Article

Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling

A Chaplain's Notebook: Poetry as Spiritual Nourishment

Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling
2020, Vol. 74(1) 61–67

DOI: 10.1177/1542305019897558
journals.sagepub.com/home/jpcc
SAGE

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Abstract
In the fall of 2017 as a chaplain intern working in a hospital setting, I started reading poems to patients and families with the hope that language could offer a buffer to suffering, a meditative space to slow down time and hear the comforting sound of language. This article contains stories of the power of poetry to nourish, nurture and connect with individuals facing darkness, doubt and vulnerability.

Keywords
Poetry, chaplain, spirituality, comfort, vulnerability, hope

She walked off the elevator, hands shaking, lost in thought and uttering softly to herself about being "dropped off in the wrong place." She stared up and down the hospital hallway and appeared worried, angry, and on the verge of tears. I was there as the chaplain resident, and stopped and asked her, "May I help you find someone?" "Amanda" (all names used throughout this article are pseudonyms) looked surprised and mumbled again about being dropped off at the wrong place. She mentioned a room number, but it was not clear what area of the hospital she was heading to. Suddenly, she remembered. "Oh, it's floor 6, room D32," and I offered to take her there. Amanda shivered as if she had just come inside from an unpleasant cold. As we walked, she mentioned she was on her way to visit a hospice patient. As we got closer to the unit, I asked, "May I get you a glass of water and sit with you for a few minutes before you walk into your friend's room?" Sounding relieved Amanda said yes. When I handed her a cup of water, she started talking fast and with anxious energy. I listened for a few minutes. Eventually, Amanda paused, and I asked if I could read her a poem. I decided to read her "Beannacht" by John O'Donohue (2010). It begins:

On the day when
The weight deadens
On your shoulders
And you stumble,

May the clay dance
To balance you.

And when your eyes
Freeze behind
The grey window
And the ghost of loss
Gets into you . . .

As the poem was being read, Amanda closed her eyes, seemingly in an act of meditation or prayer, and she took several deep, determined breaths. Her faced relaxed for a few seconds. She smiled and said, "That was so beautiful, thank you."

I have been reading poetry regularly to patients and families in a hospital setting since the fall of 2017. My parents' death in 2014, five weeks apart, was a watershed experience and led to a transition to chaplaincy. To honor and celebrate my parents' memory, I wrote a poem for each to be read at their respective memorial services. This then led to a quest to uncover and collect poems of beauty and soulfulness, ones that tenderly reveal a range of human emotions and experience including

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sorrow, disappointment, anguish, sacredness, vulnerability, reverence, hope, light, and love. Characteristically, the poems gathered are also accessible, spirited, and unpretentious. They invite softening and attentiveness, encourage self-reflection, and find a way into the bloodstream.

In 2017, I started reading poems to patients and families with the hope that the language of poetry could offer a buffer to suffering, a momentary respite, a meditative space to slow down and hear the comforting sound of language. Poet Mark Strand (1998) expresses the impact of reading poetry, being amazed and reordered, and the resulting experience:

> *When I read poetry, I want to feel myself suddenly larger . . . in touch with—or at least close to—what I deem magical, astonishing. I want to experience a kind of wonderment. And when you report back to your own daily world after experiencing the strangeness of a world sort of recombined and reordered in the depths of a poet's soul, the world looks fresher somehow. Your daily world has been taken out of context. It has the voice of the poet written all over it, for one thing, but it also seems suddenly more alive . . . .*

In an essay to first year students, "Why Read Poetry," Professor of Religion, Timothy Beal (2018) writes:

> *Many of us were taught to paraphrase what a poem 'is really trying to say.' I recommend suspending an extractive mentality when it comes to reading poetry. Try to undergo a poem before rushing ahead to get something out of it. T.S. Eliot captured an important truth about poetry when he said that 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.'*

I am interested in the experience of the poem, how it moves through individuals, as Beal suggests, before one probes or thinks too hard about it.

At the time of this writing, I carry over 190 poems written by mostly published authors in a leather-bound notebook, and commonly one to four poems fill a single page. There is no index or page numbers used, and the poems are not organized in any logical way. As new poems are discovered, they are taped into the notebook.

