

Giving us all of the feels

In the last issue of *CBT Today* (October 2019) **Patricia Murphy** introduced readers to the benefit that poetry brings to us all. In this issue, she speaks with poetry therapist and writer **Victoria Field**

Patricia Murphy: Can you tell us a bit about the thinking behind setting up a community poetry group?

Victoria Field: The answers to that question are multi-layered – much like a poem! I have always been an advocate for libraries ever since I was a young child. My mum dropped me off in Ashford Library every Saturday while she did the shopping and I would always come home with the maximum number of books. I think libraries are key to a civilised society and offer genuine public space welcoming everyone and can help build society. When I lived in Cornwall, I worked on many projects in the library service and moving to Kent I was surprised there was no provision and so applied for a small grant to set the ball rolling – the group has run on and off now for six years.

More generally, I have worked with poetry therapy and expressive writing in many settings and am interested in the theoretical justification for it. Is it a 'treatment'? A set of techniques like CBT? A form of group psychotherapy? I think there are elements of all these but for this particular community group, I see it as a 'maintenance model' – like exercise – which can help us maintain good psychological, spiritual and social health. The pattern of attendance seems to confirm this.

PM: I am regularly amazed by what we create as a group but also by the ways in which these activities foster a connection with the self at a very profound level. What do you think it is about poetry that appears to speak so directly about and to people?

VF: Yes, one of the great pleasures of this work is seeing and sensing these connections. There are many things happening when we connect with poems - some identifiable, some mysterious.

Writing in groups, trusting the process and having some gentle time pressure enables us to bypass the various personae we adopt and often get to the heart of the matter very quickly.

A poem is typically concise, often with striking metaphors and satisfying artistically so we get a sense of completion and meaning. Here I think poems are analogous to dreams, where an image can offer deep insights. A metaphor can often reveal more than a straightforward description and provides a bridge between our conscious and unconscious thought processes. Even a simple exercise like describing your anger as an animal can tell us a lot about how we see ourselves.

Giving something form, like the container of a poem in fourteen lines or a piece of writing that takes six or ten minutes is also a way of making the



Vicky Field
(Ranald Mackechnie)

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unmanageable manageable. The material of our lives is infinitely rich and can be overwhelming so being able to look at it in bite-sized pieces can help establish a sense of mastery and control.

There's also a sense of community when we read a poem or listen to one where someone has articulated an emotion or experience on our behalf. We realise that we are not alone. An example of this 'isoprinciple' is the way sad poems or music can be comforting when we also feel sad. Knowing that our own trials and tribulations are part of the wider enterprise of being human can help us manage them better.

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PM: One of my favourite things about the group is when we take it in turns to read our own or a selected piece of poetry. I imagine that many of us have probably not had an opportunity to read aloud to others since we were either in school or reading to children. Many of my patients have had aversive school experiences and lack confidence in speaking out in front of others so the opportunity to lay down fresh memories of communal speaking in a safe place can be really healing. What

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do you see as the value of reading aloud as a group?

VF: I think 'unsilencing' and giving voice to the voiceless is an important aspect of healing, both of individuals and society. As you say, many people have lost confidence in their voices.

Reading aloud is a simple and powerful way of regaining that confidence and I am pleased to see that shared reading groups are proliferating. One of my Cornwall Library groups simply consisted of reading aloud novels week-in-week-out and gradually people gained confidence and would read longer passages and start talking about things that mattered in the intervals and many reported reductions in depression and anxiety.

Reading aloud also slows the world right down. It's an immersive process and very mindful in that you have to concentrate not to miss your turn. This can be very helpful for people who may have a tendency to ruminate.

The converse of reading is listening which

is restorative for many people who may not have been listened to in their lives. There are many ways of setting up poetry therapy sessions but increasingly I think simply having words listened to attentively and kindly by others is a powerful experience.

