” fully present to the potential for healing and transformation, awake to the beauty in ourselves, each other, and the world. Healing, we may then enjoy both the physicality and the transcendence of moments fully lived, especially those moments in which we are not only capable of love, but of taking what we love inside, where it may live as a wellspring of well-being, a nourishing presence continually refreshing and reinvigorating our capacities for happiness.

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<sup>25</sup> M. Oliver (1992).

<sup>26</sup> G. Kinnell (1988).

<sup>27</sup> Lee, Li-Y (1986).

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