

UC Riverside

UCR Honors Capstones 2019-2020

Title

How We Heal: Using Poetic Expression to Overcome Personal Challenges

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0353n076>

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Publication Date

2020-04-01

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are within the manuscript.

By

A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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Abstract

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Acknowledgements

This project is made possible by the feedback and edits of my mentor, Ann Cheney. I also want to thank the generous Excellence Scholarship that the University of California-Riverside Honors Program offered me. Thank you to my friends and mentors that helped me synthesize these thoughts. Thanks to my parents for giving me eyes to read the world. You have given me the experiences and joy to create this project. Thank you for continually supporting me in life.

Introduction

Expressing trauma and pain through poetry and writing is an effective method of healing. Many research studies have shown that disclosing adverse memories to listeners can improve the health and mental wellbeing of the discloser (Kelley, Lumley, & Leisen 1997). In fact, researchers have created models on how experiencing adversity can strengthen individual resiliency, and even drawing connections between “neurobiological and psychosocial targets for prevention and therapeutic interventions” (Malhi 2019). Listening to people disclose a traumatic event can be considered an act of altruism and on a physiological basis, acts of altruism can reduce pain activation in the prefrontal cortex in healthy adults (Wang 2020). Perhaps this is getting at the core of the profession of medicine; the sharing of a patient’s emotional pain is rewarding for both the patient and the healthcare professional. Poetry is a form of reflection that engages our conscious minds with suppressed emotions and ideas. Through reflection, we begin the process of “Finding a means to express these internal thoughts and interpretations, such as transposing them into poetry, provides a novel form of expression. This transposing process moves our internal thoughts onto the written page, creating a space for our inner thoughts to be in the world in a tangible way as if we were pulling the narratives out of ourselves and laying them down before us” (Hovey 2018). Poetry allows us to speak when we feel voiceless and unable to share our personal immutable truths and burdens that are otherwise considered taboo and unutterable. Healing from immense personal challenges is difficult and is even more difficult if attempted alone. Healing is a combination of internal retrospection and external support from your family, friends, and community.

When I think about the adverse life experiences I have had, I think of when my father had a heart attack. The dizzying twirl of blue and red lights from the emergency response painted our

neighborhood. I wanted to apply poetic expression methods as a personal exploration of my own emotional experiences of pain, joy, uncertainty, hope, and fear. I think the idea of medicine is a poetic one. I know that I will cease to exist someday, but I do not know when. If I am diagnosed with a terminal illness, I still know that I will cease to exist someday, but I still do not know when. Medicine is a uniquely human endeavor to doctor our body, mind, and spirit to bring certainty to death and illness. We sometimes lack the clarity of thought to be able to distill down the nebulous, abstract ideas that organically composes medicine. When speaking in terms of life and death, medicine forces science, mathematics, and reason to decipher the undecipherable. Medical intervention is at its core, gray. The absolute black and white lines that exist in theory are blurred in the face of the messy, emotional, intertwined human experience. As Isaac Asimov adeptly said, "In life, unlike chess, the game continues after checkmate." In my collection of poems, I attempt to create a clear recount of my experience during a life-changing family emergency, to embrace the difficulties of an uncertain future afterwards, to express a spectrum of emotions ranging from fear, shame, anxiety to joy, surprise, triumph, and to heal.

Cafeteria

We handed the cashier our credit card

For a plate of macaroni and grilled chicken

I led my mom to two joined tables at the far side of the hospital cafeteria

We sat down with our backs against the wall, our faces looking forward to the rest of the diners

Her fork scraped once against the thin, Styrofoam tray

A moment later she stopped and buried her face in her hands

I paused
Spoonful of food mid-flight to my mouth
36 hours since his heart attack
We hadn't left the hospital
A table of nuns and priests sat in front of us
They were hospital Chaplains in training, most likely

I sought distraction, I dared for their glances
Wishing for a slight turn of one of their shoulders
It was an inconsequential attempt to defy and to take control of this worthless, small hill
I turned away to comfort her
She had a lot on her mind
She had a lot on her mind

Cafeteria Analysis

This free verse poem is three sestets, which is a stanza with 6 lines each. It is unrhymed. The first line of the 2nd stanza reads, "I paused," and is meant to give the reader a momentary pause in their mind as they read the poem that mirrors the actual pause that I experienced in reality as the scene unfolded. It follows common Iambic Pentameter. This moment in the hospital cafeteria occurred just 36 hours after my father was first admitted into the Emergency Room. I was the only kin that was with my mother during this short window. The nurses were doing a minor procedure during the day and asked that we step outside so not to distract them.

