



Lance Green

*The ritual chants and incantations of shamanism,
the healing songs and magic of indigenous people
with their rich core of poetry,
illustrate the vital role of art in ancient medicine.
Poetry is indeed a force, an act of human magic,
that alters the way we see our lives and so changes us.*

—Morris R. Morrison in *The Arts in Psychotherapy*

Poetic Medicine: A Kind of Magic

PLATO SAID THAT BEAUTIFUL LANGUAGE induces *sophrosyne*, a condition of stability and integration in psychic life. Throughout the ages, the healing power of words has been demonstrated in charms and spells, by poets, in scriptural inspiration, and by the spiritual transmissions of great teachers. You may well know this healing power. Can you recall a song, a poem, a line from a poem, or even a single simple word that puts your mind at ease?

Peer-reviewed, double-blind scientific research has confirmed the psychological and physical benefits of expressive writing. Psychologist James W. Pennebaker, at the University of Texas at Austin, began publishing the findings of such research with his colleagues in 1988. Their studies have shown that writing about difficult and traumatic experiences raises our immunity, ameliorates and reduces illnesses, and improves our mood and memory. In 1999, psychologists Joshua Smyth and Arthur Stone of SUNY at Stony Brook found with their colleagues that patients suffering from asthma and arthritis experienced clinically relevant improvement in their conditions when they regularly wrote about stressful events in their lives. A summary and evaluation of more than a decade of such research on the many health benefits of writing can be found both in Pennebaker's widely respected book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (Guilford Press, 1997) and in Joshua Smyth and Stephen Lepore's anthology, *The Writing Cure* (American

Psychological Association, 2002).

More recent studies by Louise Sundararajan, a psychologist in the Forensic Unit of the Rochester Psychiatric Center, along with Jeffrey A. Richards, of the University of Colorado at Boulder, reveal greater dimension to the uses of expressive writing, showing not only that it makes a difference but also that the context within which writing is applied makes a difference. According to Sundararajan, "The research questions need to shift from *whether* to *how*. We can now look at the health benefits of different types of language use in combination with different contexts of writing to learn more about the link between language use and health."

Even as these protocols show a way forward in our intellectual understanding of language's healing properties, we don't need to wait for scientific investigations to use the healing power of words to empower and awaken our lives. The essence of the word *noetic* reminds us that we also learn and grow through direct perception and intuitive knowing. As Pablo Neruda writes in "Ode to the Book":

*I learned about life
from life itself,
love I learned in a single kiss
and could teach no one anything
except that I have lived . . .*



As a poet and a poetry therapist for 27 years now, I encounter the transformational power of poem-making afresh every day. I hear it in the released sigh of feeling and breath when someone's heart begins to crack open while writing or listening to a poem. I witness it in the spontaneous tears of those who realize they are not alone in their suffering, who discover what it's like to be seen and feel more deeply alive.

Consider What Happens

*Consider what happens
upon hearing a poem
that moves you. The nod
of your head, tucking
your chin close
to your chest, as if
stopping to rest, as if you could cry now
in the middle of a long journey.
Here, whatever you regret having forgotten
even with your aching tiredness
(which you cannot forget) all of a sudden
turns to a surprisingly vibrant sky
as your eyes widen ever so slightly
in a recognition that shimmers
under your skin, wells up
into a calm line of sight
that is your own and goes on
almost forever.
Astonished, you walk outside breathing
and slowly stroll in the fresh air
suddenly aware that back in your house
someone new, a stranger you like,
has arrived.*

—JOHN FOX

That sigh, that nod of the head, those tears are noetic. The uncovering of that inner voice that speaks truth and welcomes feeling evokes joy and relief. And it is by flexing that voice that we stay close to the mystery and miracle of creation.

WORDS THE HEALER SPEAKS

In one of the essays in his collection *Open Papers* (Copper Canyon Press, 1994), Greek poet and Nobel

laureate Odysseus Elytis writes about the nurses in his childhood who practiced a kind of magic:

Until a few years ago our island nurses, with utter seriousness, chased evil spirits from above our cradles by uttering words without meaning, holding a tiny leaf of a modest herb which received God knows what strange powers exclusively from the innocence of its own nature. Poetry is precisely this tiny leaf with the unknown powers of innocence and the strange words which accompany it.

