

Poetic Medicine *in* Action

APPLICATIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY

The Primacy of Discovery: Bringing the Healing Power of Expressive Writing to the Psychological Mainstream

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I've been a psychologist for nearly 40 years. In this talk, originally delivered at the Fall Conference of the Virginia Psychological Association in Williamsburg, VA on October 19, 2007, I have outlined some discoveries that have deepened my understanding of the healing power of words and its place in the psychological mainstream.

What I want to focus on in this presentation is to demonstrate the usefulness of expressive writing to foster the process of discovery and to suggest a number of ways that this creative process can be used to facilitate growth and healing, even recovery from trauma.

The Primacy of Discovery

Like most psychologists, I was trained in the scientist-practitioner model that has been the standard for the field for the past 60 years. At the risk of being provocative, I would suggest that overly strict adherence to this model, particularly an over-reliance on statistical findings, may leave insufficient room for what I would like to call the "primacy of discovery".

Discovery involves a dynamic engagement with the world, an evolution of curiosity and an attempt to translate the often inchoate elements of experience into meaningful patterns and concepts. I believe that these moments of discovery are the crucial raw materials that provide the bedrock on which meaningful inquiry should rest.

Imagine we are able to share discoveries together. Let me pose a question: Can you remember a moment of profound discovery or insight that changed your perceptions and altered your behavior?

In my own experience, one such moment of discovery occurred about 6 weeks before my 30th birthday in 1970 when my parents failed to notify me of an uncle's death until the morning of his funeral. I was enraged, but not because I had felt especially close to my uncle, but because I felt my parents had deprived me of making my own decision

about attending his funeral despite being an adult, and a husband and father, to boot! What made this moment life changing was that instead of dwelling on my anger and frustration, for some unconscious reason, I channeled my feelings for the first time into a positive poetic remembrance as a condolence note to my aunt that allowed me to deeply connect with my inner thoughts and feelings through words that felt meaningful and empowering.

That certainly got things rolling! Shortly thereafter, I began to write poetry with increasing regularity to express my deepening understanding of my life and my work. But I didn't stop there. I began to wonder exactly how powerful this process might be and what would happen if I used my expressive writing as a bridge to establish deeper connections with a number of depressed and disaffiliated patients with whom I was then working. By sharing my writing, I had unknowingly created a place, where, perhaps for the first time, these patients felt that they, too, could safely share more of themselves than they had previously dared.

The results of this experiment in sharing were startling to me! I would like to share several examples of what I discovered. These examples are actual writings by these patients from over 33 years ago; none contain any identifying information and are used here for educational purposes only. Several of these patients had never used writing to express their feelings before. They were surprised by their own efforts at expressive writing and became more energized, engaged and connected. Here is a poem by a young man that reflects the power of his own discovery.

The First Words

The first words?

I can't quite move.
The first words are so very hard.

The first words?

The more I search,
The harder they are.

The first words.

What a wall to climb
To keep...nothing.

The first words.

If I could find...well,
Something common.

Yes
"I'm afraid."

This effort was quite extraordinary, especially for someone who had been quite confused about his identity and feelings. I marveled how he set up his page by placing his

repeating litany of “The First Words” down the left hand margin and the remainder of his words down the right hand margin. Look too at his progression from feeling frozen, to having question marks follow the use of “the first words” for the first two times and then cease to be a question, to remain stuck, from trying so hard, to finding the words, “something common”, culminating in “Yes, I’m afraid”. This gave a genuine glimpse into an inner dialogue with the self. It was a beginning, a connection with a vital place that was very real.

As impressive as I thought that was, I was even more startled by the response of several other patients who announced that they had already written poems of their own, sometimes years before, poems that profoundly captured their core struggles but had never before been shared with anyone! Let me illustrate with one example; The example I have chosen is from a middle aged man who had drearily let life pass him by. If memory serves me, this poem was written as much as 30 years before and languished, unshared, in a drawer.

