



# Fresh Thoughts on Finding a Healing Voice and Poetic Language within Yourself

by John Fox, CPT

## UNDERNEATH

Barbara  
McEnerney

What language can't reach  
is so much.

The hook dangles  
from the shline,  
while the sh  
swim by.

The sea urchins  
are un-interested,  
the kelp waves,  
a whole world  
expands.

The hook nds  
a few slender  
words,  
pulls them  
to light.

Maybe I  
can cook them.

THE COURAGE TO SPILL WORDS ON THE PAGE IS ESSENTIAL TO developing trust in your creative voice. Trust can be nurtured through providing a safe environment and offering genuine curiosity. The tendency to critique ourselves and evaluate others before we even begin holds us back from discovering the voice that is great within us.

Contrary to the popular example of TV shows like *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, and *Fear Factor*, the verbal food fights of social and political pundits—it's possible for human beings to be with one another in a way that does not rely on some producer's idea of what constitutes the "survival of the fittest." We do not have to live by calculation, judgment and competition.

Poetry is a form of communication that challenges us because it asks us to listen to one another. This may account for why it is less popular than those TV shows! Poetry may take patience on the part of both listener and writer. But the nature of poetry (and the result of patience) is to allow the richness and variety of human experience to emerge.

Wildflowers emerge under all kinds of conditions and in every place where seeds take root: in an open field in the Berkshires, through the concrete of a city block in Sao Paulo or even sometimes, through glacier ice in the Himalayas.

Likewise, your words can "grow" from a place of

depth much more meaningful and more sacred than the mental agribusiness of a media saturated culture generally acknowledges.

This is at the heart of my work that I call *Poetic Medicine*.

But it's necessary to explore this possibility for yourself to discover if what I am saying is true.

When I use the word "sacred" I am not suggesting that we can only write about things that keep us comfortable, God or present poems approved by the church!

What I mean is words—the words that flow to you, through you, that are in you—words that celebrate, that rage, that cry out, that touch what's true and speak that truth, these words can grow out of life's real grit and a place of mystery and grace.

## THESE DAYS

Whatever you have to say, leave  
the roots on, let them  
dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear  
where they come from

— Charles Olson

Even within the community of spiritually aware and socially conscious people, there is a tendency to rely on others to say what we also think.

A star culture predominates in that world too. We let others do the talking. These fine teachers can indeed be inspiring. It is surely healthier than popular culture but I am not sure it is helping us to realize how each of us matters.

In a very real sense no one else can speak for you. What I have found in twenty years of working with poetry as healer is that each of us has something to say, something that no one else could possibly say. There is nothing to compare to the satisfaction of speaking your own truth.

Poetry as healer is also about writing and saying what matters to you in a way that feels right. It is your sense of what "feels right" that keeps you in touch with the place where art and healing meet. What poetry allows you to do is give

shape to your unique voice, to begin to distinguish and distill within what feels truest to your unique experience.

Again and again in workshops across the country I experience how people who have not written poetry are able to write from an astonishing depth when a safe space is created.

Providing safety does not mean the absence of allowing risk but for me it means the letting go of judgement about your writing. It also means to protect the integrity of the workshop space so that each person is able to follow his or her own process.

Often, poem-making starts because some pain or hunger in our lives compels us to say something—anything. We may have stuffed our voice long enough. I believe that our writing may turn itself on (often at 2 a.m.) like an immune system activates when toxins attempt to overtake our body.

Poem-making may also be a conscious choice to live with greater soul, honesty and meaning, a choice rising up from within your core, insisting you pay attention. When Ruth Stone writes:

Dear children, you must try to say  
Something when you are in need.  
Don't confuse hunger with greed;  
and don't wait until you are dead.

she is calling our attention to the value and necessity of saying what we need, of naming what matters to us. Poem-making distills those things. The poem gets us to the point.

This way of finding language through poem-making is very different than the manner words are selected and organized by the discursive/rational mind. There is a discovery in this process that reveals "words" as quite different than what you were led to believe taking your fourth grade spelling test!

I like to ask people, when you took your spelling test, did your teacher also ask you, "What words on your list do you just like the sound of?" Not too many people reply affirmatively to that question, yet it is the sound of words we often had such fun with as children.

This process of writing and using words in a healing way may also include creating a greater awareness of your

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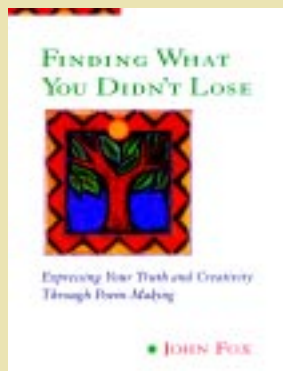
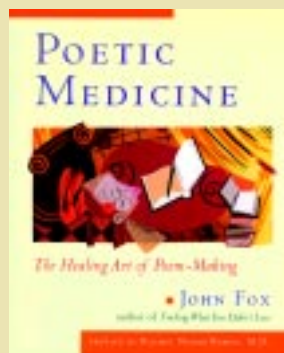
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life. It's opening to your unique experience and relationship to the world, your inner life and the earth. It's making direct contact with seasons, element and sense—and perhaps even more, allowing them to contact and enter you. A child recently wrote to me “poetry is putting objects on paper.”

Poetry as healer is not just thinking words onto a page but exploring the actual place where Spirit, aliveness, Eros, living connection, feeling and awareness are discovered within yourself.

Can you experience yourself as a living, breathing word? And what of “words” that breathe in what is all around you? What if you could touch and then settle into the thing a word was made for? Where do you step “barefoot into reality?”

A song of the rolling earth, and of words according  
 Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines?  
 those curves, angles and dots?  
 No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in  
 the ground and sea,  
 They are in the air, they are in you.

— *Walt Whitman*

I am asking about those things you love and are passionate for which often are the same things that cause you, as a sensitive human being, to hurt and cry out about as well as celebrate and sing. This may be a significant relationship,

the natural world, your family and home, your work and play, your service to others, your spiritual path. Anything that holds your attention, ignites your passion or suffuses your deepest awareness is a place where your muse calls.

What if there was a “language” within these things you could make contact with to give voice and shape to?

This kind of writing is certainly personal, yet it might be important for you to share it with a counselor, a trusted friend or within a supportive community of others doing the same kind of work. Listening matters. The practice of listening that makes possible speaking aloud your truth to others can help your healing and creative process. Or, your writing could be the way you do self-care and find your balance day by day whether anyone is there to listen or not. The most essential thing is to value your own words. **b**

*There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,  
 Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips  
 among them.  
 They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into  
 reality,  
 That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the  
 frost  
 And cried out to feel it again. . . .*

— *Wallace Stevens*

## John Fox on POETRY AS HEALER

“Often, poem-making starts because some pain or hunger in our lives compels us to say something—anything. We may have stuffed our voice long enough.”

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