

Poetry as a Healing Art in Spiritual Care

“ Our mission is to plant ~~not the prudent~~ gates at gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of self-righteousness. the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of ‘ Everything is gonna be very different, sometimes very lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it might be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle – and we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are

–Victoria Safford



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Materials developed by Kim Langley, M.Ed. for WordSPA ministry

“ I t i s w i t h i n t h e s c o p e o f p o e t r y t o e x
do so in a more intense and memorable way than any other literary form is
able to. Religion has first of all to do with vision and revelation, and these
are best told of in *poetry*. ”

- R.S. Thomas, priest & poet

The muse appears as an angel to the poet.

When You Meet Someone Deep in Grief

Slip off your needs
and set them by the door.

Enter barefoot
this darkened chapel

hollowed by loss
hallowed by sorrow

its gray stone walls
and floor.

You, congregation

of one

are here to listen
not to sing.

Kneel in the back pew.

Make no sound,

let the candles

speak.

Patricia McKernon Runkle



To be of use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

By Marge Piercy, from *Circles on the Water*.
© Knopf Doubleday, 1982.



Loaves and Fishes

This is not
the age of information.
This is NOT
the age of information.

Forget the news
and the radio
and the blurred screen.

This is the time
of loaves
and fishes.

People are hungry
and one good word is bread
for a thousand.

—David Whyte

Text and image arranged by [Parker Palmer](#)

The Star Market

The people Jesus loved were shopping at The Star Market yesterday.

An old lead-colored man standing next to me at the checkout breathed so heavily I had to step back a few steps.

Even after his bags were packed he still stood, breathing hard and hawking into his hand. The feeble, the lame, I could hardly look at them: shuffling through the aisles, they smelled of decay, as if The Star Market had declared a day off for the able-bodied, and I had wandered in with the rest of them: sour milk, bad meat:

looking for cereal and spring water.

Jesus must have been a saint, I said to myself, looking for my lost car in the parking lot later, stumbling among the people who would have been lowered into rooms by ropes, who would have crept out of caves or crawled from the corners of public baths on their hands and knees begging for mercy.

If I touch only the hem of his garment, one woman thought, I will be healed.

Could I bear the look on his face when he wheels around?

By Marie Howe, from *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*.

© W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.



Journal Prompts

A surprising gift of Chaplaincy that I never expected was/is...

The most disappointing aspect of a visit can be...

Beautiful outcomes of me interacting with staff or clients/patients/etc....

I can imagine myself using a poem if...

A Gift

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given
the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.

By Denise Levertov, from *Sand of the Well*. © New Directions, 1996.



“ We can make our mind ~~or that beings gather~~ t i l l w a
about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so
live for a moment with clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life,
b e c a u s e o f o u r q u i e t . ”

- William Butler Yeats

Beyond the Question

The phoebe sits on her nest
Hour after hour,
Day after day,
Waiting for life to burst out
From under her warmth.

Can I weave a nest for silence,
Weave it of listening,
Listening,
Layer upon layer?

But one must first become small,
Nothing but a presence,
Attentive as a nesting bird,
Proffering no slightest wish,
No tendril of a wish
Toward anything that might happen
Or be given,
Only the warm, faithful waiting,
Containe d i n o n e ' s s m a l l n e s s .
Beyond the question, the silence.
Before the answer, the silence.



By May Sarton, from *Collected Poems: 1930-1973*. © Open Road Media, 2014.

Clearing

I am clearing a space—
here, where the trees stand back.
I am making a circle so open
the moon will fall in love
and stroke these grasses with her silver.

I am setting stones in the four directions,
stones that have called my name
from mountaintops and riverbeds, canyons and mesas.
Here I will stand with my hands empty,
mind gaping under the moon.