The process of selecting a poem to read includes a single or combination of factors often gleaned from the encounter. It may be informed by something prominent that the person shares about her past and/or the reason the person is hospitalized (i.e., the result of a fall, drug overdose, violent act, heart failure, or surgery, for example.) It may be informed by a simple hand gesture, a person's facial expression or affect, or a word, phrase or image the person communicates. As a chaplain, naturally, I am vigilant about listening for words or themes that emerge that the individual is preoccupied or wrestling with. It helps to know something about a person's cultural background and have an understanding of what has been most meaningful or valued by the individual in his life. With time, one develops increasing trust in the process of selecting a poem to read, and one is able to rely on both what is known about the individual and the fusing of the one's own thoughts, feelings and unconscious. The more poems are read over time, the easier it becomes to process what has transpired in the encounter and select a poem that is meaningful to the recipient. There are times I will know exactly which poem to read, and at other times I may decide to flip through the notebook looking for a poem that appears to be a good match.

There are situations when I choose not to read a poem: when an individual is experiencing physical pain, is distracted, or is not able to focus. When poems are read, they are read very slowly so that every word is positioned to be heard. At times, patients or family members have interrupted the reading with an associated image or story that comes to mind. These interruptions are welcomed. Poems are often read towards the latter half of a pastoral visit. At times, however, if an individual appears fatigued or does not have a lot to say, poems may be read earlier in a visit. Surprisingly, over the hundreds of pastoral visits there has not been a single person who refused the offer of a poem being read or has had a negative response. There are individuals who have had neutral reactions; however, this has been rare. Often, following the reading of a poem, I will offer a prayer from my heart.

Beal (2018) adds this about the language of poetry:

> *The language of poetry submits itself more fully to the disciplining pressure of silence. In good poems, we feel the threat of what is unsayable and unsaid. We feel varieties of experience being voiced against various pressures of silence—erasure, forgetfulness, suppression, loss, etc. . . . In poems, we encounter forms of speech that both assert and surrender the possibility of lasting presence.*

To suggest that, "In good poems we feel the threat of what is unsayable and unsaid" and that we also encounter language that "assert[s] and surrender[s]the possibility of lasting presence," suggests a call to pastoral presence. Poetry, here, may give voice and space to loss.

In an *On Being* podcast interview, Rachel Naomi Remen (2018), author, physician and teacher of alternative medicine, spoke of the power of stories:

> *Stories tell us about who we are, what is possible for us, what we might call upon. They also remind us we're not alone with whatever faces us and that there are resources, both within and in the larger world and in the unseen world that may be cooperating with us in our struggle.*

Similarly, like stories, poems may serve to remind patients and families "what they may call upon," the visible and spiritual assets that may be available to help nourish, support or provide insight now or in the future.

I am reminded of a patient, "Lucy," who had requested prayer before her scheduled breast surgery. When I arrived to her hospital room, Lucy was sitting up in bed with a large gathering of family and friends at her bedside. I commented on the love and support in the room, its sacredness, and asked Lucy if I might read a poem before offering a prayer. She agreed, and in that moment I chose the poem, "Everything" by Mary Oliver (2007), the last section excerpted below:

. . . I want to make poems
that look into the earth and the heavens
and see the unseeable. I want them to honor
both the heart of faith, and the light of the world;
the gladness that says, without any words, everything.

"Everything" is a poignant example of language that speaks to mystery, faith, attentiveness, and the ephemeral nature of life. Lucy was spiritually moved by the poem and with tears in her eyes said so several times.

"blessing the boats" by Lucille Clifton (1991) is a delicate, touching, soulful poem, easily grasped by the listener; it reads like a prayer and is confidently unsentimental. It has been read numerous times.

(at St. Mary's)

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that

When reading the poem, one feels held and transported by the words "water waving forever." The poem intimates a sense of permanence and timelessness, and it generates hope. The phrase "certain that it will love your back" is affecting, and the image "sail through this to that" feels like an unceremonious call to healing.

For "Carrie" in her 60s dealing with heart challenges and a history of alcoholism, I read the writing of Pema Chödrön (2016), an ordained nun and Tibetan Buddhist, followed by "Talisman" by Suheir Hammad (2016), excerpted below.

Chödrön:
We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.

Hammad:
it is written
the act of writing is holy
words are sacred and
your breath brings out the
god in them . . .

fold this prayer
around your neck . . .

To hear Chödrön's words, "things don't really get solved, they come together and they fall apart, then they come together again and fall apart again" is to bear witness to the reality of our lives and the inherent vulnerability of living. It is a reverent acknowledgement of the fragility of the human condition, a predicament shared by the human family. "Talisman" is a tender reminder and calling out of our sacredness, and how we are all children of God. Like many patients, Carrie was emotionally moved to tears by the words. "Talisman" may remind listeners that they are holy, their simple breath contains the seeds of their holiness. For those with a history of addiction, "Talisman" may serve as a symbol of hope and counter a fragile and despairing self-image. Carrie commented that hearing the words brought her peace and she asked for a copy of the reading.