The Book

I opened the book of light
To understand it if I might
And what I read was hardly there,
It was neither curse nor prayer.
I read of small engulfing large,
Of seeing all as a mirage,
Of doom emerging from birth,
Of void emitting from our earth.
It explained things we shouldn't know,
Of speed overtaken by slow,
Of lead replacing precious gold,
Of hot evolving into cold,
As I read hate turned into love,
Underneath became above.
I turned a page and good was bad,
Happiness came out as sad,
Light became the blackest night,
Courage turned to dismal fright.
The beginning was at the end
And wasn't meant for eyes of men.
As I pored I thought I knew
All questions and their answers, too.
I realized I was on the brink,
Then my mind refused to think.
Pictures flashed before my eyes,
I knew the thoughts of him who dies
And I drowned in black despair.
All the while the book was there.

A rumbling, thundering noise arose,
I saw that awful book swing close
And I was lying on the green,
My mind was washed and rinsed clean
Of knowledge that the book had taught.
A wisp of memory yet I caught
That lingers as a phantom cloud
But cannot be expressed aloud.

Now what do you think this man is describing with this poem? I think this poem is a chilling account of being aware of life's paradoxes and mixed messages and finally, of shutting down, of being beaten back by the repressive forces of life that seemed too difficult to tackle alone.

I don't know about you, but this poem gives me goose bumps. I am struck now with the one anomaly in his litany of positives being transformed into negatives, namely, "Of hate turning into love, of underneath turning into above". I don't think I thought to pursue that at the time, but perhaps this was something positive he was desperately trying to hold onto.

This man's struggle was very honest. He was trying to undo the repression and confusion he experienced and reclaim the vitality of his life! At that point, he had a very uphill climb ahead of him, too many years of conventionality, too many years of suffering alone, too many years of selling out his soul, too many years in a loveless marriage, yet he knew all along many of the roots of his despair but for him, there had been no one with whom to share.

Towards An Understanding of the Healing Power of Words

Now, what exactly had I discovered here? At the time, I only knew I had discovered something powerful, that expressive writing offered a potent vehicle to unleash the human capacity to heal from **within**, but unfortunately, I lacked a more coherent framework for understanding the full power of this discovery.

As I think about it now, perhaps I wasn't so far from the wisdom I needed because these experiences led me to another profound discovery. Remember the old philosophical question—if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Similarly, since a number of these profound poems had never been shared, I wondered, despite their deep resonance, if their isolation from being shared with others had robbed them of some (or more) of their potency to facilitate healing. Were these expressions indeed like voices in the wilderness destined to be voices of despair rather than voices of connection and understanding?

Noted poet and critic, Edward Hirsch (1999) states rather unequivocally that when words assume poetic form, the poetry thus produced is incomplete if it is not shared; poetry requires writer and reader or listener to complete a circuit, a connection between self and other or even between different parts of the self.

U VA Professor of English and poet, Gregory Orr, goes even farther. He has written eloquently and profoundly about the survival value of poetry (Orr, 2002) and his own

struggles to overcome his unspeakable devastation for killing his 7 year old brother in a hunting accident when he was 12 (Orr, 2004). Like many writers, Orr has identified a fundamental truth-- that human beings are above all else storytellers. Long before written language, sages, shamans and epic storytellers in every culture transmitted narrative and lyric poetry in an effort to describe experience and find meaning in the vagaries and mysteries of life.

For Orr, the nearly accidental discovery of poetry and poem making as a high school senior in rural upstate New York provided him with the vehicle he so desperately needed to begin to heal from the awful trauma and destabilization that lay untouched inside. As Orr puts it, the function of the lyric poem, or in modern form, the I statement, is three fold:

- (1) to give expression to personal experience
- (2) to gain distance from its disordering effects by converting raw, at times inchoate, feelings into word symbols
- (3) to achieve greater mastery, resolution and meaning that results in the reframing of experience and the re-stabilization of the self.

