

The use of poetry in psychotherapy

The flesh became word and we dwelt amongst it

by Ger Murphy

It is said that we have two births: our physical birth, and the first time we are spoken of, that moment when we enter the realm of culture, when we are thought of as somebody's son or daughter, part of a clan or orphaned from one.

This birth into culture is linked strongly to our birth into language; we are held by language and in a real sense we are made by language, so the flesh can be seen to become word and in this becoming lies much of our suffering and also the possibility of redemption. When we can speak words which express us, lead us and give access to our deepest yearnings, we feel more human, more connected and somehow more at peace with the world even when this peace is peace with deep suffering.

It is through the word that we engage most powerfully in the realm of relationality. While touch and body expression speak intimately from and of our deep interiority, language draws us out into a realm of shared expression with the exquisite possibility of our being understood by another and also of being missed\forgotten\misjudged. The realm of language invites us to risk our narcissistic ego ideal, take our life into our hands (or our words) and set sail on the open sea of communication in the hope of the intimacy of meeting another and being formed anew in the miracle of conversation.

Poetry is a particular kind of language and has long been known as the language of the soul. It is no wonder then that poetry can be seen as a helpful tool in psychotherapeutic practice. In this piece I want to speak to the use of poetry in practice, outline some theoretical underpinnings, and offer a glimpse of specific uses of poetry in the clinical setting. The use of poems in practice settings offers a tool where the client can work with a poem for a variety of purposes. A suitable poem can be a wonderful companion for clients going through many different life events, from working with grief and loss to accompanying the client through various developmental changes and to using poems as a form of bodywork.

Many people's past experience of poetry is from the classroom where the object was to learn a poem or to understand the author's intention and to offer a critique of the style and construction of a poem. For many, this experience was a challenging one where concepts of success and failure made poetry -speaking a secondary aspect. An attempt to dismantle and understand the construction of a poem can be satisfying, but can also be a reductionist approach which misses the spirit of the poem and depends too heavily on the rational mind. Poetry has ever been a spoken engagement with posture, breath, eye contact, tone and cadence all going to make a unique offering of every poem spoken through a particular voice\body. This is hugely different from reading a poem from a page.

In the work of which I speak the poem is used differently. The poem is seen as a 'medicine' which allows the person to sink more deeply into their own inner experience. The listening is also undertaken differently. The aim is not to understand and critique the poem but to listen with the heart and allow it to open and affect us. The poetic word is a crafted word where the deepest personal experiences can be shared as they weave through the broadest existential issues in a way that offers the listener an entry point to their own experience. It is not prescriptive and does not taste of self-indulgence, even in its privacy and revelation. This is a high expectation, but a gift to the world when it is achieved.

The poem as companion during challenging times can be a real support, and the specific medicine of a poem can call the person back to a place of opening to and witnessing their experience. The invitation which a suitable poem can offer is one which allows the client and ourselves the opportunity to see that most experiences we encounter have been met before, thus allowing us to realise that our issues have a universal as well as a particular dimension. Perhaps this is one of the great paradoxes of our lives where we struggle to hold both the deeply personal and the existential and collective expressions of our days.

For example, a client going through a strong grief experience can be greatly helped by Rilke's poem "Pushing Through"

*It is possible that I am pushing through solid rock
In flintlike layers,
As the ore lies, alone.
I am such a long way in I see no way through, and no space...*

(Rilke, 2014: p.161)

Poetry offers a fine connecting possibility between the silent body and the culturally civilised spoken word that give clients many clues to the directions possible in their own unfolding while offering them scaffolding in times of turmoil and change.

Mary Oliver's poem "The Journey" has been a companion to many clients coming through dark times:

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--...*

(Oliver, 2004: p.79)

These two examples give only a glimpse at the breadth of poems which speak to particular life processes and can remind the client of their struggle and possible growth gateways through their experience.