I think back on the poetry and books that I read in the months after the surgery that gave me the clarity and determination to withstand the emotional stress. On that Winter afternoon, I felt anger and projected this anger on to people who were not deserving of it. They were pursuing their life's calling. Further, they were just eating a meal in a cafeteria that belong just as much to them as it did to anyone else. I felt a primal instinct of wanting to protect and wanting to take control. At this moment, I think my subconscious instinct was to close in our emotions and feelings as not to show weakness. Additionally, the past few days felt completely out of our control from the moment the ambulance was called, the room we received, the medicine he was given, the insurance documentation being billed, and many other aspects combined together to provide an overbearing sense of dread and hopelessness. As a result, I attempted to take control of a situation to create a sense of control and break the constraints I had felt so deeply. As Atul Gawande eloquently says in his book *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*, "...not only do all human beings err, but they err frequently and in predictable, patterned ways" (Gawande 2002). I realize that in that moment, I projected my internal frustrations on an imaginary argument. It represents how we are all flawed, and it is better to recognize our faults rather than suppress them.

7006

I forgot the room number we stayed in

It was on the seventh floor

On the first day, I asked the social worker to borrow a pen

I used it to sign papers for my professors to request any accommodations they would allow for

I owe great heaps of gratitude to our nurse, Reina, who was an angel, I assume

Our darkest day was the third when we decided to perform the bypass

She saw my mother cry and went to comfort her in the bathroom

I hid my own tears by looking through the window glass

Many staff members came in and out of the room to perform their required duties that weekend

Some tidied the room without asking, one even provided us a booklet of resources

But no one else gave everything in their heart to the very end

Except for this nurse

She decided to carry an ounce of the burden on our hearts

To share in our pain and to listen; what she did for us was nothing short of art

7006 Analysis

This poem follows the form of an English Sonnet, or a Shakespearean Sonnet where the rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG (Power Poetry). The 14-line sonnet is usually in admiration of something. The most famous example is none other than William Shakespeare's *Shall I compare Thee to a Summer's Day*. In the sonnet, he compares a woman with the beauty of a pastoral tableau. Similarly, I write about my respect towards the nurse who took care of my father and my family during the uncertain time prior to our bypass surgery. This poem is centered around the idea of healing together and being each other's keeper, "Healing is frequently thought of as taking place at the level of the individual. But if healing is viewed as a process that brings us back to wholeness, then in addition to happening within the individual

patient, healing can also take place between patient and family members, between patient and the larger community of which they are a part, and even at the level of the community as a whole” (Carroll 2005). I often think of the barrier to healing that we face. The bureaucracy that surrounds health insurance billing, the access to primary care physicians and preventative care, social determinants of health, and many other socioeconomic factors add stress to the patient and their loved ones who are already facing emotional hardships. Although we may have had the fortitude to withstand the stress of the situation even without the nurse’s gesture of kindness, her actions were memorable and made me feel cared for at a moment when it was hard to care for myself.

Holes

She waits at the back door

I see her tail wagging more and more

Her claws are dirtied, and her fur tangled

There was a circle of dark in the grass that was angled

She waits at the back door

The dirt in the flowerbed was turned upside down

The circle in the grass was a deep hole I did not dare stare down

Dogs are simple creatures that create their own happiness and mirror the energy of their master

Maybe that is why they burn through the candle stick of life faster

The dirt in the flowerbed was turned upside down

Holes Analysis

This poem is a limerick following the form of first two lines rhyming, third- and fourth-line rhyming, and the fifth line is a repeat of the first line (Limerick). Most limericks are short, and the most well-known ones are humorous. For example, I was inspired by Rudyard Kipling's *There was a small boy of Quebec* pokes fun at the difference in cold weather tolerance between Canadians and foreigners in that "we don't call this cold in Quebec" as the small boy is "buried in snow to his neck" (Kipling 1904).

I have two stanzas of quintets. I think the most powerful piece of the limerick form is that the first and last line of each stanza is a repeat. Repetition is the clear signal to the reader that what they are reading is important. Moreover, the same sentence can be interpreted differently after giving it context. For my particular poem, I gave 4 lines of context before repeating the first line in order to direct the reader to a distinct conclusion. Based on top-down processing, the first reading of "She waits at the back door" can be interpreted as a normal day where my dog awaits my return home. However, I reveal that she was digging holes all day. The effect of the last line creates tension and mystery in the reader's mind of what is causing her to dig holes and what is she waiting for. By itself, the first stanza is ambiguous and can simply be explained by the dog having fun while not under direct supervision. I use personification to give my dog a mind and feelings that I feel are fitting based on my relationship with her. This provides insight, albeit limited, inside the mind of an animal as they cope with a traumatic event.