I share Orr's experience with the profound effects of expressive writing and am thankful for the clarity of his insight.

So what does this all mean for us, as psychologists or psychotherapists or healers? As clinicians, we are never far from the storytelling world. We are faced with patients whose stories come to us in the form of presenting complaints, symptoms, feelings, thoughts, beliefs and behaviors. Through our training, we have armed ourselves with a host of tools and techniques that, regardless of theoretical orientation, are designed to alleviate suffering, promote hope, resolve stuckness and foster healing and growth.

But how exactly do we accomplish this task? The present managed care driven climate that focuses on symptom removal and medical necessity is not particularly conducive to helping individuals restructure their personal meanings. This involves changing personal stories. How often have we felt that despite our best attempts to help our patients change, it's as if they are telling us in return "Hey, this is **my** story and I'm sticking to it".

Changing our personal stories does not come from the simple application of techniques to our patient's thinking, feeling and behavior from the outside in. Rather change, in the form of narrative restructuring, emerges from an organic process **within** that encourages our patients, as well as ourselves, to embrace our experiences, our anxieties, our anguishes, our despair and actively struggle to re-form them and derive new understanding and meaning. At our best, we are constantly evolving our stories.

We now know from studies by University of Texas psychology professor and Department chair, James Pennebaker (1997) and others that persons given an opportunity to write about meaningful events for 20 minutes, 3 times a week, show positive gains in various health and mental health indicators compared to controls and his studies have spurred a broader range of empirical investigations about the efficacy of expressive writing protocols (see e.g., *The Writing Cure* edited by Lepore & Smyth and

published by APA in 2002).

These explorations are not just on an academic or clinical level. In the January 2007 issue, *Newsweek* columnist, Anna Quindlen, wrote that the popular film “Freedom Writers” not only describes the power of a dedicated young teacher to channel an “at risk” mix of Latino, black and Asian students to express themselves in writing rather than fighting, but that this simple method is not just for writers or students, it is for everyone!

In recent years, I have expanded my understanding of the healing power of words by becoming involved in the field of poetry therapy but ironically, another of my discoveries came directly from experimenting with the poetry therapy process years before I was formally aware there was such a field. I found that my patients often benefited from my writing something for them when I had witnessed an important moment in their therapy and wanted them to have a tangible reminder of their struggle and growth.

In working with many characterologically-challenged patients, I have learned to appreciate that they have not necessarily achieved a capacity for integrating their experiences or to holistically resolve complex levels of feeling and ambivalence. Rather, psychotherapeutic progress with these patients is typically slow and there will be many victories and defeats in the course of growth over time. As a result, I often try to capture unspoken feelings for a patient, in a way they can hold and allow the poem to become a tangible container or symbol that can be used as a benchmark in the back and forth process that is characteristic of therapy.

Here I would like to use two examples because the circumstances are different: The first demonstrates an attempt to reinforce something a client has done that strengthens his growth. It involves less risk; the patient is ready to hear it because he has already done it. In this case, the patient was a middle aged, quite successful man who had worked hard in individual and group therapy to heal splits in his personality and feel more whole and comfortable navigating the world on his own terms, in his own skin. This poem followed a riveting piece of psychodramatic group work as the patient came to terms with his tendency to continue to internalize his mother’s negative influence and then reach a healing resolution that expressed his growing wholeness and proclaimed his freedom from his mother’s grip. I felt excited for him and tried my best to capture his triumph this way:

Healing

It's quiet now
So very quiet
And in the hushed silence
There is the unmistakable sound
Of a heart beating as one

Perhaps it's the normality of it
Which is misleading

Nothing special really
Just the simple presence
Of a human being

But oh my
It wasn't easy
Achieving such simplicity

I hope everyone doesn't need
To cross endless mine fields
In terror for one's life,
Endure splits in being
And disjointed relationships
Just to someday have his heart
Beat as one

