

Alchemy of Words: Poetry as a Powerful Tool for Chaplains

All poems are used for educational purposes only.

The Lightest Touch

David Whyte

Good poetry begins with
the lightest touch,
a breeze arriving from nowhere,
a whispered healing arrival,
a word in your ear,
a settling into things,
then, like a hand in the dark,
it arrests the whole body,
steeling you for revelation.

In the silence that follows
a great line,
you can feel Lazarus,
deep inside
even the laziest, most deathly afraid
part of you,
lift up his hands and walk toward the light.

David Whyte, "The Lightest Touch", *Everything Is Waiting for You and River Flow: New and Selected Poems*, © Many Rivers Press, Langley, WA USA.

The Most Important Thing

I am making a home inside myself. A shelter
of kindness where everything
is forgiven, everything allowed—a quiet patch
of sunlight to stretch out without hurry,
where all that has been banished
and buried is welcomed, spoken, listened to—released.

A fiercely friendly place I can claim as my very own.

I am throwing arms open
to the whole of myself—especially the fearful,
fault-finding, falling apart, unfinished parts, knowing
every seed and weed, every drop
of rain, has made the soil richer.

I will light a candle, pour a hot cup of tea, gather
around the warmth of my own blazing fire. I will howl
if I want to, knowing this flame can burn through
any perceived problem, any prescribed perfectionism,
any lying limitation, every heavy thing.

I am making a home inside myself
where grace blooms in grand and glorious
abundance, a shelter of kindness that grows
all the truest things.

I whisper hallelujah to the friendly
sky. Watch now as I burst into blossom.

By Julia Fehrenbacher

Night Dweller

Fear tries to keep you small,
presses you under its wide thumb
so you never want to leave the house,
make the phone call, pray for help.
But sometimes you pry yourself loose,
slip out into the winter night
and pass through a shimmering black tunnel—
no moon, no stars, no flashlight—
where anything might happen, and does.
You fall to your knees and listen
to the scuffing noise of leftover leaves
on the beech trees, calling with each rustle:
Be more like us. Dwell naked
in the night without running away.
Hear what secret languages you learn
by staying. See what sweeping thoughts
perch in each of your available branches.

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Published in the Christian Century Magazine, by James Crews

If I Sing

If I sing, I weep.
If I sing joy, even sing joy, I weep.
If I weep, if I weep, if cries splatter from me,
if I sputter snot and spit
down my chin, my shirt, your shirt,
if I shake and shake until you fear I'll shake apart,
don't be afraid for me, don't be ashamed;
I will not break from this, will not die,
but from lack of it, from the closing,
and I will not close anymore, will not deny anymore
the child I was who could not
cry out has kept crying in
me. And now that I can cry I will sing,
even if my song comes shoved out
on the wave of snot and spit I swallowed not
to cry, I will sing.

by Martin Jude Farawell

Where the Others Are

Going. They are going.
They wave from the old photo,
then turn around to leave,
walking hand-in-hand
like a kindergarten class
down a street you remember.

Look, a cloud has come
to meet them, and they shimmer
in the doorway of this dream.

But before they go, they turn
to wave at you again, their hands
letting go of everything.

by Penny Harter

Choice

Jo McDougall

You've come to the oncologist's office
to talk about your options.
You view the scans,

forgetting to breathe.
"It's metastasized." He frowns,
pointing to where and where.

He ticks off the preferred treatment,
the side effects,
low rates of success.

"It's your choice," he says,
closing your folder,
"but we need to start tomorrow."

You think of yesterday
when you lived in a different universe,
of a waitress,
hand on her hip, asking,

"Hon, you want mustard or mayo
on that sandwich?"

“Choice” by Jo McDougall from The Undiscovered Room. © Tavern Books, 2016.
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The Biopsy

Ruth Johnston

It is the season of fruit
in this heart land,
berries hang
from bushes and trees,
apples and pears
arrive at the table,
though some fall
hard to the ground.
Everything has to be tested.
Summer brings warmth
and a razor sharp sun,
whipping winds and hail
on rainy black nights.

How final the test can be,
how terrifying the finality.
She touches her bandaged head,
wonders at the hole there,
the precision of surgery.
The sadness she saw
in her loved ones’ eyes told
her what she needed to know.
Still, the apple pie she made
yesterday lingers in her mind,
balm for the troubles of today
arriving in this too white bed.

She doesn’t believe in tests,
no test from God, only love.
But what is without trial?
Work, children,
the voice inside always
fighting to be heard?
She leans back into blankness,
into arms she never sees,
pushes her pain out ahead of her,

lets the open wound
begin to heal.

Here is the test:
to wait for the light
of which we have no conception,
as the seed lying in the dark
softens in the wet dirt,
opens, spills,
waits silently for a pulse
of life,
or reunion
with the dark hidden
heart.

“The Biopsy” by Ruth Johnston, Not previously published. Used with the permission of the poet. Ruth Johnston works as a chaplain and a grief counselor.

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Prague

Stephen Dobyns

The day I learned my wife was dying
I told myself if anyone said, Well, she had
a good life, I'd punch him in the nose.
How much life represents a good life?

Maybe a hundred years, which would
give us nearly forty more to visit Oslo
and take the train to Vladivostok,
learn German to read Thomas Mann

in the original. Even more baseball games,
more days at the beach and the baking
of more walnut cakes for family birthdays.
How much time is enough time? How much

is needed for all those unspent kisses,
those slow walks along cobbled streets?