Finally, we are reading carefully chosen words which has an impact on us the reader. A poem has been described as a machine for remembering itself and 'remember' has an interesting etymology – as if we are putting ourselves back together. As these words come through us, I think we are subtly changed. I had a recent profound experience when a friend asked me to read the words of diarist Etty Hillesum at a lecture he gave and it was as if I felt them for the first time. We've prioritised silent reading in our culture but reading aloud means both taking in – like breathe and inspiration – and then expressing and even tasting the words on our tongues. In other words, it's embodied and again modern life has created a

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Giving us all of the feels *continued*

disconnect between our intellects and bodies which reading aloud re-establishes.

PM: You have had extensive experience of working in health and social care settings with many different client groups. What benefits from poetry therapy do patients report and what impact do you think it has on physical and psychological well-being?

VF: I'm going to quote here from the report of a previous iteration of the Wise Words for Wellbeing group. There is a strong social component to these answers which I think is central to poetry therapy – although poetry and writing can be useful in one-to-one psychotherapy, I think the benefits are multiplied in a group setting.

- The group allows an opportunity for members to express their individual spirituality in an environment of acceptance and openness.
- I have enjoyed sharing my work and hearing others' work. It is a kind of intimacy that I don't normally have with my friends. I have been more open in sharing my creative side with my friends since doing the wise words sessions, and it has been rewarding. I could also say that my mental health has improved a lot, as I have a lot more calm and clarity, and actually a lot more self-confidence. I am more aware of, and appreciative, of my own unique voice. Having this writing practise is a great outlet for stress and pent-up emotions.
- Throughout the various workshops I have attended, I've been fortunate to be able to interact with a variety of different people from a variety of different cultural and social backgrounds, across a wide age range. Our enjoyment of writing has enabled me to begin forming new relationships which I may not have made outside of the workshops
- I have a 25 minute walk each way so that's good exercise. I meet up with an old friend who also comes.
- I have unexpectedly gained new friends and felt stimulated to look after my physical health
- Have reconnected with people I've not seen for years and met new people. I have a chronic anxiety problem, this is giving me the confidence to help combat this.
- I did not really expect a writing group to have such an influence on my emotional and social wellbeing, and not at all on my

physical wellbeing, but as these are connected it unavoidably influenced all of them.

- Reawakens a writing habit.

PM: I am greatly admiring of your ability to contain the space inhabited by the group. You have a very light touch and are able to set clear boundaries whilst also being acutely aware of and managing the individual sensitivities of each member. How the devil do you do that?

VF: It feels like a bit of high-wire act at times as with an open group you never know who might be in the room and what experiences and expectations they are bringing. I try to be a facilitator rather than a tutor or therapist in that I want to allow individuals to shape and express their own material and simply witness it, rather than get into processing or analysing what's emerged.

Groups in a hospital or dementia setting which tend to be closed might have a different dynamic but will also entail the balancing of the needs of individuals and the group as a whole. People need to feel both safe and free to take risks and this tension is paramount – both in groups and in daily life. A colleague and I teach an online course called Running Writing Workshops. We've drawn on the experience of other facilitators in a series of interviews as well as our own and related that to the literature on group process – it's fascinating stuff!

On a personal level, I've discovered over the years that I have a bodily sense of people's moods and emotions. A lot of what happens, even in a poetry group where our business is words, is non-verbal. We are giving subtle messages all the time through posture, gesture, eye contact and so on. I've found that to be especially apparent when I've worked one-to-one with someone with dementia and felt how they might open up or close down in response to different poems – hard to explain but once you tune in, it's very clear.

PM: It is fascinating to see the range of responses to the material you share with the group but also how shared themes can emerge. For example, this Spring you brought in a daffodil for everyone and we had to write a poem for it and then write a poem from the daffodil's perspective. How

interesting that it brought to mind for many of us themes of being undervalued and transience. Can you say something about how poetry can create a common bond, decrease a sense of isolation and increase affiliation with our fellow humans?

VF: In our secular society (although some argue that we're now post-secular), questions such as what happens after death, how to find meaning and what values we should live by are all up for grabs and as individuals we can feel isolated as we grapple with these questions. This can be especially apparent at times of loss and change when life is challenging or simply when we have to confront - as all of us will - mortality and aging. Whatever the surface stimulation is – in this case a daffodil – it's likely eventually to bring us back to those important questions about our transient human existence.