For "Gerald," an 87-year-old who stated, ". . . I'm exceedingly grateful for the miracles in my life, several at different times; I am very lucky to be alive," I selected "Ode to Dirt" by Sharon Olds (2016). It begins:

Dear dirt, I am sorry I slighted you,
I thought you were only the background
for the leading characters . . .
It's as if I had loved only the stars
and not the sky which gave them space
in which to shine. . . .

"Ode to Dirt" was selected for its earthiness (pardon the pun). The writer's (Olds) words exhibit sheer gratefulness and tender honesty, both traits that I saw in Gerald. Gerald reacted to the poem by tearing up, and appeared to more deeply recognize his own vulnerability, and in a way that he had not previously admitted. "Ode to Dirt" demonstrates vulnerability while at the same time it is exceedingly playful.

I am reminded of a patient, "Patrick," who carried a tremendous burden of remorse, anxiety, loss, and hopelessness about his predicament. He was challenged by several things in his life, including his alcoholism, and felt very alone in the world. Patrick reported that one of his options was to go back to a faith-based residential treatment program in North Carolina for 30 days. He had been a resident

there several years ago. Patrick felt badly about his life trajectory and that he was letting others down, including his spouse. I offered Patrick a prayer from my heart and read him the poem, "Island and Figs" by Jack Gilbert (2012) as a spiritual resource. The opening and closing lines of the poem are below.

The sky on and on,
stone. . . .

The heart never fits
the journey.
Always one ends first.

The poem seemed to lift Patrick out of his hopelessness, at least for the time remaining during our visit together.

"Eliza," a 72-year-old woman, came to the hospital because of a motor vehicle collision. The incident caused significant disc damage while at the same time she was challenged by worsening neuropathy. A short excerpt of our conversation is below.

Chaplain: *So, Eliza, tell me what's been happening? How are things coming along?*
Eliza: *Well, I was at PT* [Physical Therapy] *this morning and it hit me hard, it was a real awakening. I could only do certain tasks that I was asked to do. My life has altogether changed from now going forward* [Eliza tears up.]

And, a little later:

Eliza*: I've talked to my son about it, but he thinks that I'll be able to bounce right back up and continue to do all the things I've always done.* [Eliza tears up.] *He's optimistic to a fault. He doesn't listen to me and where I think I am now.*
Chaplain*: I notice your tears, Eliza. Can you tell me what they're about?*
Eliza: *I need to feel heard. I need to know that he understands what I'm going through.*

Towards the end of our visit, I decided to read Eliza "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye (1995). "Kindness" speaks profoundly to loss and sorrow.

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Eliza reacted to the poem with soft eyes and asked for a copy. I have noticed that "Kindness" often elicits a softening posture towards the self and world, and it may help momentarily to remind the listener what is ultimate, what really matters. Sometimes, I think it may also serve as realignment, rebalancing or repositioning of the soul.

"Maria" had been dealing with many years of addiction. Most of her relationships were tattered, and she was depressed, anxious, and increasingly desperate. The Bible and a book about addiction recovery were on her bedside table, and she told me she read the Bible every day. I decided to read Maria "Makebelieve" by poet, theologian, and peacemaker Pádraig Ó Tuama (2019).

And on the first day
god made
something up.
Then everything came along:

seconds, sex and
beasts and breaths and rabies;
hunger, healing,
lust and lust's rejections;
swarming things that swarm
inside the dirt;
girth and grind
and grit and shit and all shit's functions;
rings inside the treetrunk
and branches broken by the snow;

pigs' hearts and stars,
mystery, suspense and stingrays;
insects, blood
and interests and death;
eventually, us,
with all our viruses, laments and curiosities;
all our songs and made-up stories;
and our songs about the stories we've forgotten;
and all that we've forgotten we've forgotten;

and to hold it all together god made time
and those rhyming seasons
that display decay.

Maria was mesmerized and transported by the poem; her eyes glazed over as she looked up and to the side. She commented that it provided her with a momentary respite from her difficult life. "Makebelieve" is often read to and impactful for individuals who are angry and out of breath with nothing to center them. The poem has been used when a person has spoken about their faith being tested, and they want straight talk.

To open the space and peer deep inside the tenderness, uncertainty and vulnerability of living, I have read "Perhaps the World Ends Here" by Joy Harjo (1996). Note the broad spacing and indentation are the author's own.

