



A LOOK AT POETRY THERAPY

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Our journey is often filled with unique experiences and surprises before we reach our destination.

Old Chinese saying

The letter inviting me to represent the field of poetry therapy by submitting an article for a “Special Issue on the State of the Arts” was broad enough to intrigue me and challenging enough to help me decide on a positive reply. And as I began to formulate ideas, discuss points of view with many individuals¹ and gather notes, it soon became evident that I had undertaken a gigantic task that no special guidelines could possibly describe or direct. And the more I read and researched, one thing soon became clear. To do justice to the spirit of this assignment, I could best carry out my charge by calling upon my own experiences with literature, poetry and poetry as therapy and appropriately weave them into the context of specific issues, questions, trends and other matters pertaining to the field of poetry therapy. Indeed, it is a humbling experience. I will deal primarily with poetry therapy on the American scene. I believe I can best serve the spirit and intent of this special issue by doing so. Although developments in other parts of the world regarding poetry therapy are important to the growth of the field, the basic organizational structure and forward movement of poetry therapy began in the United States and is continuing primarily under the sponsor-

ship of the National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT).

It is interesting to note that the mention of the term *poetry therapy* often evokes a reaction of optimistic expectation and seductive enticement that one is hearing about a field that can now handle the rational (Apollonian), the emotional (Dionysian) and deal with creative aspects of one’s psyche. It is true that there are as many reasons why people write poetry as there are people writing (Rilke, 1954). Also, there are many ways of evaluating what makes appropriate and effective therapy as there are ways of judging what constitutes a good poem (Jaskoski, 1987). Individuals coming into poetry therapy for the first time often are confused about the fact that a poetry therapy workshop is not a poetry workshop. In poetry therapy the accent is on the person. In a poetry workshop the accent is on the poem. “Poetic process differs significantly from therapeutic process in that the poetic transaction does not involve the roles of helper and person-to-be-helped” (Rothenberg, 1973, p. 96). And in the course of my experience in poetry therapy this point is one of the most difficult for the newcomer to understand and appreciate. The idea that two fields are combined to form a discipline of a special kind often arouses feelings of territorial rights. Both poetry and therapy have their own history and their own adherents, each with their special ways of looking at and understanding their areas. There is much understandable confusion and resistance here.

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The thing that stands out in my mind about poetry and therapy is the feeling of how close these areas are at times and yet in many ways far apart (Rothenberg, 1979). It is easy to fall into the belief that poetry and healing are so closely related that one who writes poetry can also conduct individual and group therapy sessions on a professional basis without training because of the power of the word. Again and again, as I have experienced this attitude, I have gone back to basics in each of the above fields to remind myself that I am dealing with two different areas even though at times they appear to be touching (Harrower, 1972; Jerome, 1984). Both poetry and therapy are formal disciplines that enable us to engage in the journey of defining ourselves as human beings.

The Term Poetry Therapy

One must keep in mind that the term *poetry therapy* has largely come into usage in the last half of the twentieth century, from the 1950s on to the present. Although poets have written about love, hate, greed, sex, good and evil from earliest times, the phenomenon of combining poetry with formal therapy as part of a certificated or licensed professional group is of recent vintage. True, the early bards, troubadours, priests, shamans and medicine men often had powerful healing effects upon individuals, but they did not have to pass state and national licensing boards, take out malpractice insurance, be connected with a hospital or an HMO, attend formally-approved courses for continuing education and go through the birth pangs of opening an office and paying for office space. This is not to say that those who practiced before medical schools and psychology departments were formally organized did not have their own apprenticeships or body of knowledge, their own inner circles and their own hierarchical structures. But today much of the practice of therapy is enmeshed in and closely determined by economic, professional and legal considerations.

I use the term poetry therapy in this discussion with the knowledge that it is part of bibliotherapy, the application of all literary genres to the therapeutic situation (Lerner & Mahlendorf, 1992). In this regard

Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1986) reminded us of the wider meaning of the term *literature* within the bibliotherapy context where all literary genres may be included along with sound and visual images. They also differentiated between clinical and developmental uses of bibliotherapy. This is a vital differentiation² in terms of the populations being served by the therapist. One of their most telling points is their emphasizing that "poetry therapy and interactive bibliotherapy are synonymous in most critical respects. Both emphasize the importance of the interaction between the triad of participant-literature-facilitator as well as the use of creative writing as material (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986, p. 12).

Perhaps some day poetry therapy will have its own clearly defined and tested body of knowledge that will enlarge its range of theory and practice. At present, however, it is important to state that any school of therapy can find a place for it in its armamentarium.

Some Historical Considerations

A definitive statement must be made here. First, as of this time there is no official or clear-cut history of the field of poetry therapy. Second, there are many individuals who helped build the field and should be acknowledged, but because of time and space, only limited justice can be done here. In no way does the omission of names and other events deny their validity and importance.

Many of us were working in our own venues using poetry and literature in counseling and therapy and were unaware of each other. For example, Joy Shie-man and I were working on the west coast for years without knowledge of each other. We were acquainted with Smiley Blanton's (1960) *The Healing Power of Poetry*, Prescott's (1922) *The Poetic Mind*, Schaufler's (1925) *The Poetry Cure*, and, of course, Freud (1959), Jung (1966a,b), Adler (1965) along with the bibliotherapy contribution of Shrodes (1949) and Rubin (1978a,b), and dynamic psychology. But there was as yet no specific non-profit organization on a national level with emphasis on poetry therapy.

Blanton was a psychiatrist on the American scene whose book contained poems for healing purposes.

²This differentiation is also recognized by the National Association of Poetry Therapy in its designations of Certified Poetry Therapist and Registered Poetry Therapist. Another note of interest brought to my attention by Stephen J. Rojcewicz, Jr., M.D. is that the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Health Care Organizations now gives recognition to "Poetry Therapy" and "Poetry Therapists" in their dictionary, *Lexicon: Dictionary of Health Care Terms, Organizations, and Acronyms for the Era of Reform*. (O'Leary, 1994).

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