In poetry therapy, we often draw on poems and images from the natural world as this provides a background that hints at eternity and puts our own concerns into some kind of perspective. The cycle of the seasons, the way flowers and trees die back and then return to full bloom can be comforting and make us feel part of something larger. Many people who are disenchanted with organised religion may say that for them, nature gives a sense of transcendence and wonder. These responses can be cultivated by close observation – as we did with the daffodil and subsequent reflection. In many ways the practice of poetry therapy relates to the current enthusiasm for mindfulness. Paying attention and staying with the present moment can be transforming.

Time is a perennial theme in people's expressive writing. Such writing is a way of engaging with the question of what we should do with (in Mary Oliver's words) 'this wild and precious life'. Exploring these questions collectively and without any agenda in a kind and supportive group can help counteract the atomistic, disconnected sense nature of modern life.

PM: The poet, novelist and teacher Kate Clanchy recently gave an interview regarding her recent book based on her work in a small comprehensive school where the children speak 30 languages. A

comment was made about the degree of reverence shown toward poetry by the children and she acknowledged that it was part of being a multi-cultural community.

VF: I love Kate Clanchy's work and have heard her speak about 'the very quiet foreign girls' she works with at her Oxford comprehensive.

I think inclusivity and diversity are an issue in many areas of the arts and of course society more generally, whether we are talking about race, gender, sexuality, being differently-abled or class. As KC says in your quotation above, if we can see ourselves reflected in the poems, then we are more likely to engage.

Your question is one that I have grappled with for a long time – both as a practitioner and when I was on the Board of Lapidus and various Arts for Health organisations where it often felt as if we were looking in the mirror, and I've yet to find an answer.

On a more positive note, in the wider world of poetry publishing and performance, there's definitely been an increase in the diversity of those winning prestigious prizes or appearing at festivals. And there are also movements like Survivors' Poetry and The Deaf Poets Society which are user-led and provide platforms outside of the mainstream.

PM: Last year I went to hear Lemn Sissay, Canterbury's Poet Laureate perform his 'A poem for Canterbury' in the Cathedral. It was utterly magical. Sissay's traumatic experiences of being in care led him to become involved in 'Warrior Poets', a collaboration between artists from across Kent and the South East working with young people in care and young refugees to explore and celebrate the resilience that develops through facing adversity at such a young age.

What do you think can be done to change the perception of poetry as not just entertainment but as a powerful agent of change in health care?

VF: I think people have always known that poetry

is important. Many people I've learned are secret poets, possibly only writing at times of heightened emotion such as a bereavement or falling in love and many people carry a poem that's given them hope, inspiration or solace. It's free, requires no special equipment and I think we instinctively know that shaping our thoughts is therapeutic – many teenagers start writing diaries and listening to music that reflects their current feelings.

The above though is part of the problem in that poetry is as varied, diffuse and accessible as music so getting it recognised as a powerful agent of change in healthcare is difficult. The challenge is both to define what's happening and also to demonstrate its efficacy in promoting health. I was an adviser on a systematic review of the literature on therapeutic writing for long-term conditions published in 2016 which, not surprisingly, was inconclusive. For me, poetry therapy and therapeutic writing, especially in groups, is a holistic intervention not susceptible to randomised controlled trials and wellbeing measures like the Warwick Scale. One of the challenges is that benefits are likely to be long-term and cumulative and we may feel 'worse' but paradoxically more authentically ourselves initially (not dissimilar to exercise).

The best way to change perceptions is for people to experience the power of the process directly. It's difficult for busy, senior people to have that opportunity so I am always delighted if I can present a session at a conference or on a training course as even with a short demonstration exercise, I get a sense of the penny dropping as people see how their own written responses can give them powerful insights into an issue.

But to answer your question, there are optimistic signs now that the NHS has embraced social prescribing as one aspect of more personalised care, especially for people with long term conditions and complex needs. Community writing and poetry groups fit well into that model. ■

You can follow Patricia on Twitter @Mspmurphy

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