Stephen Dobyns, "Prague" from The Day's Last Light Reddens the Leaves of the Copper Beech. Copyright © 2016 by Stephen Dobyns. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of BOA Editions, Ltd., www.boaeditors.org.

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What People Give You

Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno

Long-faced irises. Mums.
Pink roses and white roses
and giant sunflowers,
and hundreds of daisies.

Fruit baskets with muscular pears,
and water crackers and tiny jams
and the steady march of casseroles.
And money,
people give money these days.

Cards, of course:
the Madonna, wise
and sad just for you,
Chinese cherry blossoms,
sunsets and moonscapes,
and dragonflies for transcendence.

People stand by your sink
and offer up their pain:
Did you know I lost a baby once,
or My eldest son was killed,
or My mother died two months ago.

People are good.

They file into your cartoon house until it bows at the seams;
they give you every
blessed
thing,
everything,
except your daughter back.

"What People Give You" by Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno, from *Slamming Open the Door*.
© Alice James Books, 2009.

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Living Will

George Bilgere

When the doctor called at 3am
to tell me that only a ventilator
could keep my aunt alive at that point,
I stood shivering in the dark kitchen,
thinking about that word, ventilator.

I envisioned a dark shaft of some sort
in an old office building from the fifties,
when my aunt was a young woman.
Then I imagined being in that shaft,
somehow hidden away behind a grill
while an important meeting was going on
in a paneled conference room
full of big shots scribbling things
on yellow legal pads. Millions of dollars
were at stake. Someone's career,
maybe even their life, depended
on what the important men did or said.

But I was hidden in the ventilator shaft,
safely out of bounds. I stayed
inside that word for as long as I could,
its syllables like four rooms
I could buy some time exploring.
But it was so cold in the dark kitchen,
and the doctor was waiting.

"Living Will" by George Bilgere. Copyright © George Bilgere. Aired December 30, 2014
on "The Writer's Almanac". Reprinted with permission of author.

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The Cure

Albert Huffstickler

We think we get over things.

We don't get over things.

Or say, we get over the measles

but not a broken heart.

We need to make that distinction.

The things that become part of our experience
never become less a part of our experience.

How can I say it?

The way to "get over" a life is to die,

Short of that, you move with it,

let the pain be pain

not in the hope it will vanish

but in the faith that it will fit in,

and be then not any less pain but true to form.

Because anything natural has an inherent shape
and will flow towards it.

And a life is as natural as a leaf.

That's what we're looking for:

not the end of a thing

but the shape of it.

Wisdom is seeing the shape of your life

Without obliterating (getting over) a single

instant of it.

"The Cure" by Albert Huffstickler from *Walking Wounded* originally published in 1989 by Backyard Press.

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Visiting the Alzheimer's Wing

Fredrick Zydek

She will not remember who I am
but will take the glass of ice and cola
with the same words with which I am
greeted each week: "Oh yes, I love

Coca Cola." She does remember
that. She will tell me stories of life
on the wing. She thinks she's living
at a hotel. She complains about maid

service, the skills of the chef, how poor
the performances are in the lounge
and that her husband, dead now these
many years, is off gambling somewhere

and probably pinching a cocktail
waitress's derriere as she speaks. She
will tell me there is something wrong
with most of the guests. "They're all

so old and forgetful," she'll complain.

"This is the last time I'm going to let

Frank book us into a hotel that caters
to the older generation. They're the

dullest damn people I've ever met."

I will avoid reminding her that Frank
was not her husband's name and show
her photographs from the old family

album. It won't help. She likes to look
at them; because of the clothing styles
in the 30s and 40s. "Don't you wish
those trends would come back, John,"

she'll ask. I won't tell her my real name,
and force myself to remember that no
matter how hard I try or what I do,
I will never be her favorite nephew again.

Originally published in Healing Muse Magazine. The Frederick J. Zydek Papers were
donated to UNO Libraries beginning in September 2016.

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Let Evening Come

Jane Kenyon

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Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in the long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

“Let Evening Come” by Jane Kenyon, From *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems*.

Closing: A Prayer for Inner Wisdom

God show me how to take a stand in this world, how to make contact with the earth...My legs are God's legs. Let the creator show me how to move forward in my life and where to go. May I carry forward the divine intent into this world. My emotions are God's emotions. May God show me how to feel; may I be the vehicle to share God's feeling with others.

My vitality and power is divine power. May God show me how to express it and where to apply it so that I influence others as God would have it. My heart is God's heart. May I know compassion as the Creator knows it; may I extend divine balance and understanding to others. My hands and arms are God's hands and arms. Let the Creator show me how to reach out and where to help; let me use these hands creatively. My voice is God's voice. May I be shown how to speak with truth and beauty, how to communicate what God wants me to say.

My ears are God's ears. May I hear the world the way God would hear it. My eyes are God's eyes. Let God show me what to see and help me see fully. Let the Creator see the world through me. My mind is God's mind. May I be shown the way to perceive, the way to make choices, the way to release thoughts. Let God perceive the world through me and teach me how to know.

From *The Intuitive Way: A Guide to Living from Inner Wisdom* by Penny Pierce

For more info and mindfulness prompts related to grieving, follow @KimALangley on **Twitter** or like the Send My Roots Rain **Facebook** Page.

Free bookmarks, podcast interviews with the author, slide decks to assist grief group facilitators in leading grief groups using Send My Roots Rain and other resources for readers are available on the book landing page at www.ParacletePress.com.

Other wonderful poems for reflection, discussion and journaling can be found in **the resource section of www.WordSPA.net**, the ministry which gave birth to the book.

Every Blessing, Kim Langley
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