Cortney Davis is a nurse practitioner in Redding, Connecticut; she is also a poet and editor of anthologies of poetry by nurses. In *Between the Heartbeats* (University of Iowa Press, 1995), Davis writes about the role of poetry in medicine and caregiving:

Nurses are often, along with their patients, creating a sacred space. Picture the bed with the patient in it, a patient in pain or perhaps simply afraid. See the nurse next to the bed. He or she may be involved with some technical problem—the malfunctioning ventilator, the insistent warning bell on the IV—or she may be doing the work of listening, of comforting, of staying. Unlike the doctor, she will come and go a hundred times a shift to this patient. And she will walk, again and again in this one day, beside death, beside birth and pain—sometimes like a shadow, more often like a partner. What the nurse knows is different from what the doctor knows, different from what the family experiences. The nurse descends and returns from hell. She also sees grace.

When we write about our work, we recreate that sacred space, draw again the shimmering line around patient and nurse, and draw them together. By revealing the details, the dailiness of nursing, we discover, and then teach others, universal truths about life and death. Just as we know the feel of our hands on the patient's body, we have learned these truths by heart.

Creating sacred space in a hospital setting through attention, compassion, and poem making shows us a new way of looking at empathy, tenderness, and professional caregiving—and how they weave together.

I Want to Work in a Hospital

*I want to work in a hospital
where it's okay
to climb into bed with patients
and hold them pre-
op, before they lose
their legs or breasts, or after,
to tell them
they are still whole.
Or postpartum,
when they have just returned
from that strange garden,
or when they are dying,
as if somehow, because I stay
they are free to go,
taking with them
the color of my eyes.
I want the daylight
I walk out into
to become the flashlight they carry,
waving it
so God might find them
as we go together
into their long night.*

—CORTNEY DAVIS

Given the broken nature of health care in our country, where isolation is the norm, where loss and death are considered failures, this poem, by its risk, deep courage, and compassionate intimacy of care, seeks to return us to balance. Western medicine's zealous pursuit of technology, intense reliance on prescription drugs, and stamping out of the feelings in its students and practitioners—all within a managed-care system concerned mostly with the bottom line—limit our capacity to love. Drugs and technology will not speak for love, but poetry is a revolutionary act that does. The privilege of caring for people who are ill includes the responsibility of healers, caregivers, physicians, hospice volunteers, nurses, and creative



David Drewry

Healing Words, a film about poetry and medicine

Since 1990, the Arts in Medicine (AIM) program at Shands Hospital at the University of Florida has used arts therapy in the form of dance, music, drama, visual arts, and creative writing to help patients and their families deal with the sorrows, losses, and unexpected joys that accompany illness and recovery. *Healing Words: Poetry and Medicine* is a documentary that highlights the poetry component of this remarkable program. It follows Dr. John Graham-Pole and poetry therapist John Fox into hospital rooms where they help patients write poems as part of the healing process. For many, poetry captures an essential truth about themselves—a memory from childhood or a moment of insight—that deepens their understanding of their lives and their illnesses. This understanding, the film shows, is the key to healing. Some of the doctors who work at Shands also write and share their own poetry, as do participating University of Florida medical students, who report that writing keeps their spirit of humanity alive.

Healing Words premiered on PBS in July 2008 and is available for purchase at www.shoppbs.org. To learn more about the film and explore the connection between medicine and the expressive arts, go to www.healingwordsproductions.com.

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art therapists to listen and speak in a healing way. All too often we ignore integrative practices of healing, including the creative arts, that could guide us to a deeper understanding of what it means to connect with another person, share presence, speak words that heal, reclaim a sense of belonging and community, and live within a reality where death is part of life.

In the PBS documentary *Healing Words: Poetry and Medicine* (see sidebar, p. 17), Michael Okun, neurologist, medical director of the National Parkinson Foundation, and codirector of the Center for Movement Disorders, Shands Hospital, at the University of Florida, explains why art is essential to medical practice:

The interface between art and medicine is natural. It's always been there, and the reason it has been there is we don't have all the answers. So the doctor or the bedside physician is left to interpret to the best of his or her ability how to help the patient make very important and life-changing decisions. At the same time, a doctor is trying to deliver to that patient the best possible medical advice and the best possible medical care. But when you do that, you realize it's not a cookie-cutter approach—not everyone can have the same thing or needs the same thing to get better or to heal, whether that means getting better or not getting better. Because of that, you realize that the practice of medicine is an interface between art and medicine. Sometimes there is more art, and other times more medicine—but if you leave one or the other out, then you ultimately fail with your patient.

The cathartic tragedies of Euripides and Aeschylus were played in the round so that actors and audience could participate together. The cultures of India and Tibet with their immersion in Vedic and Buddhist mantra; the poetic insight of ancient China's Tao Te Ching with stanzas that set the self ablaze; the emotionally charged biblical psalms that cry out to God; native and indigenous peoples' awareness of the interconnectedness of everything and of language's strand in the web—all use healing words, rhythms, metaphors, and the creative imagination to prepare and sustain a healing container. All create sacred space to bring beauty to mental, physical, and spiritual imbalance.

