Chapter 4
Poetry as Therapy

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It is possible...
It is possible at least sometimes...
It is possible especially now
To ride a horse
Inside a prison cell
And run away…
— From *The Prison Cell* by Mahmoud Darwish, (1992)

Yesterday, I attended an event at the Harris Museum, Preston, Lancashire. This museum in a small town in Northern England was hosting a reception where the mayor and other bigwigs came to open an exhibition I am involved with—for the past 9 months, I have been engaged with unearthing history from the archives on one of the largest and oldest asylums in Europe, Whittingham Asylum, and using historical titbits—photos, information from superintendent's registers, reception orders (when someone was committed, each person's personal details were logged in an admission form known as a 'reception order'), etc.—in conjunction with the lived experiences of service users, family members of those struggling with mental health distress, prisoners/service users still committed in a secure unit here in Lancashire to create fresh writing, poetry and art. The results of these workshops have been startling, politically charged and very powerful.

Using poetry and creative writing as a tool can be therapeutic as well as can be a powerful intervention to create change and affect public perceptions. Art can appeal obliquely, and as people witness the created art and writing, like they did in the exhibition last night, conversations flowed over wine that could possibly change the way people with mental distress are perceived.

In the 1990s, James W. Pennebaker started publishing results from clinical trials he had conducted, in laboratory conditions, on the connections between health markers and expressive writing (Pennebaker 1993). Although there has always been a connection between revealing your traumas and feeling better, the way Pennebaker

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conducted these trials and documented results resulted in his work being accepted as ‘therapeutic’ and ‘scientific’. He and his team invited subjects, whose health markers like blood pressure, whether they are grieving, in distress, etc., were noted individually, and then they were placed into a writing cubicle in a lab; he separated subjects into groups that wrote about general topics, like the weather, a walk, etc., and others who wrote about significant and traumatic events in their lives. The subjects repeated this for at least 15–20 minutes for five consecutive days. The results revealed that the subjects who wrote on general topics showed no significant changes in their health markers, but the subjects who wrote on distress or trauma showed significant improvements in their health markers over the next 6 months. These experiments were repeated by several scientists and they found the same results. These results were also true for people living with depression and other mental health conditions—both physical and mental health markers improved.

In my work as a poet, activist and founder of a mental health charity, I use creative writing as an important tool in helping people heal from trauma, or perhaps make more sense of living with their distress, or cope. In prison settings, classroom settings or workshop settings, I have used these sessions to varying results, mostly positive and powerful, and the participants claim ‘don’t know what it is, but I feel so much better after writing!’ I think poetry in particular helps you to make sense of grief, of trauma. Poetry opens a door to light.

For example, consider these words, created in one of my classes by a service user:

Tea and Medication

In seclusion, they give you
Tea and medication
In seclusion, they give you
Time
In seclusion, you can shout
The walls don’t care
In seclusion, the walls have eyes
In seclusion, they do what they like
In seclusion, you’re not really alone

For someone who is still living with the threat of facing seclusion for any misdemeanour, writing this was a breath of fresh air. This poem was created in a project I did through February and March 2018, the one being showcased last evening at the museum. We used archive history prompts about Whittingham Asylum to create new writing, poetry and songs by service users living in Guild Lodge, a National Health Service (NHS) secure mental health facility, running on the grounds of the old Asylum. For the service users and staff, who were seeing photographs of what may have happened in times gone by, realising that although a lot had changed, some for the better, many things were the same or worse, lead to some powerful words being created.

In my own work, where I head a charity in India called the Bhor Foundation, one of whose mandates is to take poetry as therapy into psychiatric institutions and prisons, this project has helped me see, yet again, how therapeutic and amazing these interventions can be. In the words of Hemlata Tripathi, a technical instructor at the

NHS facility, who was present for the series of workshops and a key part of them, 'the service users keep asking if the workshop is definitely happening next week, this is a first that they look forward to something so much.' The same service users kept coming back to these voluntary sessions, and said they enjoyed them so much, in one user's words, 'the highlight of his week!' And although sometimes the subject of the material led to controversial words being written, the energy of the group was always contained and managed and there was cathartic, therapeutic and often political writing in response to the material we had unearthed at the Lancashire Archives.