My second stanza is trying to suggest the idea that dogs mirror the energy and emotion of their owner. Up to a certain threshold, they can create their own happiness and spread their optimism to their masters. I realize that this act of accidental altruism can be an explanation for their shorter life spans. I hint again at the idea of loss and how every living organism will have to

free itself of “the surly bonds of earth” (Reagan 1986). At the time, I thought of the ephemeral nature of life itself, and how all of humanity that has ever lived or will live, will face the finiteness of life and lose the certainty of all the emotions that make life worth living such as love and loss, joy and sadness, humility and pride, triumph and determination, and so forth. I think the final line of stanza 2 is the most poignant. It is my intent that the reader interprets the poem with some sort of unease. The literal “dirt in the flowerbed was turned upside down” is a metaphor for my actual life being turned upside down. Although dogs may be simple, I consider my dog a part of our family and feels, at some level, the emotions that we feel. As Ronald Reagan once said in an address to the nation after the Challenger disaster, “The future doesn’t belong to the faintheart; it belongs to the brave” (Reagan 1986). Anything that is worth having is worth fighting towards, just like any hole is worth digging.

The Gift Baskets

Two baskets sit in front of me, filled with snacks and hand-written cards
My friend gathered the gifts from all who knew me without telling me
Three days ago, I shared my burdens with her. I won’t forget this

The Gift Baskets Analysis

The Gift Baskets is in the poetic form of a 3-line Sijo, which is a Korean poetic form that has 14-16 syllables each line (Sijo). I was inspired by its brevity, and I wanted to experiment with expressing appreciation in as few words as possible. I wrote this poem to share the immense gratitude that I lacked the words for expressing until now. During the peak of my responsibilities and stress, I was still responsible for my schoolwork. I met one of my friends and finally shared,

for the first time, everything that was on my mind. After I had vented for ten minutes, I looked at her face and she looked as if she heard the worst news of her life. She uttered a simple, “I’m sorry, please let me know if you need anything.” I thanked her for her time and walked away. I didn’t think much of the encounter for it was unremarkable. Three days later, she returned with two baskets of gifts and hand-written cards from all our mutual friends. I was stunned that someone would do this act of kindness out of the genuine altruism in their heart.

This act of kindness reached deeply and evoked an emotion from me that I had not felt for the entire duration of the family emergency: gratitude. She decided to take on a share of my burden by listening to me without interruption. She spoke with conviction and was proactive rather than reactive. In other words, when she asked if I needed anything, she actively thought of what I would need. I feel that my approach to coping with my family emergency was to bottle in my emotions and keep my troubles to myself to solve. However, feeling that warmth and compassion drew me out from a dark place and pushed me to find other ways to heal that invited help from those who cared for my wellbeing.

The Most Important Renovation

I climbed up the sturdy steep ladder

The wooden beam pressed into my shoulder as I lifted it to heights it once reached

Long before it became a fossil

I rested it on the 8’ by 6” patio column we were refurbishing for my childhood home

My father did the same on the other column

My right hand mirrored his as I raised the dense drill to the bare wood canvas and drilled

Years working alongside my father had sharpened my coordination

The fine control needed to solder wires in electrical work was
Completely opposite the superabundant strength needed to secure beams

The sun traveled the sky, and I traversed the seasons and my sunbaked tan faded
Now I was building and fixing on my own; no longer could my father pick up a nail and hammer
Or lightly tease my ineptitude with the same tools because he lay in a hospital bed miles away
I now faced the confusing challenge of insulating his room to fight away the cold
The cold of the night, the cold shiver of fear, the cold air in an empty house
I went to Home Depot, wandered the cavernous aisles I had become so familiar with as a child
I wanted more than anything to follow my father around and look for parts
I was on my own and had just hours to prepare our home for my discharge from the hospital
Just a few days away

I thought of what could provide insulation and was not onerously obtuse to secure on the wall
Memories of past weekend afternoons where we repaired our roof flooded my mind and
I stumbled upon the gargantuan slabs of Styrofoam insulation used for walls, covered in tin foil
As I made duct tape loops to secure the wall, I remembered the zip tie loops I made for my father
So many years ago, to secure the cables of a water pump for a fishpond in our backyard
After all these years I thought all these small skills were just for practicality but
Perhaps the greatest lesson he taught me through those renovation projects was independence
And now I admit that the most important renovation project of all, is the ceaseless pursuit of
Excellence and self-improvement of ourselves for those we love

