Fresh Thoughts on Finding a Healing Voice and Poetic Language within Yourself

by John Fox, CPT

The courage to spill words on the page is essential to developing trust in your creative voice. Trust can be nurtured through providing a safe environment and offering genuine curiosity. The tendency to critique ourselves and evaluate others before we even begin holds us back from discovering the voice that is great within us.

Contrary to the popular example of TV shows like Survivor, The Bachelor, and Fear Factor, the verbal food fights of social and political pundits—it’s possible for human beings to be with one another in a way that does not rely on some producer’s idea of what constitutes the “survival of the fittest.” We do not have to live by calculation, judgment and competition.

Poetry is a form of communication that challenges us because it asks us to listen to one another. This may account for why it is less popular than those TV shows! Poetry may take patience on the part of both listener and writer. But the nature of poetry (and the result of patience) is to allow the richness and variety of human experience to emerge.

Wildflowers emerge under all kinds of conditions and in every place where seeds take root: in an open field in the Berkshires, through the concrete of a city block in Sao Paulo or even sometimes, through glacier ice in the Himalayas.

Likewise, your words can “grow” from a place of

What language can’t reach is so much.
The hook dangles from the shine, while the sh swim by.
The sea urchins are un-interested, the kelp waves, a whole world expands.
The hook nds a few slender words, pulls them to light. Maybe I can cook them.

UNDERNEATH

Barbara McEnerney
depth much more meaningful and more sacred than the mental agribusiness of a media saturated culture generally acknowledges.

This is at the heart of my work that I call Poetic Medicine.

But it’s necessary to explore this possibility for yourself to discover if what I am saying is true.

When I use the word “sacred” I am not suggesting that we can only write about things that keep us comfortable, God or present poems approved by the church!

What I mean is words—the words that flow to you, through you, that are in you—words that celebrate, that rage, that cry out, that touch what’s true and speak that truth, these words can grow out of life’s real grit and a place of mystery and grace.

**These Days**

Whatever you have to say, leave the roots on, let them dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear where they come from

— Charles Olson

Even within the community of spiritually aware and socially conscious people, there is a tendency to rely on others to say what we also think.

A star culture predominates in that world too. We let others do the talking. These fine teachers can indeed be inspiring. It is surely healthier than popular culture but I am not sure it is helping us to realize how each of us matters.

In a very real sense no one else can speak for you. What I have found in twenty years of working with poetry as healer is that each of us has something to say, something that no one else could possibly say. There is nothing to compare to the satisfaction of speaking your own truth.

Poetry as healer is also about writing and saying what matters to you in a way that feels right. It is your sense of what “feels right” that keeps you in touch with the place where art and healing meet. What poetry allows you to do is give shape to your unique voice, to begin to distinguish and distill within what feels truest to your unique experience.

Again and again in workshops across the country I experience how people who have not written poetry are able to write from an astonishing depth when a safe space is created.

Providing safety does not mean the absence of allowing risk but for me it means the letting go of judgement about your writing. It also means to protect the integrity of the workshop space so that each person is able to follow his or her own process.

Often, poem-making starts because some pain or hunger in our lives compels us to say something—anything. We may have stuffed our voice long enough. I believe that our writing may turn itself on (often at 2 a.m.) like an immune system activates when toxins attempt to overtake our body.

Poem-making may also be a conscious choice to live with greater soul, honesty and meaning, a choice rising up from within your core, insisting you pay attention. When Ruth Stone writes:

Dear children, you must try to say something when you are in need. Don’t confuse hunger with greed; and don’t wait until you are dead.

she is calling our attention to the value and necessity of saying what we need, of naming what matters to us. Poem-making distills those things. The poem gets us to the point.

This way of finding language through poem-making is very different than the manner words are selected and organized by the discursive/rational mind.

There is a discovery in this process that reveals “words” as quite different than what you were led to believe taking your fourth grade spelling test!

I like to ask people, when you took your spelling test, did your teacher also ask you. “What words on your list do you just like the sound of?” Not too many people reply affirmatively to that question, yet it is the sound of words we often had such fun with as children.

This process of writing and using words in a healing way may also include creating a greater awareness of your

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A song of the rolling earth, and of words according
Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines?
those curves, angles and dots?
No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in
the ground and sea,
They are in the air, they are in you.

— Walt Whitman

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips
among them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into
reality,
That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the
frost
And cried out to feel it again. . .

— Wallace Stevens

John Fox on Poetry as Healer

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“What poetry allows you to do is give shape to your unique voice, to begin to distinguish and distill within what feels truest to your unique experience.”

“Poetry as healer is not just thinking words onto a page but exploring the actual place where Spirit, aliveness, Eros, living connection, feeling and awareness are discovered within yourself.”

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