

## Why Poetry Matters

In 2005 my youngest grandson died, and my world fell apart. Sam was seven- years old, and although he had a terminal illness, his death happened without warning, a day he'd gone to school, a good day. He had been like my own child. Because his older brother was often in the hospital, I babysat, sometimes five weeks at a time. His death knocked me off my feet. Grief overwhelmed.

I've always been an avid reader and for some reason during this time, *The Life of Language* by Bill Moyers came into my hands. It dealt with the Dodge poetry festival in New Jersey. I knew nothing about that, or about the poets. I didn't even like poetry. It made me tense because I understood so little of it—all the poems I'd ever come in contact with were in a one-semester literature class in college. "Beowulf," "In a Country Churchyard," etc. They had no relevance to my life.

But now, with Moyer's book, I went upstairs to the room I had set up as my own space, the space where I meditated, got away. Sitting in the wicker chair, my feet on the ottoman, I began this book. Jane Kenyon, Garrett Hongo, Joy Harjo... names I was not familiar with but poets who spoke to a damaged spirit. I finished reading, knowing that something had taken place—some kind of healing. I felt a shift inside.

I began looking for the poets I liked in Moyer's book. That led to other poets, many of whom I could not yet fully understand. I'd had no practice in poetry. I tumbled and cried, but my daughter, a writer and published author encouraged me.

She sent Linda Pastan's *Carnival*, knew what I needed to keep me going. In a visit to Wisconsin from Delaware, she said she wanted to write with me, a ruse I now see.

"Let's see what you can do here. We're going to take Pastan's poem, "The Almanac of Last Things" and we'll write using her poem as our example. Write our own versions. "

"I really can't," I replied.

After a couple of stanzas, I was tired of this exercise, but saw it was possible to write by leaning on assessable poets, with a task-master like Maribeth.

Months later, another friend took me to a poetry workshop. I had no experience, and walked into a room with established writers all sitting around a long oval table, chatting. I panicked.

Wisconsin's first Poet Laureate, Ellen Kort, was the facilitator. I wrote to her prompts—in prose. She was a warm personality, compassionate and found things in my prose to praise. She also understood where I was coming from with Sam's death having experienced her son's death a few years earlier.

With some misgiving, I joined a poetry class. The room was windowless, filled with the long oval table. Bulletin boards. The class had started years ago and filled with regulars. I think I was the only new person that night. We went around the room introducing ourselves. I said, " This is my first poetry class, and I'm terrified." The woman next to me patted my hand, and then someone said, " That was exactly the way I felt the first time. It'll go away after a while." The rest of the class smiled and nodded in agreement.

When it was my turn, I read my first poem, “ For Sam,” written for this class. I thought I might cry before I finished reading. Shaky with fear, I heard the familiar rise of pitch I knew as emotional prelude to what I didn’t want. Taking a deep breath, I began the next line, my voice revived.

Silence followed. My heart was pounding. I kept my eyes on the poem in front of me, not daring to look up, unaware that prolonged silence didn’t mean failure.

Finally, the moderator said, “I think you know more about poetry than you let on. This is an outstanding poem filled with meaningful imagery. Each stanza though different, builds on what came before, carries the poem to conclusion. Only the title could be better—We leave no one unscathed in this class. “

The other class members laughed. I don’t remember now what the original title was of the poem, or even if I laughed with them, but the class had a hand in changing the title.

In 2007, my second grandson died of the same illness. He was fifteen. Zachary died on Thanksgiving Day. The season of Christmas was in full bloom, music, decorations, all the poinsettias. It seemed a mockery. My grandson was dead.

By now I’d been writing for two years, and though I tried to write through this new grief, I couldn’t. Two months later, late February, and I still was not writing. In Florida, the air soft, birds singing, the sun brilliant, I noted the beauty, but had no incentive to go outside. And one day, a book of poetry, *Duties of the Spirit* by Patricia Farnogli, accomplished what Bill Moyer’s book had done originally.

It touched me.

Something flickered, something was alive.

And why? Because I'd come to poetry in need, and poetry responded. It understood an aching heart. It wasn't pushed down my throat by a curriculum. Poetry showed me that spirit matters. And it is not too strong a statement to say, I rejoiced. I wrote to the poet, I went outside and took a long walk. I saw everything in an expansive manner as if for the first time. The egrets were never so white, and when did the mangroves' leaves become that bright green in their dark green forest? Other walkers smiled. I smiled and said "Hello." I felt again the muscles in my legs, how strong they were, and my jaw let go of the tension it had been holding.

In 2008, two weeks after the publication of my first book, *Joy in the Morning*, I was diagnosed with throat cancer. I continued writing through the first treatments of radiation. Poetry helped me hang on. I couldn't concentrate long enough to read, but I could journal, write a few poems. And then suddenly, unexpectedly, the radiation pushed me over the edge. My body shut down—I could not breathe on my own, was intubated with a ventilator, my heart plunged into stage IV heart failure, my kidneys called for dialysis, etc. I was in The ICU for nine weeks, not expected to live.

I remember none of this.

I had no idea how sick I was, and just felt frustrated with what I considered bother—therapies of all kinds, learning to walk with a walker, people helping me remember—I couldn't write my name, did not know my children's names.

I came home to further recover. The therapies continued. One day I could walk unaided, the tubes were removed, the picc lines. But writing a sentence was not possible. Every time I tried, I fell into despair.

I'd sit by the kitchen window, mindless, my yellow legal tablet blank. I got lost in whatever was going on outside. When I tried to write it down, there were no words I could pull up from memory. It was too much effort. Sleeping was easier.

Here enters my daughter again, and another good friend, who helped me patiently lovingly, accepting whatever I could do. I tried to write from Lucille Clifton's *Good Times*, and a children's author I no longer remember. I was unhappy with the result, but both of my "mentors" were persistent.

"You can't quit now," they both said in their different ways.

Finally somewhere around 2010, I wrote a poem that I liked.

So does poetry matter? Poetry saved my life. Poetry continues to save my life. When I lost everything, poetry waited and was there.

It glistens on a just-bloomed daffodil, is carried by two baby squirrels playing hide and seek in the oaks. It lingers on bare trees, on budding trees, finds me on a walk when my mind is completely empty. It's in the soil, in the sky, and leaps from the pond like the carp mating. Poetry steals in like a cat. Suddenly it's there.