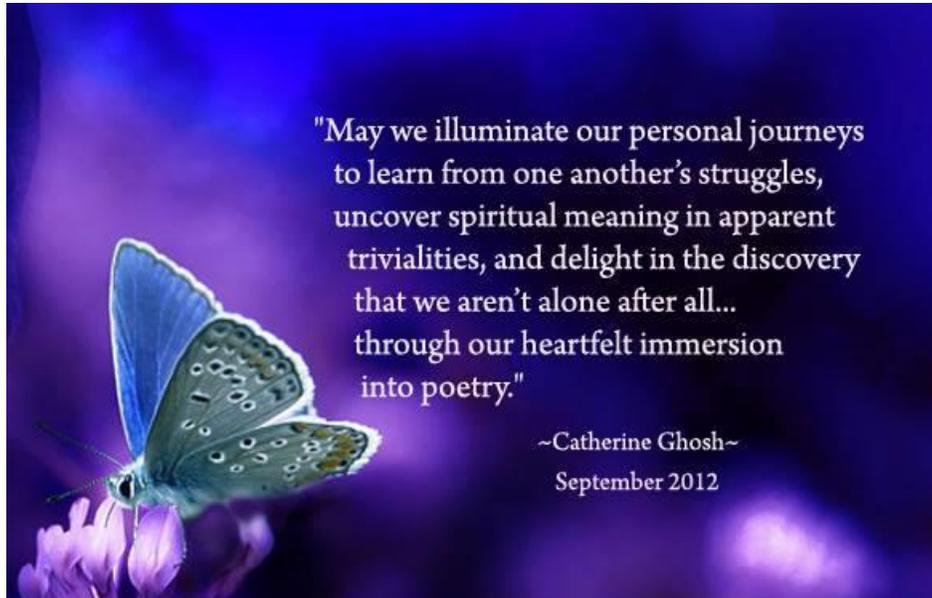
I know there is another way to live.
When I find it, the angels
will cry out in rapture,
each cell of my body
will be a rose, a star.

If something seized my life tonight,
if a sudden wind swept through me,
changing everything,
I would not resist.
I am ready for whatever comes.

But I think it will be
something small, an animal
padding out from the shadows,
or a word spoken so softly
I hear it inside.

It is dark out here, and cold.
The moon is stone.
I am alone with my longing.
Nothing is happening
b u t t h e n e x t b r e a t h , a n d t h e n e x t ...

By Morgan Farley, from *Soulcraft*. © New World Library, 2003.



Talking to Grief

Ah, Grief, I should not treat you
like a homeless dog
who comes to the back door
for a crust, for a meatless bone.
I should trust you.

I should coax you
into the house and give you
your own corner,
a worn mat to lie on,
your own water dish.

You think I don't know you've been living
under my porch.
You long for your real place to be readied
before winter comes. You need
your name,
your collar and tag. You need

the right to warn off intruders,
to consider
my house your own
and me your person
and yourself
my own dog.

Denise Levertov

Adrift

Everything is beautiful and I am so sad.
This is how the heart makes a duet of
wonder and grief. The light spraying
through the lace of the fern is as delicate
as the fibers of memory forming their web
around the knot in my throat. The breeze
makes the birds move from branch to branch
a s t h i s a c h e m a k e s m e l
in the next room, in the next song, in the laugh
of the next stranger. In the very center, under
it all, what we have that no one can take
a w a y a n d a l l t h a t w e ' v e
I t i s t h e r e t h a t I ' m a d
by a holiness that exists inside everything.
I am so sad and everything is beautiful.