The Most Important Renovation Analysis

This Concrete poem (Concrete Poetry) is in the shape of the Styrofoam slabs that I centered this poem around. The large blocks of nearly rectangular text of the 2nd and 3rd stanzas are meant to represent the shape of the same objects I used to renovate my father's room. The 1st stanza includes alternating long and short lines meant to represent the long, slender screws we used to rebuild our patio of my childhood home. The purpose of the Concrete poem is to create a shape that is suggested in the poem and further create the poetic imagery that there is a deeper meaning behind the literal words in the poem. In addition, the fullness of the stanzas increases over time to represent the result of my coming of age towards independence and self-reliance. I was inspired to center the poem around Styrofoam slabs and use the concrete poetic structure because of my reading of E.E. Cummings', *O sweet spontaneous* (Cummings 1923). In line 5 of the 2nd stanza, I use the rhetorical device of antithesis which is the use of parallel structure to draw similarities between apparently dissimilar abstract ideas. I write, "The cold of the night, the cold shiver of fear, the cold air in an empty house" to contrast the physical coldness in the air that caused aggravation of my father's condition by raising his blood pressure from vasodilation to the fear of our lives thrown out of balance with the coldness of an empty house once filled with joyous laughter. At that juncture, the fate of his life was uncertain just like the future of our home. I think back to the writings of Atul Gawande as he admits that this uncertainty pervades even the exactness of surgery, "The core predicament of medicine- the thing that makes being a patient so wrenching, being a doctor so difficult, and being a part of society that pays the bills they run up so vexing- is uncertainty" (Gawande 2002). Patients and patient's loved ones face a unique challenge of a new reality after their encounter with illness or death requires accepting uncertainty.

I included three instances of the poetic device, alliteration. More specifically, I used consonance in line 1 with “sturdy steep”, line 6, with “dense drill”, and line 9 with “superabundant strength”. The idea behind using the same letter in consecutive words is simply to connect the two words that otherwise not be linked. I wanted to draw attention to the staccato tones of each instance of alliteration which mimics the rhythmic, steady sound of each nail and screw going into the wood. I also decided to make three stanzas of 9 lines each that tell a “beginning, middle, end” progression of my relationship with renovation. The first stanza represents how I simply thought of the task at hand and nothing more. I was focused on the nuances of finishing the project. The second stanza is a transition from this absolute view of the world to echo my own confusion as I began the process of coming of age having to do the same things my father and I used to do together. In the third stanza, I realized that I had the strength and skills to handle the situation on my own. My sudden realization of this ability is distinct from my gradual acquisition of many skills. In that moment, I proved to myself that I was able to shed off my role as a follower and become a leader of myself and others. In the autobiography, *When Breathe Becomes Air*, Paul Kalanithi laments at the idea of perfection and how it is a process rather than a singular event, “You can’t ever reach perfection, but you can believe in an asymptote toward which you are ceaselessly striving” (Kalanithi 2016). When I first finished the book, I turned it over, looking at its front and end pages in wonder if the publisher had left something out. The autobiography follows the life of Dr. Paul Kalanithi who acquires terminal cancer at age 36. If there is a lesson at all from his work and my experiences, it is that adaption to circumstances is a crucial trait in professional and personal success, and we must continue to improve ourselves.

The context to this work was that I had just a few hours away from the hospital to prepare and renovate my father's room. He was currently recovering in the Intensive Care Unit after his surgery. My mother, brother, and I took turns taking care of him in his stay there. I stayed there during the nights, and they were there during the days. The hour hand of the clock seemed to spin furiously around the clock during those nights, but in stark contrast I felt every moment. When I think of those difficult nights, I reflect upon the work of Billy Collins in *The Lanyard*. He tastefully admits his naivety and perhaps the callous attitude children have towards their parents' sacrifices, "And here, I wish to say to her now, / is a smaller gift-not the worn truth / that you can never repay your mother, / but the rueful admission that when she took / the two-tone lanyard from my hand, / I was sure as a boy could be / that this useless, worthless thing I wove / out of boredom would be enough to make us even" (Collins 2007). I feel a similar realization in that the renovation projects we worked on taught me technical skills but more importantly, they taught me independence and determination. Through thousands of hours of building, scraping, reworking, drilling, wiring, and hundreds of other skills, I shed my fear of the unknown. I tore away at problems undaunted by the possibility of failure. He had been helping me cultivate an attitude of self-reliance and resilience. If we worked under the 100-degree Southern California sun to build a patio, I could have the mental power to figure out the challenge of insulating his room from the cold in the limited time I had.

Conclusion

In writing this work, I became more aware of my emotions, cognition, attitudes, and biases. Through the act of reflecting on my personal challenges with poetic form, I was able to heal. This personal exploration of my thoughts and experiences has provided me a greater appreciation for kindness and giving to others when they have nothing to offer us. As Ruth E.

Brooks said, "I've seen the possibilities that emerge when we become each others' keepers" (Brooks 1967). I read voraciously after my experience, and I have built a habit of reflection and synthesizing my own thoughts after reading. Poetry is the chance to become whole by pulling together the disintegrated pieces of your life. We can heal through individually self-reflecting and by sharing our burdens with others.

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