Similarly the Mark Nepo poem "Adrift" has helped many clients in times of great loss and change:

*Everything is beautiful and I am so sad.
This is how the heart makes a duet of
wonder and grief.*

(Nepo, 2000: p110)

A poem given to a client to work with can also be a very useful form of bodywork and can highlight patterns of holding and structure. For a useful introduction to character structure which is a framework I am using, see *Eastern Body Western Mind* by Anodea Judith, (2004) which draws on the work of Willheim Reich and Alexander Lowen.(The founders of Body Psychotherapy)

How a client embodies a poem in speaking it can be very telling. The constriction and blocks in the body energy are evident as someone speaks a poem. There can then be many creative ways to work with the client in this regard, and as they more fully absorb the poem and allow it to live inside them, they can get many hints as to the areas of their body which can be more fully and vibrantly inhabited. How the poem is communicated also lets both psychotherapist and client feel the opening to intimate connection which the client can allow and this often speaks loudly of the relation to presence and connection in the client's world outside of the therapeutic space.

Different poems can shine a light on different aspects of the person. Poems such as Seamus Heaney's "Digging", allows a focus on their relation to their own root chakra and ground or earth element:

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pin rest; snug as a gun.
Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down...*

(Heaney, 2019: p136)

Schizoid issues are uncovered in the work where the individual has had to develop a schizoid type character structure and not fully enter the body due to early developmental challenges in the womb and in early life. The client's relation to the earth and to their own grounding on it are revealed both in a symbolic and a physical sense with the poem acting as a guide to becoming more embodied and earthed.

Another poem which speaks of this theme is Mary O'Donnell's "Return to Clay":

*It is not hard.
Go west or south, north,
east if you wish. Take
the swift path to the soil,
in boots or killer heels,
dungarees or velvet. The garments
are irrelevant, merely
a beautiful counterpoint
to the moment when you sniff
the air, realise your pores
have filled with the smell of clay...*

(O'Donnell, 2018: p. 189)

Poems of this type can alert us to what is missing in our presence in life as, for example, how we keep ourselves separated from the earth element in our lives with the losses that entails to our relationships with ourselves, others, and nature.

The issues and challenges of the oral stage of infancy can be vividly brought to light as someone works with the poem "Love after Love" by Derek Walcott. In taking this poem into themselves, the client can encounter issues regarding self-esteem and also issues related to their feeling life, their sense of fullness or lack in their belly area, or second chakra, water

element. To fully engage with the element one has to tolerate pleasure and sensual experience, and the issues that are often buried due to past conditioning or trauma can emerge, as well as the presence of the 'self-critic' who appears when self-love becomes a possibility. Opening to self-love and the challenge of a benign sense of self-esteem is a major issue for many clients with issues of a second chakra or oral nature.

*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*

(Walcott, 2009: p.39)

The challenges inherent in tolerating and embracing our feeling nature, and also our lacks and hungers, is strongly present and awakened by poems like this.

Poems like "I Will Not Die an Unlived Life", by Dawna Markova are useful in relation to the subsequent developmental challenge of self-assertion versus shame, or so-called masochistic character or endure-type as Judith refers to it.

*I will not die an unlived life.
I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days, ...*

(Markova, 2000: p 68)

This can bring into focus the client's issues regarding self-assertion, or will-related issues. Many clients who have had their will thwarted in toddler stage and beyond and who had to arm themselves against shame and humiliation, thereby developing a masochistic type character structure, benefit from the stretch which a poem like this offers them where they are encouraged to fully experience meeting the power of their own will and the defences against this. This refers to the fire element of the person. To dare to celebrate the separate identity, to stand out, is often a risk for such individuals where it can be more comfortable to hide in self-abasement and hold a subdued and stubborn approach to life. So, to speak the lines "*I will not die an unlived life, nor live in fear of falling or catching fire*" are often experienced as a stretch for the self burdened by shame, and can bring great liberation when the shackles of such shame are cast off, allowing the grief to flow and be followed by a greater sense of self possession.