Mark Nepo



Image graciously provided by Kim Lewin

Rev. Molly Bolton, M. Div., CPE, -- offering the poem ' Wild Geese '

Molly was a huge supporter of the book to promote using poems in ministry, because she saw for herself how it unlocked something. Early in our friendship, she shared a story that captures exactly what poetry can bring to ministry. Molly often uses carefully chosen poems as a healing modality in her work. She memorizes poems that might be useful for connecting with patients, especially those who are not amenable to scriptures or praying together. So one day she was making rounds and she came to visit two men who were sharing a room, one of whom was 18 and recovering from a near fatal drug overdose. The other man was a Vietnam vet who had a serious burden of health problems. The two of them were deep in conversation when she arrived, so she offered to leave them alone, but when they recognized her as the chaplain, please, they come in...we are solving all the problems, they joined their conversation and had a terrific connection with them. I remember her saying that she admired how the older man was mentoring the younger one, and how she was able to slip into their circle because they welcomed her. When about an hour had passed, she had to move on, and made to say goodbye. They pressed her to stay for a bit longer, and she asked if it would be ok to recite some words that meant a lot to her person in light of their splendid conversation. They agreed, and by the time she had finished reciting it, they had moved, so that the men were all circled up with the chaplain, their arms around each other in a huddle. This is the poem that she shared with them.

Wild Geese by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

**Creating a ministerial connection with this poem—the
powerful example of skill plus love.**

Learn more about <https://www.sevmollybolton.com/>
Rev. Molly Bolton is a poet and liturgy writer. She writes weekly for
[Liturgy that Matters](#), a project of [enfleshed](#). Here is an [essay about
grief](#) & a [Blessing for the Cosmic Whole](#). Her poetry can be found in
[Prayers and Blessings for Healthcare Workers](#) edited by Mandy
Mizelle.

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From Blossoms

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted *Peaches*.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere

in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

Li-Young Lee

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Where Grief Meets Poetry

By Janice Falls, RP, Med

***Sign up for Jan's thoughtful blog called
Heart Poems at <https://janicefalls.wordpress.com/>***

Ah, Grief, I should not treat you
like a homeless dog
who comes to the back door
for a crust, for a meatless bone
I should trust you.

(f r o m " T a l k , D e n i s e L e v e r t o w G r i e f ")

We don't really know how to trust so r a
o u r l i v e s s u d d e n l y , t h e d o g a t o u r b a c k
want to give. In our culture, we tend to perceive grief as something that
happens to someone else, something to be met with stoicism and a steady
eye to the future when we will have gotten over it. The challenge in our own
lives, much less our clients, is to learn to trust this deep sadness, to turn
toward rather than avoiding it. So how do we do this?

One way I have found to learn to trust is through poetry. Certain poems bring me solace because they speak words I cannot not find myself in the moment. They allow me to feel understood and they show me that the person writing has survived their sorrow. They become a kind of pathway, a guide to experiencing and expressing this pain.

In my world view, grief is part of living a meaningful life. Without it, we cannot fully comprehend what it is to be human. I want to share with people that we need not be afraid of sadness and death so that they can fully open themselves to joy. The more deeply you love, the more you will hurt when that person dies. ~~So~~ of grief you must not let yourself feel the joy of loving fully. It became clear to me that was not a choice I was prepared to make.

Poetry may seem an odd companion to learning about grief and loss but, in fact, it has been both necessary and healing for me. This has led me to believe that poems are one of the few things we can offer ourselves or others when we are grieving.

My first encounter with a significant death was through two miscarriages. What I experienced from others was avoidance, embarrassment, false cheer (you'll get pregnant again) and silence transformative; it acknowledged my grief as nothing else had. At that point, though I searched the written word for comfort, I had not yet found refuge in the beauty of poems.

As part of my healing, I began to talk about death and dying and grief out loud despite the changes of subject and discomfort I knew I was causing. I was persistent because I knew it was in heard (and, sadly, repeated in the past). I used the word died, rather than 'passed away' in my condolences because

way. And I began to explore the words of the poets who so eloquently expressed my own grieving heart.

It is not the weight you carry
but how you carry it-
books, bricks, grief –
i t ' s a l l i n t h e w a y
you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.

(f r o m “ ~~Marya~~Oliver”) ,

T h i s w a s m y c o m p a n i o n a f t e r m y f a t h e r ' s
radically altered. Suddenly the one person who loved me unconditionally
was gone and at the same time I became a caregiver to my mother with
Alzhe i m e r ' s , s h o r t l y f o l l o w e d i n - l o w . B u t t h e d e a t h
w a s t h e l o s s o f m y f a t h e r I g r i e v e d t h e
to me, became my guide.