Indeed in my own case, in 2015, I did an unusual thing—I signed up for an MA in Creative Writing. Middle-aged women, especially Indian ones, do not suddenly get up and go to England to do another degree, but on a whim, I sent off a creative piece, got admission and I was off. I was 47 years old and was trying to rebuild my life after a divorce, the kidnapping of my children, trauma, forced incarceration in a mental health institution, sexual violence and much else (Breckenridge 2017).

The irrational decision turned out to not be so irrational after all. The poetry module, when it came to me—although I went in dragging my feet, protesting that poetry was not for me—transformed me. I could suddenly breathe. Poetry turned into my gills.

Trauma is a strange beast. It is a heaviness in your limbs, it is an itching just under your skin where you cannot reach, it is the irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) in your gut, it is the hair falling out in handfuls. It is the grey dog sleeping at your feet which can suddenly wake up, lunge for your throat, gleaming white teeth bared. It is the cobwebs that flutter in every room of your house, and as you walk, they shimmy, reminding you of their presence.

Trauma loves to stay in parts of your body that therapy and medication cannot shift. And although I benefited greatly from my pony-tailed psychotherapist in New Delhi when I was going through the worst times of my marriage, I can truly say it is poetry that has set me free. I breathe differently when I am writing or even reading poetry that speaks to me. It is as if the whole world slows down and I can finally tune into what really matters.

When I began my course, I found that I related to more contemporary poets—Warsan Shire's work resonated with some aspects of my own life, the feeling that I was not enough, not pretty enough, not woman enough. Anne Sexton's (1981) confessional poems gave me an insight into the heart and minds of women with feelings like mine: 'But suicides have a special language./Like carpenters they want to know which tools./They never ask why build'.

Ellen Bass and Jane Hirshfield taught me to tune into the immediacy of the moment and the thrill of being able to express it with the simplest language. This was a journey I was already on with yoga and mindfulness and meditation, which has saved me through my darkest times. And the joy of Faiz and my current attempt to learn Urdu is a quest that is transformative and is somehow taking me closer to my Muslim grandmother, now dead and gone, except that I sense her fragrance leaning into me, holding my hand as I read.

Although we cannot think of specific poems for specific illnesses, because everyone is unique, consider that in her memoir, *Black Rainbow*, Rachel Kelly describes

learning and repeating lines from George Herbert's poem, *The Flower,* and the effects this simple act had on her: 'In those moments of the day when I held hands with Herbert, the depression couldn't find me. It felt as though the poet was embracing me from across the centuries, wrapping me in a cocoon of stillness and calm' (Kelly 2014).

But the other interesting thing that has happened with me thanks to poetry is that I have just become more relaxed and nothing, I repeat *nothing*, bothers me anymore! It is as if I have finally discovered the magic mantra for life, and I am grateful for every day, every breath. Stress, worry, headaches, migraines, sleeplessness, all these have just upped and left my side, whereas before they were my constant companions. And this again corroborates with the Pennebaker studies, that health markers improve from expressive writing.

In the UK, there is a lot of focus on expressive writing, as well as reading. There is an organisation called Lapidus which I am a member of; in addition to other things, their mandate includes writing with refugees, the elderly and families, to new ways of engaging with stories and poems. They aim to work with writing and words to inspire, connect and promote communication, physical and emotional health and enjoyment. Their journal debates the ways in which writing contributes to the well-being of individuals, groups and communities. The Reader, which is a charity, takes shared reading to spaces like palliative care homes and other communities to improve well-being, reduce social isolation and build resilience in diverse communities across the UK and beyond. The groups they work with include looked after children, people in recovery from substance misuse, prisoners, individuals living with dementia, parents, teachers, people with mental and physical health conditions and many more.

