

2015

Editor's Introduction to the Survive and Thrive Poetry Issue: Not Therapy but Transformation

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Recommended Citation

Veeder, Rex (2015) "Editor's Introduction to the Survive and Thrive Poetry Issue: Not Therapy but Transformation," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol2/iss1/1

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Editor's Introduction to the *Survive and Thrive* Poetry Issue: Not Therapy but Transformation

The pain that we doctors act upon is different from the grief, sin, anguish, fear, hunger, impairment, or discomfort, which our patients and we translate, wrongly, as pain.

-- *Aphorisms From The Bedside Teachings and Writings of Howard M. Spiro, M.D.*

This issue includes the prompts for two workshops and a selection of poems submitted by workshop participants. It also includes poems submitted over the last few months that resonate with the workshop and its atmosphere. Those submissions include two from our Poetry Editor, Steve Katz. I selected his two poems because they are part of an ongoing conversation about our relations with family in regard to caregiving and just simply being present for elders and others. The poets in this issue, whether they were directly part of the workshops or not, have demonstrated the kinds of attitudes and motives for poetry that are transformative in moving our suffering to love. I hope that the spirit of the workshop will continue, through the poems included here, to move readers to become writers and join us. (There are going to be other workshops.)

I've also published two reprints of poems by two of our *Survive and Thrive* poets, Alberto Rios and Jimmy Baca, because they represent so much of what poetry can do for us in regard to Surviving and Thriving. It is up to you of course to see if these poems provide transitions and transformations for you.

The place of poetry in the Humanities and Health is at once obvious and complex. It is obvious because historically poetry has always been a part of healing and of finding a balanced life. It is a part of a community's social fabric. It is complex because when we focus a light on the experience a rich texture emerges. Definitions and distinctions about the role of poetry in living well proliferate, and where we are often taught that Poetry is an elite experience we find it is familial and communal first.

One discovery I made during the workshop was a familial relationship with members of this particular writing community. As in discussion and healing circles, the participants listened and were present for each poem written. In addition, I found the comments about the poems to be generous and helpful at the same time. I concluded the workshop with a poem about how my motives for writing were completely exposed during the workshop. I realize that a writer's motives can change for every writing experience, but it seems there are persistent attitudes and motives that go along on every experience.

Why I write

Because it changes every day
The way the light grows wings
Delight in pondering
The way I pray.
Because my inner voice
Is not alone
And seeking comfort
Whispers to those with the only ears
Willing to listen.
Because lingering in silence
I hear silent callings
And have to speculate about who's there.
In rooms of my making
A blood drum
Compels me to leave, and I do,
Crossing the doorsill whispering words of praise.
Because by shaping words
I make something
As real as a cardboard shack in Nogales
A Hogan in Winslow
Or a cathedral in Paris.
Because my family
Wonders where I am
And demands a postcard's worth of love.
Because my sisters and brothers write
And by writing too
I confirm them
And by reading I listen.
Because in all the clamber of the world
One word stills the terror of discord.
Because I am not alone,
And you are not alone.

Poetry, the lyric especially, has been a necessity for humans because poetry is not necessary. The power of poetry is that reading and writing poems resists commodification. It's possible to make money writing poems, and a few very smart and talented people have done so. But, the urge for poetry is not the urge to make something to trade, although, very quickly, I have to retreat from this perspective because poets like all writers compel or seduce us to believe something, to do something, to see something in a particular way. I'm not sure what is traded in this agreement between poet and reader and poem.

Most people, even those who have been taught to hate poems, are moved by music and the lyrics of songs. I've actually heard excellent songwriters say they hate poetry. They have learned, somewhere, to think of poems as deadpan school exercises.

Students should sense the primal experience of poetry, which is the telling of stories and singing around a fire surrounded by a dark and violent world.

The academic division between poetry and therapy also misses the point. I do not imagine that those early brothers and sisters sitting around the fire thought much about therapy. I do imagine some few of them realized that the way they said things, and eventually wrote them down, made a difference for them and for those who listened or read -- that there was often a transformation. Transformative writing is not necessarily therapy, but it is what reading and writing does for us when we are authentically engaged in them.