And when my world was turned inside out some years ago by the sudden
and many cancer diagnoses of close friends, I wrestled with disbelief, rage,
g r i e f a n d p e r h a p s m o s t o f a l l h e l p l e s s n e s s
r o u n d o f d i a g n o s e s a n d d e a t h s t h a t t h e
“ S w e e t n e s s ” a r r i v e d t o b e a r m e u p .

Just when it has s e e m e d I c o u l d n ' t b e a r
one more friend
waking with a tumor, one more maniac
with a perfect reason, often a sweetness
come
and changed nothing in the world
except the way I stumbled through it.

The more deeply I move into this life, the more certain I am that grief is as natural a part of living as joy. And grief, for me, is no longer a heavy sadness that permeates everything continuously. It is an acute sensation that comes with certain losses, not a chronic condition. I have learned that like all beings, I have the resilience to meet my losses and I know, too, there will be poems to guide me, comfort me, in the mouth of language, / t h e o n l y t h i n g t h a t w o u l d g
(M u e l l e r , " W h e n I A m A s k e

I have noticed how all the poems I am drawn to about grief are also about joy. They give voice to my deepest convictions and they create beauty in the world – the necessary and inevitable outcome when you mix sorrow with joy. What I have learned about the dark emotions, grief in particular, is that they can be trusted. When we mindfully listen to them, there is an innate wisdom that emerges, allowing for profound healing and a renewal of life. I believe that the underlying challenge we all face is to seek some balance between the exhilaration and beauty of life, and its counterpoint of darkness. As Jane Hirshfield writes in

So few grains of happiness
measured against all the dark
and still the scales balance.
The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

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TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

For professionals who work one-on-one with people:

I interviewed dozens of clergy, social workers, chaplains, and counselors, and I consulted funeral directors and, importantly, some people who were themselves terminally ill. Many of them are increasingly using poetry personally and in their work. Why?

Here's what one chaplain told me. "If you go to visit someone and you introduce yourself as the chaplain and say, 'Would you like to pray together?'

The answer is often no.

"'Would it be helpful to read a scripture from your tradition?' 'No, because you know, chaplain, I am spiritual, but I'm not religious.'

"'How about if I read some words that I have found meaningful and that might help?'

"'Asked in this manner, 95 percent of grievors say yes.'"

What this chaplain reads is a poem, or a part of one, without calling it a poem. This brings down barriers very quickly and opens the conversation. She carries about thirty poems on a tablet alongside various spiritual readings and prayers that she finds valuable for opening the door. Even people who might find the descriptor "poem" a hurdle are usually able to ease right into dialogue. If grievors are a little stuck, the tips below might help you to get them started.

For facilitators leading grief groups:

1. Decide before the first session that you will try to keep the group to the ideal size. Bereaved themselves indicate that this is five to eight participants. At a stretch take nine people because one or two almost always drop out for reasons of their own.
2. Look at the space and make it as welcoming as possible. A study of research on what makes adults comfortable indicates that setting is key. If the room has tables, arrange them in a small, intimate square, and be prepared to clean the coffee rings or cover them with a cloth. Let people know they can bring a beverage, but don't fuss. Even taking a turn at bringing a group snack can cause anxiety. Reduce glaring overhead light. Try to keep the room from feeling like school. Consider beginning with "a quiet moment to gather ourselves." Light a candle.

Consider reading this poem aloud as you begin:

Softening the Soul

ROBERT J. WICKS

Lighting a candle
in a dark room
is a small gentle act of peace.

When the match touches the wick,
time slows down
and the race to the future ceases.

Worries are consumed
anxiety burns out
and I sigh deeply.

Watching the flickering light
is a graceful prayer
which eases my stress and lessens my strain.