Finally, there are many poems that can help work with the phallic/narcissistic or hysteric character process where deep relation and surrender to relationship are key themes in the work with a particular client. Developmentally, such clients can come to therapy unable to let go into a relationship fully when their early experience meant that offering their love safely was compromised, leaving them with specific defences in this regard. This fourth chakra, or heart chakra corresponds with the air element of the client

Marie Howe's poem "Annunciation" offers great opportunities in working with these issues:

*Even if I don't see it again—nor ever feel it
I know it is—and that if once it hailed me*

*it ever does—
and so it is myself I want to turn in that direction...*

(Howe, 1998: p.101)

This brief introduction to the use of poems to elucidate particular character issues is of course merely pointing to the fact that particular poems can be chosen to work with, where the medicine of the poem can be an elixir for the particular themes with which the client is engaged. The character structure map developed by Wilhelm Reich as he built on the developmental schema outlined by Sigmund Freud, and further developed by David Boadella and Anodea Judith is very useful in providing a view of where development has been impaired and where growth can be focused.

With the work on these four elements- Earth, Water, Fire and Air-and the corresponding chakras, we can have a rounded schema to explore the potential and the blocks in the individual and how best they can pursue their growth and healing. Suitable poems can be valuable tools for growth, and can be a creative and fun way to explore how we can fully open to living.

A poem often operates as a transitional object, or self-soothing structure, and I have noticed recently through the Covid-19 challenge that many clients are finding support and nourishment in this way by having a few lines of a favourite poem with them through their days and nights. For example, the first stanza of the Stanley Kunitz poem “The Layers” is evocative for many just now:

*I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle not to stray...*

(Kunitz, 2003: p28)

To draw us back to what it is, “*that principle of being from which I struggle not to stray*” can offer us a fine meditation to strengthen us in challenging times.

Clients may themselves have a poem which has particular relevance for them and they are encouraged to bring it to therapy and to work with it.

The process of learning a poem or “writing it on our bones” can be so revealing in what we remember and forget. It is useful to see Kim Rosen’s book *Saved by a Poem* (2009) to explore in depth the process of engaging with a poem.

Finally, there are many poems that can support the whole depth therapeutic endeavour of coming to acceptance of life as we find it, and confronting our resistances and narcissistic holdings, but one that I employ is Rumi’s “Undressing”.

*Learn the alchemy
true human beings know.
The moment you accept
what troubles you have been given,
the door opens...*

(Rumi, 2006: p94)

I hope I have pointed to the possibility of this kind of poetry work being significantly different from our normal engagement with poetry. Poetry offers a creative path to personal development in a psychotherapeutic context. We could say that in fact this is an embodied practice where Tantra meets Shamanism. By this, I mean that the opening to the ecstatic or the more-than-personal realm through a body practice, which is foundational to the Tantric tradition, can meet the grounded practice of meeting spirit in nature through the elements, which is basic to Shamanism. These two practices can come together as we engage mindfully with poetry, so we are changed by this deep alchemy. How this practice can live within a psychotherapeutic engagement is an ongoing and creative question which I continue to hold.

Seeing this poetry work as a form of bodywork can open us to the possibilities in it as a part of psychotherapeutic practice. Using the tri-focused matrix outlined above we can look at ourselves and our clients along the lines of the three foci:

1. What character structure seems most present in the person before us? And then what is the core existential question to be grappled with?
2. What chakra seems to require more or less energy activation?
3. What element from the four elements of earth\water\fire\air is most pertinent to the individual's development?

Using these questions, we can begin to build a focused bodywork practice that helps the individual build strength, resilience and surrender in their approach to life.

I find the use of David Boadella's guidance for bodywork practice in his book *Lifestreams* (2015) useful here also. Boadella focuses on three dimensions of contact as key to developing focused bodywork practice: these are centering, grounding and facing. I find working with how someone embodies a poem using these three dimensions to be most valuable as they offer good guidance as to how we might experiment with the poem, speaking in creative ways that offer a stretch to the character-structured way in which we speak, move, breathe and are embodied.

Having lenses of this kind strongly potentiates our work with poetry and I wish you well as you deepen your engagement with poetry for yourself and possibly your clients.

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