

The Healing Power of Poetry

An interview with Mary Jo Balistreri

by Neil Leadbeater

Wisconsin poet and former musician, Mary Jo Balistreri, speaks candidly about how she came to poetry through desperate need at a time when her life and that of her family endured unimaginable tragedy. Balistreri spent her life in music as a classical concert pianist and harpsichordist. It wasn't until the death of two of her grandsons from mitochondrial disease, followed by her own cancer diagnosis and loss of hearing, that Balistreri found strength and consolation from some patient friends and the power of words. This was the moment when she turned, in her grief, to another art – that of writing poetry. Her stoicism and bravery is a testament to the healing power of poetry.

Mary Jo, tell us something about your background and how you first became inspired to write poetry.

I was raised on music. We lived upstairs in my grandparent's home and they were both concert performers, she with the piano and he with the violin. They played duets most nights after dinner. Our family, cousins, aunts and uncles, drifted in during the evening to listen although there was quiet conversation too. My grandmother also taught piano and was the director of the choir. My father sang all the time in our upstairs apartment. He was a lyric tenor and at one time had a radio show. My mother was the rhythm section with her career as a teacher and performer of tap dancing.

I began performing at age three. Music was my life until I became a grandmother myself. By now I had switched instruments and played harpsichord professionally. Performing tapered off almost completely in my grandmother role to four wonderful children. The two boys had Mitochondrial Disease and the little one, though leading a fairly normal life, died unexpectedly when he was seven. We had lived with the knowledge of a shortened life, but Sam kept defying the odds.

Music, for the first time, was not enough to rise above Sam's death. A friend thought writing might help bring me out of depression. She brought me with her to a poetry workshop. I was not a writer, certainly not a poet. The instructor had lost her son and my friend thought perhaps her experience of survival through writing might be able to reach me. The miracle is it did. I did not ever want poetry. I didn't understand it, so feared it. I came to poetry through desperate need. **I came to poetry through loss.**

Music was an interpretive art for me. I needed something to rein in my emotions by creating. Poetry was that container.

What do you see as the role of a poet and what does poetry mean to you?

I think the role of the poet is to tell the truth however slant. The poet does this by being attentive to the world, by loving the world with all its imperfections. To look at it straight on and yet be able to say, **but**...so not a Pollyanna version but to try and see the whole picture. Poetry is about discovery for me—of ourselves, of our place in the world. It is a means of dialogue a means of listening carefully. A means of creating beauty and also a means of praise for what we have. For me personally, it is life. I truly don't believe I would have survived emotionally without it. It gave me a way to express my heart. It showed me how to stand strong and be a witness to one little boy who lived a big life. To do what he had done all along—live joyfully, live with wonder. Continual grieving would have dismissed all that. Sam's legacy would have been lost.

When you write your poems, where do your ideas come from?

Many of my ideas for poems come from walking each day. My mind, unfocused, tags along with my feet which in turn alerts my senses, which in turn might jog a phrase or an image loose from my morning reading, or it might be the sun shining a certain way on a tree that I hadn't noticed before. I also get many ideas from reading. I journal in the morning and read some Rilke or Rumi—usually a few poems from some other poet and then walk. I read at night also.

Describe for us your writing process.

I write at the kitchen table and look out at a small lake and woods. I invite the new day in and often start by listing, without comment, thirteen things. A phrase or an image might present itself. Sometimes a prompt that is sent to me on email triggers a thought. I write whatever comes to mind, and then with a drafting pencil and a yellow legal tablet I'll write words. Ideas come from that and when I get a few lines, I re-write them without all the cross outs. I do many re-writes. When I feel the poem is close to being finished, I rush into the computer to see how it looks on the screen.

When the poem is as close to finished as I can make it, I let it sit and don't look at it for weeks. When I was performing on the piano, I did the same thing but left the piece of music for my ideal six weeks. It was/and is with poetry, amazing at what I did not see the first time.

What are the main influences on your poetry and how do they manifest themselves in your work?

I think music, art, nature, and reading have a great influence on my poetry; relationships, family, loss, and renewal as well. Ekphrastic poems often show up, and color is abundant in my work. I wasn't even aware of that, so it must be second nature. I write from experience, in response to reading other poets.

Do you have a favorite genre of Poetry? If so, why does it appeal to you?

I don't believe I do have a favorite genre of poetry. When I began, it was free verse and I do enjoy the beautiful images and language of lyric poetry. A good narrative poem is also

appealing. I like prose poems, and I admire the skill of formal poetry. I've been writing haiku and senryu lately and the juxtaposition of images, and concision is appealing as is haibun which combines prose and poetry, (a haiku).

Do you have a favorite place in which to write?

As mentioned above, the kitchen table has always been a favorite in Wisconsin, but when I'm in Florida, I enjoy writing at an open-air table by the sea. It might be my very favorite place with the sound of waves, birds, the scent of salt air and brine. Watching children play and people in a kayak or sailboat going by. It arouses all my senses and there's nothing better than daydreaming, reading and writing there.

What collections have you published to date and what are you presently working on?

Bellowing Ark Press published *Joy in the Morning* and *Gathering the Harvest*. (2008-2012), Future Cycle Press published *Still*, (2019) and Tiger's Eye Press published *Best Brothers*, a chapbook, (2011), which was re-printed in 2014. Tiger's Eye Press also published a mini chapbook of haiku, *Along the Way* (2017). At present, I'm working on a book of haibun and several personal essays.

How are you coping with Lockdown?

As social distancing continues, I find myself moving in ways I haven't encountered before. I'm an Introvert and have never had a problem with solitude, but this feels more like aimlessness. It's a feeling of walking under water, everything in slow motion. The less I do, the less I want to do. I'm having trouble making decisions. Some of this is perhaps depression which is anger turned inward so that's my next question to myself. What am I angry about? That would take pages in this political climate. There is a feeling of helplessness underneath the anger which is perhaps fueling it. I walk each day, write in my journal, but there is no relief from myself. I've fallen in a well, have retreated to a cave. Even when I venture out as I will today, the thought of it is more a chore than something to look forward to. It points to how much I need other people and realizing this Introvert has always moved within a group of people. Writing alone at a café or at the beach, there is the undercurrent of conversation, and occasionally someone stopping at my table. When I'd return home, having been in a social setting, I was content.

I have tried Zoom as a way of connecting with other poets live, but it has lost its fascination.

What lessons have you learned from writing poetry? Do you have any pieces of advice to pass on to other aspiring poets?

Read extensively and don't limit yourself. Keeping a journal is helpful to me. There are days I don't write in a formal sense, and I used to worry about that. Now I know there is no such thing as writer's block. To quote Ecclesiastes, *There is a time to sow and a time to reap*. Just as a field must lie fallow to restore its fertility, so must most writers give themselves time to gather

thoughts, let them marinate. One thing that has been helpful to me is to take a first line from a poem I like, close the book and write to that line for 15 minutes. Just write. It sometimes helps jog me out of inertia.

Neil Leadbeater is an author, essayist, poet and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His short stories, articles and poems have been published widely in anthologies and journals both at home and abroad. His publications include *Librettos for the Black Madonna* (White Adder Press, 2011); *The Worcester Fragments* (Original Plus, 2013); *The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives* (Poetry Space, 2014), *Finding the River Horse* (Littoral Press, 2017), *Punching Cork Stoppers* (Original Plus, 2018) and *Penn Fields* (Littoral Press, 2019). His work has been translated into several languages.