Finally when the flame goes out
I turn quietly back,
to the events of the day

And indeed everything changed because of the time
I sat softening my soul
. . . by candlelight.

3. Prepare your opening remarks with these things in mind. Set a tone of inviolable mutual respect. I borrow Parker Palmer's excellent guidelines for groups when I lead sharing circles. He calls them "Circles of Trust Touchstones," and they are so powerful that I urge you to become familiar with them. I hold up a standard-sized sheet of paper with these quick "rules" printed out. No fixing. No saving. No advising. No correcting.

These have never let me down and once you briefly explain them to the group, in your most easygoing tone, guidelines, then you can easily enforce them by just gesturing to your little sign as a reminder. If you do this with warm humor and laugh at yourself as someone who needs reminding, too, it usually is very effective in keeping the group safe and on track.
4. Resist the urge to "go around the circle." I learned this from Parker Palmer, too, and I have seen going around the circle ruin a group from the very first meeting. Let me share a story. I have an elder friend whose husband died and who willingly went to a grief group. Unfortunately, the group was about twelve people, and the facilitator had not really thought through what it would be like for the participants to hear twelve stories of tragedy in a row. By the end, my friend was emotionally exhausted and felt worse than when she came. And she said it wasn't that clean cathartic sort of release that you get from introspection, but a feeling of complete overwhelm. She never went back.
5. Remind the group that *everything* is to be held in the strictest confidence. I cannot overstate this. I have had a good reaction to pausing to gather up the group with my eyes, looking at each member, and asking them to nod their assent. It's even OK to say, "Brenda, is this OK with you?" and wait for the nod. "Floyd?" "Lucia?" is builds trust.

6. Set a tone that honors privacy beginning with the introduction. You can say something like, “Let’s just use first names to protect privacy, and one or two sentences by way of introduction if you wish.” An old facilitator trick is to speak first yourself, and be their role model in brevity. “Hi, I’m your facilitator William, and I’m a social worker. My mother died five years ago. Who would like to introduce themselves next?” Remind them more than once that they are always free to say, “I’m going to pass,” and to say nothing if they prefer. Every group has both introverts and extroverts. In addition, the stress of grief makes some people mute and others talkative.

7. Solicit comments on the quotes. Not every poem will appeal to every reader. That’s one reason I included quotes, as well. Facilitators might ask the group, “What grabs you in the poems?” But also, “Was anyone struck by one of the quotes in a way they can share?” This gives people more than one point of entry into the poem and the reflection.

8. Mention the Mindful Activities at the end of each section. Some folks are more doers than talkers. They may find their comfort spot in the Mindful Activities. I recommend a very low-key invitation at each meeting that goes something like, “Did anyone feel drawn to do one of the mindful activities? If so, how did it go?” If no one has done one, remind them that there’s no pressure, but that some of these activities include proven ideas for increasing resilience and that doing them is a way to make sacred time for themselves.

9. Encourage writing at home in a journal or notebook, and/or write during your circle time. To keep the experience of the group fresh, you can mix in a five- or ten-minute “free write.” Build confidence in your group by sharing this piece written by a

mom whose young-adult daughter died. Put your group at ease by reminding them that they can do this, too, that it's not a contest, and that Shakespeare is not in the room! The name of the daughter being memorialized in this writing was Brooke.

Brooke

small and bubbly,
refreshing, always moving
owing
into an enormous unknown
a tempestuous sea
where waves battered her spirit
until a silent, still sand stayed
when the storm subsided

ashes, sand, soil remain
our bubbling Brooke,
wrapped in her autumnal quilt,
can visit in any season
. . . at the Lake
in the rain, at the river, in my tears

Water is Everywhere
soaking my memories

10. Remind participants to bring their books to each session so they can read and refer to them in discussion. Give them permission and encouragement to mark up the book and make it their own. It's a tool for highlighting, writing margin notes, and dog-earring the pages.