Opening the Word Hoard

POETRY FOR MEDICINE AND HEALTHCARE

Schoolboys have a master to teach them, grown-ups have the poets.1

Aristophanes

Look around – there’s only one thing of danger for you here – poetry.2 (interrogated at gunpoint on his deathbed, when his house was raided)

Pablo Neruda

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry.3

Emily Dickinson

‘When Nehru lay dying, he had written out the last verse of Robert Frost’s Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening on a piece of paper by his bed, and kept repeating the lines (‘And miles to go before I sleep…’).4

Neil Astley

Poetry should be part of every modern hospital… It’s a powerful force, which can help us through the darkest times. I would like to see more poets in residence, more poetry books in waiting rooms, more poems on the walls, more training in creative writing for doctors, and more poems printed on primary care leaflets.5

Julia Darling

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DOCTORS’ POEMS, ARISTOTLE’S POETICS

Let not young souls be smothered out before

Opening the word hoard is edited by Gillie Bolton. Items should be sent to her address at the end of her editorial.

They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world’s one crime its babes grow dull….6

Remembering that all healthcare staff are, and are allowed to be, emotional people is critical amid current upheavals in their education and governance. Some of those with whom we work would have been happy in Plato’s Republic. Plato banned most poetry from his ideal republic particularly because it rouses the emotions.7 For Plato, emotions were something to be brought under control by the power of reason. Aristotle, however, argued that allowing room for the emotions was not simply sensible or pleasurable but part of being a virtuous person. “To feel emotions at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel them in the mean and optimum amount and that is the mark of virtue.”8

These poems are by two nurse educators and one newly qualified doctor, who took part in workshops with Ann Kelley. Being part of a poetry workshop can be a shock to the system. Suddenly, you are asked to be an active participant rather than a passive listener and to write something other than a clinical history. In general, in our workshops with healthcare staff and patients, the purpose of the sessions is to produce a poem. We believe (and the participants tell us) that the process takes them out of themselves; it reminds them of a life outside hospital or surgery, and often of aspirations and interests that they had before starting their training. They are not therapy sessions. A trained art therapist might have such a purpose, but not a poet working with embryo poets. However, the workshops can bring serious issues and strong emotions to the surface and often these have to be dealt with as we describe below.

Workshops can raise issues, such as bullying or racism, that have to be followed through. We have successfully dealt with some of these during workshops and subsequently. In one mentoring small group, a discussion arose around a comic poem. The writer revealed that he had started writing about an incident of bullying but had “dried up”. The group supported the doctor affected, suggesting solutions (ultimately, a formal complaint was made). This, and another event, highlighted that “we learn from our tutors, teachers, lecturers; we learn far more from our peers…”9 They showed too that sometimes groups need very little facilitation. The writing itself is facilitated. It brought events into the open. Participants realised that another was voicing their problems; that there was a real sharing of which they had been unaware; above all that there were real talents among their peers for giving a new voice to common and sometimes old problems. It made them realise, as one later said, that they were all “gerbils in the same grinder”.

This revealing of the self would often surprise writer and audience; occasionally writers were too moved to read. Emotions can stay as silent as the word read on the page, but have an awkward habit of welling up with the word spoken. Spoken or not, the poems clearly produced some sort of catharsis. Aristotle would have approved of the process, though his views on catharsis remain obscure, and he only talks of it in relation to tragedy, and with reference to listeners rather than writers. There is just one reference in his Poetics.10 There, he talks of tragedy “producing through the pity and fear caused” (by the acting of the tragedy) “a catharsis of those emotions”. There is another mention of catharsis in the Politics.11 Irritatingly, he says there that he need say no more about catharsis as there will be a fuller discussion in the Poetics. We have lost this, probably with his discussion of comedy, which was the book at the centre of the plot of Umberto Eco’s Name of the Rose.12 It is commonplace now to view medical education and practice as dulling and restricting the emotions.13 We believe that medicine encourages the burying and controlling of emotion, which can lead to its release in excessive and uncontrolled ways. Poems such as these below might have an Aristotelian cathartic effect. In the brief treatment in the Politics, it is clear that Aristotle saw catharsis not as a purging of emotions but rather bringing them within reasonable bounds, a restoration to a state of health.

