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POETRY THERAPY PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR RAISING AWARENESS OF RACISM

SUSAN (SHANEE) STEPAKOFF, MA, CPT*

In order to be optimally effective, anti-racism trainers must tap the emotional domain, stimulate new ways of thinking and perceiving, and bypass resistances to awareness and action. Poetry is particularly well-suited for these tasks. In contrast to purely cognitive methods such as lectures and didactic texts, a poem initiates a deeply-felt experience, evokes passion and sympathy, and activates the senses and imagination. Further, a poem expresses a human experience in a highly concentrated manner, thereby fostering recognition of hidden or unspoken truths. Poems expand our perception, deepen our awareness, and strengthen our capacity for critical thinking. Poems help us to recover buried memories and to recognize, name and reintegrate submerged aspects of our lives. By verbally embodying our experience, poems enable us to think about our lives in more conscious, refined and sophisticated ways.

Moreover, poems possess special properties for dealing with the defensiveness that many people mobilize when confronted with the realities of racism. Poetic devices such as imagery, symbolism, metaphor, intensity, rhythmicity, novelty, aesthetic appeal, emotional expressiveness and self-disclosure render poetry a powerful medium for bypassing resistance. This is particularly important in anti-racism training because most of us have strong resistances to recognizing the persistence of racism in ourselves and others, in history and in society (Katz, 1978). Poetry "speaks to" the unconscious realm more powerfully and effectively than other linguistic styles, and a well-chosen poem often taps into the deepest layers of the

psyche. Poetic metaphor is a highly effective mechanism for counteracting resistance; metaphors have more liveliness and communicative power than other means of communication, and are less likely to be viewed as moralistic. Further, by serving as a model of speech that is more honest, authentic and self-revealing than ordinary conversation, a poem can stimulate honesty and self-disclosure on the part of reluctant participants. In summary, the properties of poetry are highly compatible with the aims of anti-racism training. Poems, when used strategically, can be a powerful and effective tool for raising awareness of racism.

Based on my experience conducting workshops and leading multicultural groups over the past 5 years, I have generated a series of themes that are important elements of anti-racism work: overt racism, covert racism, childhood socialization in a racist society, psychological damage resulting from racism and strategies to end racism in ourselves and in society as a whole. Each theme is addressed by presenting one poem, or a series of thematically related poems, and then engaging in writing exercises and group sharing designed to deepen the process initiated by the poem(s). The selection of poems and exercises within each theme can be adapted based on the demographic composition of the group.

Overt Racism

As a result of erasures and distortions perpetuated in our educational system, many children grow up

*Shanee Stepakoff, a Certified Poetry Therapist and doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at St. John's University in Jamaica, NY, is presently an intern in Child and Adolescent Psychology at a community mental health center in Newark, NJ.

with little or no information about our country's history of genocide, enslavement and discrimination against people of color. Thus, it is often useful to begin with exercises designed to enhance participants' awareness of intentional, explicit racism in U.S. history and society. In seeking to fill in gaps in participants' knowledge, as well as to overcome their understandable reluctance to face painful realities, the facilitator utilizes poems that refer to significant instances of racism in U.S. history. Events that have been memorialized in poetry and popular music include slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, segregation, and detention of Latin Americans who attempt to enter the United States.

Relevant Poems

Several poems that explore the issue of slavery are contained in Randall's (1971) anthology. These include James Whitfield's *America* and Frances E. W. Harper's *The Slave Auction* (which vividly depicts the dehumanization and horror of slave auctions) and *Bury Me in a Free Land* (which refers to lashings, separation of babies from their mothers, and other brutalities). In *Afterimages*, Audre Lorde (1981) describes her anguish, still acute after 25 years, over the lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black youth from Chicago who was kidnapped and brutally murdered by white men near Money, MS, in August of 1955 after he had allegedly whistled as a white woman was passing by; an all-white jury acquitted the two white men who were charged with the crime. Forche's (1993) anthology contains a fine selection of poems about the history of white violence against African Americans, such as Richard Wright's *Between the World and Me*, which graphically portrays the poet's experience of stumbling upon a place in the woods where a Black man had been tarred and feathered by white racists. In *In Response to Executive Order 9066*, Dwight Okita (1992) presents a child's perspective on the order, signed by President Roosevelt in February of 1942 with widespread public support, giving the army the authority to evacuate "any and all persons" from "military areas" and to provide "accommodations" for them elsewhere; in fact, it was exclusively Japanese Americans who were rounded up en masse; 110,000 men, women and children were sent to internment camps in isolated, barren regions scattered from California to Arkansas, with devastating social, financial and psychological effects

on Japanese American families. In *La Migra*, Pat Mora (1993) conveys the abuses of power routinely perpetrated by agents of the U.S. Border Patrol against Mexican women. As noted in Katz (1978, p. 77), Native American folk-singer Buffy Sainte-Marie has several songs with powerful lyrics about the history of racism against Native Americans, including *My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying* (1970). This song conveys with unusual intensity the condescension, viciousness and indifference that have marked this country's behavior toward Native Americans:

Now that you're wondering how they must feel,
 meaning them that you've chased across America's movie screens,
 Now that you're wondering how it can be real . . .
 Now that we're harmless and safe behind laws
 Now that my life's to be known as your heritage
 Now that even the graves have been robbed
 Now that our own chosen way is a novelty . . .
 Can't you see that their poverty's profiting you?

In another verse, Sainte-Marie graphically describes how, during struggles between Ohio Indians and British colonizers in May of 1763 at Fort Pitt (in present-day Ohio), the British military governor of the western region, General Jeffrey Amherst, proposed that his officers "send the smallpox among the disaffected tribes" by distributing infected blankets from the fort's hospital, thereby intentionally causing an epidemic that spread from the Delawares and Shawnees to the southern Creeks, Choctaws and Chickasaws, killing enormous numbers of Native Americans.

Dudley Randall's (1966) *Ballad of Birmingham* concerns the racist bombing of a church in Birmingham, AL, in September of 1963, in which four small Black girls were killed. The vivid imagery, rhythmicity, and irony in this poem tend to trigger strong emotional reactions. The first five stanzas describe a mother's conversation with her child in which the mother insists that in order to stay out of danger, her daughter must go to church rather than outside on the "streets of Birmingham." The poem then continues:

The mother smiled to know her child
 Was in the sacred place,
 But that smile was the last smile
 To come upon her face.

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