The layers are so visible now
It's a lot easier when there is
Safety, caring, protection and love
There's a final accounting at last
A soulful sorting out of who's who

Yes, I'm standing here
With the last fragment of Parsifal homespun
Torn from its choke hold
Around my heart

And I can choose to be free
Having done far more than survive
I can move on with a heart
That beats as one
With the simple dignity of knowing
I am a man

I hope I have been able to convey the awe, reverence and respect I experienced bearing witness to this person's hard work. Later this patient went on to write a full length book charting the recovery of his wholeness with narrative and poems of his own that were quite remarkable.

The second example is being out ahead of the patient's actual behavior but nonetheless pointing the way towards growth as a still possible goal. In this case a chronically depressed and narcissistically fixated young man of 30 was totally stuck in telling and retelling his story and failing to progress in his career and his personal relationships. I decided that the best way I could reflect this person's struggle was to try to point out the path he so painfully repeated as well as the path he so fearfully avoided.

The Unbearable Journey to Nowhere

Each day ushers in another
fragile, tentative, hopeful prayer:
Will this be the day that my
long and lonely quest
for meaning and purpose
will be fulfilled?

Will this be the day
I, at long last,
drink from the fountain of wisdom
to give me the power to discern my fate,
to divine my destiny?

Will this be the day
the blossoms burst forth
in a bloom so fragrant
that the gods suspend their heavenly journey
and drink from the same nectar
that nourishes my soul?

Will this be the day
that my mind and heart and spirit
unleash their passion
and together, illuminate the darkest
corner of my being
with their hopeful light?

Will this be the day
that opportunity appears,
like a ghostly specter,
from behind a cloud,
leading me to the pot of gold
at the end of the rainbow?

Will this be the day
the journey ends,
when all is revealed
in a blinding light
that cannot be denied?

Or will this be the day
I awake from my numbing trance,
stumble from my bed,
bump into the clutter of my life,
sort through my possessions and relationships,
trust my spirit,
reach out for connections,
and gleefully raft the turbulent waters of my soul,
hand firmly guiding the paddle,
harnessing the power of my being,

and finally end the unbearable journey to nowhere!

Now, make no mistake. This poem did not produce a magical improvement. After all, magical thinking was one of this patient's core issues. But my sharing this poem with him did lead to some resurgence of energy and some shifts in perspective and that seemed perfectly OK. Sometimes, progress is slow.

Years later I learned that one of poetry therapy's pioneers, George Bell (2005), called this process a "feedback" poem. Bell urges therapists to write something to patients from time to time in an effort to check if the therapist has fully understood what the patient has expressed. Bell is very specific here; he carefully gives the feedback poem to his patient and asks several questions: (1) how close am I on this? (2) did I get it right? (3) what have I left out? And (4) what needs to be added? His intention is to try to capture the patient's struggle as precisely and accurately as possible and involve the patient in providing validation that he or she has been properly understood, especially if the poem expresses feelings the patient has not yet fully expressed aloud.

In the examples I have cited and others, Bell's structuring questions might certainly have been useful and I would be open to using them now. At the time, I wanted these patients to feel that they were being listened to, without intellectualized discussion, and affirmed either for their accomplishments or for their continued desire to find some pathway out of the wilderness. Using feedback poems in this way requires a high degree of empathy and trust in one's own intuitive power as well as sensitivity to the reactions they bring. In my experience, the rewards and a chance to have in the here and now a deeper sense of understanding with something another could hold far outweighed any risks of getting it wrong.

I would like to share an additional discovery, an experience in listening, that didn't involve poetry or expressive writing at all but very much depended on the healing power of words and the depth of empathy it requires. This one may also have required a bit of luck. (see Rosenfield, 2006). The core of the story, now nearly 31 years old, involved my having to tell a very paranoid patient I had been working with only a few months that I would be leaving my position at a community mental health center for full time private practice. I was not in a financial position to offer him a reduced fee and he was not in a position to pay out of pocket so I needed to transfer him to another therapist at the center.