Our concern is to keep alive the flame that young doctors bring to medicine. Doing so is part of ethical practice.

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2. Look around – there’s only one thing of danger for you here – poetry. DOCTORS’ POEMS, ARISTOTLE’S POETICS.
3. If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. Emily Dickinson.
4. ‘When Nehru lay dying, he had written out the last verse of Robert Frost’s Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening on a piece of paper by his bed, and kept repeating the lines (‘And miles to go before I sleep…’). Neil Astley.
5. Poetry should be part of every modern hospital… It’s a powerful force, which can help us through the darkest times. I would like to see more poets in residence, more poetry books in waiting rooms, more poems on the walls, more training in creative writing for doctors, and more poems printed on primary care leaflets. Julia Darling.
6. They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride. Gillie Bolton.
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8. To feel emotions at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel them in the mean and optimum amount and that is the mark of virtue.” Aristotle.
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12. It is commonplace now to view medical education and practice as dulling and restricting the emotions. Aristotle.
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THE LORDS PRAYER – OUR FATHER
Jacky Griffith
A point of reference, my father.
Strong as a slug of Benedictine on an unsuspecting stomach.
As likely to growl as throw his head back and roar with laughter.

I was the wrong daughter.
“She’s the one” he said, wagging his finger at me.
His brain fumbling for words fogged in by cancer.
His cross face could drain the colour from your extremities at 20 paces.

Cathy chided him gently, ever the peacemaker.
“Come on Dad, don’t fall out with us now.”
I picked up the book of common prayer in stern desperation.
Flicked to the psalm of the day. Beati Immaculati.
He didn’t know what day it was except it was the day he wasn’t allowed to leave hospital.
I read with bogus authority, conscious of ward noises
And the listening ears of a faithless world.

Eyes scanned ahead for words that heralded death.
No ‘souls’ here, not yet.
Old habit forced him to put his hands together.
Voice compellingly neutral, I intoned the psalm and then...
The prayer he had led us in on so many childhood evenings.

AFTERWORD
I had worked in palliative care as a nurse, but my knowledge and experience were profoundly challenged when my own father became ill suddenly. The amount that he understood and could articulate was variable because of his condition. He got words wrong or couldn’t remember the appropriate word- substituting “windows” for “eyes” for example. He was a clergyman, and had kept working until a few weeks before his illness.

Writing the poem a year later forced me to confront many issues, not least of which is that your professional expertise and knowledge do not help much when you are personally affected by illness, by hospitals, by communication difficulties. Illness can make people very intolerant, frantic and fearful, and it is not unusual for the much mythologised “good death” to fail to materialise at all. Some people will just have to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”. Our memories of the last days of our loved ones may sometimes be a boulder in our hearts between fonder memories and happier times. That first year of grieving was about letting go of what I could have or should have done, and, after laying down on paper, clambering over the boulder to set his death in the context of his life, and my part of that— the vicar, teacher, youth club leader, hill walker, mountain climber— I got back to that in the end and this poem was part of that journey.

“...And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

UNTITLED
Jacky Griffith
Other people’s sadness
Is a vast sunless
Stretch of water
Lapping at my feet.
Hard to imagine what
Lies under the troubled
Grey surface and
How deep it is.
I am pierced by unknowing
Familiar only with the
External appearance,
The usual gorse edged reservoir
Of your despair.
 Casting a lifebelt
Out for you,
There you are suddenly,
Snorkelling in the middle
Not drowning but waving?

Our own melancholy
Is almost finite
With edges well tramelled
And travelled,
Just the depths left to plumb,
A lifetime of
Crossing the surface,
Walking on water
In leaking wellytoms,
Without looking down.
(Don’t look down!)
Go on - throw in a coin,
Still waters and all that,
I’ll shine my torch out
Over the waves
And look for the Lochness monster.