Joseph Bruchac captures this perennial wisdom in these lines from his poem “Remedies”:

*Half on the Earth, half in the heart,
the remedies for all the things
which grieve us wait for those who know
the words to use to find them.*

BRINGING POETRY TO CANCER PATIENTS

For many years, I have worked with cancer survivors at Wellness Communities, a nationwide support center with a welcoming and holistic approach. I remember Sydney Long, somewhere in her early to mid-60s, from the poetry circle at the Wellness Community in Columbus, Ohio. I found myself interested in Sydney's face as she listened to others—the way it displayed connection and empathy to poem and person. This empathic relationship is often difficult to find in the world, but it is not so unusual in a place like this. People who are aware of mortality have given up their masks and are thirsty for truth.

All the while that I watched Sydney, I noticed a calm dispassion on her face. I did not sense that she was disassociated from her body or self, but rather that she was living from a mind settled into her heart. Watching her, I was moved to write this poem:

*I watch for the way a person
Man, woman or child
Stops and pauses
In the moment
Willingly or
Because they must,
To say it all or what little
Can be said, said
Lightly, with gravity,
Hopefully and when
Nothing else can be done—
Speaks from their truth, heart,
Looks within, connects—
And lets the silence sing.*

Does the silent calm, that quiet witness we sometimes feel in the writing circle, take deeper root because of the

writing and listening that occurs? Is this something we can share because we are speaking from a place, from places, in this rich life that is breathing below the surface?

I found all the healing outcomes of poetry expressed in Sydney's face—and in her poems. Here she writes about her cancer treatment:

*After a long day I felt pulverized
Like plaster dust—fine and desiccated.
Scattering on the wind preferred.
Dispersing care and burden.
But wishes aren't horses
So no one will ride. Only sitting
Motionless and silent hoarding my energy
Letting it seep inward to my heartwood
Where sunshine and leaves dapple my day.
Where turquoise skies and violet rivers merge,
And even magpies have sense.
Where gazelles cavort in breath-stopping play.*

*Gradually I grow from a spendthrift's purse
Into a flickering, a rippling of renewal.
My hollowed core will fill again, and
I will emerge from this undertow
To howl hallelujah and carry on.
Just not today.*

—SYDNEY LONG

Poetry asks us not only to notice (in itself a rare thing) but to *stay with*—stay with a freshness of mind and heart that allows for mercy to touch our pain and loss. This freshness rejoices in the miraculous uniqueness that the universe offers us to explore, through each particular moment, and in each particular expression of being.

WHAT CHILDREN CAN TEACH US

My sense of connection to poetry as healer is largely possible because of what I learn from children. Even more than my excellent mentors, extensive training, and constant practice do, children show me how to help adults rekindle creativity, how to plumb a native wisdom within them.

Years ago, visiting a classroom of fourth-graders in Fredericksburg, Texas, I was determined *not* to teach

them anything about poetry. I wanted to learn about poetry from them. So I asked them: “What would we lose in our world if we didn't have poetry? What if poetry were considered unnecessary and died from lack of use?” Within seconds, girls and boys were shouting, “Feeling!” “Imagination!” “Music!” “Memory!”

Having met so many adults wounded by the neglect or rejection of their own creative spark, I imagined these nine-year-olds at midlife in the midst of life's rising losses, and I wanted them to find access to that spark now, free of the self-doubt that kills the willingness to give it a try later as adults. I share the poetry of children with adults in my poetry circles, especially at the beginning, to facilitate their connecting to that same vulnerable, resilient, and wonder-born place within themselves—a place where metaphor breathes freely. In that place, there is the possibility of reawakening our connection to the larger life.

Heart of Water

*When I was a baby my heart
was a tiny fish swimming
in a gargantuan sea of things to come*

*When I was a toddler my heart
was a trout in a large lake of
thoughts and feelings*

*Now my heart is becoming
a salmon ready to go to the sea
of the troubles I will have to face*

*When I am old my heart
will be a whale swimming
in a sea of memories*

*When I die God will become
a whaler.*

—ORION MISCIAGNA, 11 YEARS OLD 

JOHN FOX is president of the Institute for Poetic Medicine, a professor at the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California, and author of *Poetic Medicine* (Tarcher, 1997) and *Finding What You Didn't Lose* (Tarcher, 1995). To learn more, go to www.poeticmedicine.org.

