

# ☯ Take Two Poems & Call Me In the Morning ☯

## *Poetry In & As Therapy* by Lori Opal, MFT

Poems are, for me, the deepest of soul medicine. When I look back on my life, there is a trail of poems and a specific time that each precious gift came into my life. There is also a way poems tend to circle back around just when they are most needed again. For life seems to spiral in rising circles with the life lessons and the divine medicine coming 'round and 'round in perfect timing.

Sometimes a poem can be heard without being fully received. Looking back, often a poem would come but I could not yet understand the depth of its meaning. It seems that some poems slowly grow into us. Some poems we choose for ourselves, and in other moments, the poem chooses us like the fit of a key into a lock.

My journey with poetry began in earnest when my world was shattered by the death of a friend. Nothing could have prepared me for seeing the truth of impermanence. I desperately needed something that could comfort me. A dear friend gave me my first copy of Gibran's *The Prophet*. The prose passages offered solace and helped me climb out of the pit of existential angst that I was lost within. The lines that most matched my experience were: "When you are sorrowful look again in your heart and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight."

I remember the act of rote memorization of poetry in high school. The potential of poetry's alchemical transformation first became apparent to me while in graduate school.

One of my teachers recited Mary Oliver's *The Journey* from heart. I had heard the poem before, but somehow in

her deep embodiment of it, the poem became radiant and underscored the importance of us each undergoing our humble journey into our core, unearthing our most authentic and whole self.

### *The Journey*

*One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice~  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones,  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do~  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.*

~ Mary Oliver

There are many mystical traditions in which the poems are written as an offering of love and adoration to God. A poem coming from a state of Grace offers each reader a portal into that unity consciousness or state of Oneness.



For me, this poem best illuminates the potential therapeutic remedy offered by mystical poetry:

*A poet is someone  
Who can pour Light into a spoon,  
Then raise it  
To nourish  
Your beautiful parched, holy mouth.*

~ Hafiz

These words reveal the depth of divine healing that is possible when a poem gives itself to us. It can wiggle in past our linear mind and get straight to the heart and soul of the matter.

Some poems provide a direct transmission of truth; here you are invited to experience Hafiz joining us, now, in this present moment:

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# ∞ Poetry In and As Therapy ∞

*Troubled?  
Then stay with me, for I'm not.*

*Lonely?  
A thousand naked amorous ones  
dwell in ancient caves  
Beneath my eyelids.*

*Riches?  
Here's a pick,  
My whole body is an emerald that  
begs,  
"Take me."*

*Write all that worries you on a piece  
or parchment;  
Offer it to God.  
Even from the distance of a  
millennium*

*I can lean the flame in my heart  
Into your life*

*And turn  
All that frightens you  
Into holy  
Incense  
Ash.*

See what I mean?

Recently a book literally jumped off the shelf for me, *saved by a poem*, by Kim Rosen, which spoke so directly to my own poetic experiences:

Regardless of the gender of the spell-maker, a good poem, like the shaman's drum, rattle, and song, changes consciousness. When you enter the world of a poem, whether through reading it, hearing it, or speaking it aloud, you make yourself available to its spell.

In the sense that it alters consciousness, it is a spell. But in another sense, it is quite the opposite of a spell. A

poem alters consciousness back to its natural state, prior to patterning. Instead of a spell, it is a spell-breaker." (pg. 83)

Life inevitably brings each of us to our knees, humbling us and removing the illusion of control. Sometimes the correct poem can feel like the first breath of air after being underwater for far too long.

I have four levels of relationship with poems 1) ones that have become part of me, intimate friends that I know by heart; 2) ones which are very familiar, so I can paraphrase them if needed; 3) those that I know well and can locate very quickly; 4) those that I have the felt sense of but may take me awhile to find.

When using poems with clients or supervisees, I try to wait until the poem has knocked 3 times from inside me. For a poem, like any other intervention, timing and resonance are key factors in how it will be received. If done well, it can be potent medicine that takes us both into the vastness. If ill-timed or not in resonance it can fall flat . . . or even be experienced as an empathic failure, a *clang*.

The right poem at the right time can be the antidote to whatever suffering we have been speaking of, or feeling into. The questions I keep in mind before offering a poem are:

- How established is our relationship, how much safety is present?
- Has this person responded well to poetry in the past?
- How loudly is the poem knocking inside me?
- Am I speaking the poem for my client, myself or ourselves?
- Can I offer the poem without attachment to how it is received?

Another powerful way to engage with poetry is to write it. For me it often feels like a poem happens to me, or comes through me. It is as if it already existed somewhere fully formed and I am channeling it, or giving birth to it.

I encourage you to have fun experimenting to see how the poetry of life wants to move through you, and in your practice. ∞

## Resources

Fox, John. (1997). *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*.

Rosen, Kim. (2009). *saved by a poem: The Transformative Power Of Words*.

Recommended Mystical Poets: Blake, Gibran, Hafiz, Kabir, Lalla, O'Donohue, Oliver, Rilke, Rumi, Welwood & Whyte.

*Our hearts are made to be broken  
So everything can fit  
There is so much room.*

~Lori Opal

**Lori E. Opal, MFT**, considers poetry to be a potent therapeutic tool; she enjoys sharing poetry when inspired with clients, supervisees and those that consult with her. She has offices in San Francisco and Emeryville. Lori can be reached at **415-503-0522** or visit her at **www.loriopal.com**.

In her San Francisco office, Lori currently supervises two skilled private practice interns and can whole-heartedly recommend them to anyone interested in experiencing somatic psychotherapy. They are: Hilary Hedden at (415) 364-3088 or [www.hilaryhedden.com](http://www.hilaryhedden.com) and Melinda Frenkel at (415) 364-3066 or [www.melindafrenkel.com](http://www.melindafrenkel.com).