These organisations are not unique to the UK. Such charities and organisations are spreading up all over the world, and even in universities, there are now Medical Humanities departments looking at the intersection between literature, art and medicine, amongst other things. Universities are also increasingly conducting seminars, workshops and conferences upon the connections between expressive writing and pain, for instance the one I went to in Lancaster University. Glasgow University, earlier this year, had a conference on writing and well-being, with scholars, professionals, service users and writers coming together to talk about these not-so-mystical connections between writing and well-being.

Here are some reasons poetry is good for you!

1. Slow down

In these days of life moving so fast and a smartphone-addicted life, where our attention spans are getting shorter and shorter and we need continuous entertainment, we need to slow down. But when you read a poem, it is as if time slows down; you have to take time to understand a new thought and it forces you to engage with that present moment, without thinking of your to-do list or the latest cat video on Twitter.

2. Forces you to feel

One of the advantages of poetry over prose is that poetry can often convey a whole story in twenty lines! It may bring you the joy of reading a novel but in tiny bursts—travelling, new ideas and maybe a new way of thinking of something, or a new way of imagining something. And most poetry has a strong emotion it is conveying, so it forces you to feel and to exercise your emotional muscles.

3. Deal with difficult emotions

Research shows that poetry helps people who are grieving, recovering from a broken relationship or other difficult times in their lives. Just as Rachel Kelley mentions in her memoir, *Black Rainbow*, the simple act of reading George Herbert's poem *The Flower* helped her move away from the haze of depression, albeit temporarily.

4. Useful in conditions like dementia

We all memorised nursery songs and rhymes and certain poems can transport us right back to our childhood. Poetry is a successful intervention when used as a therapeutic tool for patients with dementia, since memories of our early life often remain and the rhymes may take you back to a space of safety and joy.

5. You are not alone!

I think when you are hurting, you feel 'why is this happening to me' and you feel very alone in your suffering. Reading poetry may help you see that others have walked this road and there is solidarity and connection in that knowledge. That somebody else felt as desperate as us, grieved as much and hurt like we do.

6. Poetry is not just for the dark times

It is such a joy to read a poem that shows us how it feels to be content, or madly in love or just present in the moment. This is one of the reasons that poetry is so popular for wedding readings and maybe on cheesy Hallmark cards!

7. Travel

Even sitting at your desk or in your armchair, a poem can help you travel to a wood, to a distant land, to imagine and see what you may never see physically. Good poetry has striking imagery and it is almost as if you are there. This can be incredibly empowering and fun—my friend, Sujatha Mathai, herself a poet, now has serious health conditions and is unable to get out much. But for her, to be able to read poetry and share with groups of like-minded people on Facebook, she finds a sense of community in this. And this can only be a good thing rather than someone wallowing in their sickness!

Lorde (2007) says, and she is right:

> Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

Some ways you can use expressive writing in a therapeutic sessions are creating workshops for groups with similar experiences. I often lead sessions for a group here in the UK called Writing for Well-being and the group is made up of people society marginalises—mental health service users, addicts, disabled people, people who are

not economically well off. This group uses writing, art and performance and meet once a week to write together, sometimes they perform. They find community in the meeting, and the experience of shared writing is transformative for many of them. In more individual one-on-one sessions, expressive writing can be done with set exercises as well as asking people, in a safe setting, to write about their most traumatic experiences. To have the option for therapy or a holding space while they do this, or after, needs some consideration and thought, and it is important to create these. You can also offer the option to people who do not feel competent with language to draw, to draw their trauma or create art. This will have similar effect.

Poetry, both reading and writing, continues to offer support and therapy to affected people around the world. Of course people also read it just for pleasure. In my own case, poetry helped me realise that this single breath we live in is home, that the body is home, and that while we have that, nothing else can really go wrong.

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