When people talk of therapy and Art, I understand they are talking about **controlling** the experience. The idea that poetry and the experience of poetry can be organized and controlled is a powerful one, and one that poets have to ignore if not disavow. If we could just orchestrate the experience in some way, with goals and outcomes in mind, then we have harnessed the power of poetry and can influence those who participate in a workshop or session to respond as we might want them to. This urge to control makes for the worst kind of relationship in poems: propaganda as lovemaking. It doesn't work. The desire to control can be very scientific, and it can have benefits, but when dealing with poetry the first rule of the experience has to be you can't really even want to know what you are going to get or how people are going to respond -- at least exactly. That means that every poem is written or read in the spirit of taking a chance and that being faithful to the experience of the poem is to be willing to follow it into places unknown and unexpected. I suppose this can be therapy. In fact I recommend it as a therapy for life in general. However, the first commitment to the poetic experience is to uncertainty and either subtle or violent transitions.

Transitions and transformations, then, are at the center of the experience, and almost everything else gravitates toward that center. Gregory Orr, in *Poetry as Survival*, describes a twin purpose for poems: they organize the world, and they return the world to chaos. It's clear to me that the interplay of these transformations is part of the power of poetry. Survivors of illness, injury, or trauma exist in the borderlands between these things. Poets and writers with poetic sensibilities follow a love for words into the borderlands between chaos and order. If they are poets as they write, they also think in lines more than in sentences. The music and the drama of lines attract them almost as much as a love for words and language. This love for line and language is all it takes to

be a poet I think. There are many added skills and habits that intensify the experience, but if you write a poem you are a poet. By that I mean that being a Poet with a capital P carries the same curse as being a visual Artist with a capital A.

One of my heroes, Gloria Anzaldúa, suggests in *Borderlands* that there are orientations and motives to Art with a capital A that separate people from art. She describes the investments in visual Art -- in museums and collections with guards and buildings and specially trained curators -- as ways of separating art from people. She prefers as do I art that people keep in their homes and make members of their families.

All this was on my mind when I thought about doing a writing workshop on Facebook.

The invitation to the workshop was intended to stress poetry with a small p:

Announcing The Survive and Thrive Writing Workshop #1 to begin on Monday March 2nd. Sign up for the poetic writing workshop group if you would like to practice and find out more about writing, art, Medical Humanities, and Narrative as Medicine. You can sign up for the workshop by searching for The Survive and Thrive Writing Workshop #1 and asking to join. I will certainly affirm your membership!

We will hold a two week workshop with prompts for writing daily and discussions about the writings as well. (5 days a week for a total of 10 prompts.)

You don't have to be a practicing poet or creative writer to take part. Our main question about what we expect from each other is: "What would you do if it didn't have to be perfect?" The workshop will generate an environment much like the sessions at Survive and Thrive, so you can expect it to be supportive and caring.

In later messages to those who were interested in joining I also wanted to emphasize that one thing we wanted to do was see if we could write a bad poem that people enjoyed. Thus, the people who joined the workshop were diverse in regards to experience and in practice. A number of the writers were indeed what could be considered Poets with the capital P in that they have written poetry for some time, published, and are workshop organizers and leaders. Others had never written a poem, or had tried at one time and found it intimidating.

Among the delightful surprises of the workshop was the fact that everyone took a rigorous approach to writing and rewriting poems in response to the poems and comments of others. I know this is one of the main workshop objectives, but somehow I did not expect it from a workshop in a Facebook group. I guess my own preconceptions about the way Facebook works blinded me until the workshop started.

Some poems were startlingly good all at once. Those poems seemed to generate an attitude other than intimidation by Poetic Genius, which is a hangover from the worship of Poets with a capital P -- people wanted to match those poems in their own ways. Others that were half formed or that lacked the kind of intensity of language we associate with the poetic experience were often powerful as explorations, declarations, and disclosures. All of them found readers who took something from them and made their own transformations through personal and even private associations.

Usually I agree with the dictum that "from compression comes expression," but it is clear to me that a lazy conversational line and style has a power of its own. Of course, I am a fan of Whitman and Sandburg, so I know the power of both formal and informal conversational poems -- the formal are speeches to me while the informal are openings in a dialogue. You can make as many associations to your own reading and writing experience as you like, and my point here is that survivors making poetry and telling stories will often meander about with language and associations that are essential to the telling, sometimes speaking to us and sometimes to themselves. Going back as a poet and cutting is a way to get compression and a way to find delight in the line, but it is not an indispensable part of the poetic experience. That experience is, simply and fully, the sensation and realization of a transformation.

Rx Veeder, Editor

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