At the beginning of our next session, I announced my departure date and explained his options one month before I was scheduled to leave. The impact was immediate and far more reactive than I might have imagined. The patient became nearly psychotically agitated. I knew enough to recognize that he was probably in the throes of abandonment rage, but on a conscious level I had no idea what words of comfort or support I could possibly offer. Somehow, at the height of his agitation, I suddenly asked in my quietest and most gentle voice "did you go to church a lot as a young boy"? To my astonishment, his agitation ceased immediately, followed by uncontrollable sobs and finally, after a time, by silence.

When my patient appeared to have regained some composure, I asked if he could share with me what he had just experienced. He explained that his alcoholic parents often sent him to a Pentecostal church on Sunday mornings as they recovered from

their stupor. On some level, my announced departure seemed to evoke an intense re-living of that abandonment. What was bewildering to me was that I shared none of his background or experience yet I had somehow detected in the rhythm of his agitation, the hellfire and brimstone cadence I must have unconsciously associated with Pentecostal ritual, hence the question I asked that seemed to resonate with his childhood experience. More importantly, therapeutically, I firmly believe this terribly disturbed man had felt deeply understood for perhaps the first time in his life. For all this drama, I fully expected that the remainder of our time together might prove far more fruitful than had been true to date. Sadly, nothing really had appeared to change.

The end of the month arrived; we met for a final time and bid each other goodbye rather perfunctorily. Fortunately, the story did not end there. Two weeks later, I heard a knock on the outer door of my new office. It was this patient and I nearly recoiled in fear that I was being stalked. I was wrong. As he stood in the hallway, he simply said, “Dr. Rosenfield, I know I am not able to see you any more but I just had to know where you are.” I was stunned. We wished each other well, shook hands and I never saw or heard from him again. I can only hope this patient internalized as much of me as I have of him. I remain forever in his debt.

I have no difficulty telling you, all these years later, that this experience changed my professional career. It taught me never to give up trying to understand my patients, no matter how challenging and never to underestimate the healing power of words to reach levels of experience that are not readily reached by established techniques alone. We all need to be alert to the “primacy of discovery”.

I would like to close with a recent discovery. The discovery I want to share with you here flows from the decision I made to stay in the present and focus on one day at a time once I had a confirmed diagnosis and treatment plan for a current illness. I think we’ve heard this prescription so often that it almost sounds like a cliché but interesting things do happen if you really stay open to your own experience.

Without any conscious focus, I found myself 4 days following my first treatment cycle for lymphoma suddenly seeing myself, my life and my relationships with complete clarity followed by a sense of self-acceptance, inner peace and calm I had never previously experienced. Any sense of inner struggle I have carried with me through my life evaporated and I felt that I really understood more deeply the meaning of the word, “freedom”—freedom to be in the world just as I am and use that understanding as a foundation for whatever lies ahead. In communicating with others, I have heard reports that suggest that this experience is far from unique. These inner shifts appear to occur when people are faced with life changing events.

For me, this discovery has reminded me that one of our most important jobs as psychotherapists and healers is remembering not to push the river with our knowledge and techniques at our clients but help create a space where the river flows within our clients and contributes to their own capacity for healing.

The current popularity of Mindfulness Meditation speaks directly to this by helping people focus on awareness of the present moment, with acceptance, and with inner calm. I’m not sure if my shift in consciousness and discovery of peace and calm worked quite

this way. I wasn't deliberately trying to focus on the present moment or any particular outcome. I was just there. As with all discoveries, I only know that by trusting my own experience, I have deepened my understanding of how the process of healing takes place.

As Thich Nhat Hanh (1991), spiritual leader of the Mindfulness movement urges us, "peace is every step". We only need to be open to its power.

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