AFTERWORD
In one of my past nursing lives, I was a psychiatric nurse. I was familiar with depression in its many manifestations. I was often struck, when people become ‘patients’, how willing we are to separate them from their earlier personalities. The depression becomes who they are and they become the depression. I wrote the poem almost without thinking. I was trying to understand that the nature of melancholy and misery is highly individual, and can take people to a place where all we can do as observers is wave from a distance. I kept waving. While this friend’s behaviour was alien to me and alienated him from many people, I held on to the fact that he would come back to himself. I waited. He did.

THE BLADE
Ian Ringer
The taut wire of my soul receives the blade
Where the cutting goes deep. Red pain mists my eyes.

Snapping filaments brought taut by abuse
Echo past tensions of the family’s fifth.

Bitter revenge within should attack
But shame screams “…its me, the fault is mine
He’s perfect isn’t he?”

The slashing blade parts skin glissening blood
Reds the room and my heart screaming out
Subdues anger.

Flushed with afterglow I walk away
Seeking solace in everyday experience

And failing

AFTERWORD
I wrote this after working with a client, in psychotherapy, who relieved her frustration by so-called “self-abuse” in the form of cutting. I have always found cutting difficult to understand. In trying to appreciate the apprehension she felt and the need to relieve this by cutting, I wrote the poem, in the first person, imagining myself in her place. In discussing the abuse and her motivation to cut and using the poem as a medium, I came to a much better understanding of it as a coping mechanism. Although the poem...
has a negative end, it moved both of us
and we changed together.

A LETTER FOR MY MUM
Bashir Alaour

My words, my ink and my papers
all let me down when I decided to
write to you
after such a long time
I just wanted to tell you

My Mum: when I said goodbye to
you that morning
I did not realise that your kiss would
be the last
and when I phoned you the day after
I did not expect to hear someone
else’s voice
the time stopped for a while
and I found myself travelling to you

And there in the hospital I found a
different bed
to what I used to see every day, a
part of my soul was lying on it
It was you Mum

I kissed your hand but it did not
move to hold me closer,
your look was cold, not the one I
know which was the warmth for me

My tears tried to warm up your face,
my blood tried to feed your heart to
live a bit more
the medicine which I studied could
not do anything
and nothing remained for me but
my tears and my praying

so I prayed six days only for the
woman
who prayed for me for the whole life
And now this is my world without you
The happiness is sad without your
smile
The light is dark without your shining
face
the hope is hopeless without your
praying,
and the rain is thirsty missing your
flowers

Miss you Mum

light, love and peace.

AFTERWORD
The poetry day that we had in the
postgraduate centre was not one of those
teaching sessions in which we used to
listen to seniors’ and colleagues’ lectures
talks. It was the time for us to talk on
topics that were not the same pre-
pared topics we were used to; no
electrical tools to present clinical stories;
the stethoscopes were left aside. A non-
medical book was opened, echo of a warm
poetic voice was travelling between the
corners of the small hall, blank sheets of
papers were spread, the pens were ready
to create some words, hearts were opened
and the words started to invade the
whiteness of the papers, not to write
down clinical words and symbols but to
tell stories and memories......and I found
myself writing my story.

It was exactly five years since my
mother left this world...and I decided to
write her a small letter.

It was my turn to read my words but
the words took control and started to
read me. Time passed very quickly. At
the end of the session, my stethoscope
was calling me to put it on my
shoulders, as many patients on the
surgical wards were awaiting me to tell
me their stories. My pen was no longer
authorised to write what I felt instead of
what my patients feel...suddenly I was
back to medicine...the echo of the poetry
was still in my ears...and thinking back
to my mum I asked myself again:
‘Can medicine really cure everything?’
And the answer was no - medicine is
nothing but a philosophy about which I
could learn few lessons only.

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