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

"Perhaps the World Ends Here" is intensely honest and aches with tenderness. The frailty of the world is on display and in turn the frailty of the patient or family, especially reflected in the very last line of the poem: "Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite."

For "Evonne," a woman in her early twenties, angry and lonely, suffering from anorexia, I read a few poems including the well-known "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver (2017). It begins:

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 despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. . . .

After the poem was read Evonne seemed relaxed and self-reflective, more so than at any other time during the visit. The poem's ultimate and searing message is unyielding hope, peace, and a place for one in the world, no matter who or where one is.

Reflecting on my personal journey, I recall the first poem that I taped into my notebook was "Love After Love" by Derek Walcott (1987).

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here, Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

I remember something shifted after reading this poem. I was struck by the profound simplicity and revelation in the words, "You will love again the stranger who was your self . . . who knows you by heart." These words became sacred and reading them initiated a clearing away of self-doubt and longing for someone or something I was not.

The mirror that appears in the poem became more than a reflective object; it became a portal to the larger, unseen, spiritual world. The notion of the "reflective" mirror or the mirror whose image (one's own) looks back at you is alluring. The poem is a love poem to and for the untapped or under-appreciated self. The mirror helps the self find its way back to loving the self again, the self that has always been there but has been hidden.

For the pastoral visit, the mirror speaks directly to a goal of the spiritual care. The chaplain serves as a mirror for the patient or family to more clearly "see" themselves and when needed, find a way back to loving the self again. I find myself rereading the poem regularly for comfort, contemplation, and refueling. The poem has been read often in pastoral encounters, and for many it has been particularly satisfying.

Poetry helps connect individuals to their emotional or spiritual inner life and feel less alone in it. It can provide comfort in not only words but sounds, and offer language through metaphor, for individuals to hear things that they could not hear otherwise. It has offered those who are less vocal, or who find conversation awkward, a path toward finding their voice. For those who are more verbal, poetry functions to define the in-between space as holy and freeing, and serves to deepen and enlarge the conversation to universal themes of mystery and connection. The language of poetry may open individuals to their semiconscious or unconscious experience, provide an escape, if only momentarily, from suffering, and slows down time. Poetry confronts the darkness, hurt, doubt, brokenness and vulnerability inherent in life.

Poetry rises above religion and speaks to deep and universal truths. As my functional theology, it has broadened my reach and has helped bring light to individuals when they are not able to find meaning or comfort in God, in certain types of language, or in theology. Poetry's power lies precisely in the fact that its language is disassociated from traditional theology.

In the winter of 2017, early in my chaplaincy training, I was documenting a spiritual care visit when I anxiously realized that my notebook of poems was missing. I retraced my steps, but it was not to be found. I recalled taking it into one of the restrooms near the pastoral care suite, but upon inspection it was not there. So, I tracked down one of the hospital custodians to inquire whether he had seen it. He had seen it in the restroom and also reported that he had observed a woman and child entering the restroom soon after. The next time he entered the space, the notebook was no longer there. Perhaps she took it and then threw it away on her way out of the hospital? I searched through several nearby trash cans; it wasn't there. I remember later that day my spouse said to me, "Maybe the person who took it needs it more than you right now . . ." It was a very comforting thought.

Later that evening I received a call, it was a woman's voice. "Hello, is this Neil? I'm the person who took your notebook. I want you to know that my mother died last week and the poems have helped me. There are so many beautiful poems in it and they were comforting to read. The notebook must be very special to you." It was a breathtaking moment. We met up the next day at her home not far from the hospital. I thanked her and gave her five poems to keep from the collection. With tears in our eyes we wished each other peace and parted ways.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following writers and/or publishers for permission to reprint poems in full:
Lucille Clifton's publisher, BOA Editions for "blessing the boats;" Joy Harjo and W.W. Norton and Company for "Perhaps the World Ends Here;" Pádraig Ó Tuama for "Makebelieve;" Naomi Shihab Nye and Far Corner Books for "Kindness;" Derek Walcott's publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux for "Love After Love." "Love After Love" from THE POETRY OF DEREK WALCOTT 1948–2013 by Derek Walcott, selected by Glyn Maxwell. Copyright © 2014 by Derek Walcott. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Special thanks go to Rev. Dr. Stephen L. Dutton, Manager of Pastoral Services at Christiana Care Health System for his wisdom, love of poetry, and encouragement in the writing of this manuscript.

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