

Why a Poem in a Place Like This?

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Poetry may seem an odd addendum

to medical training, but more and more programs in medicine and related fields are including it. As a way of articulating and communicating the experience of illness or disability, poetry opens a very different avenue of communication than conventional clinical discourse. Lyric poems emphasize discontinuity, surprise, experiential gaps, and the slippery relationship between words and the life of the body.

The practice of poetry teaches clinicians to hear differently. In the course of training they learn to listen for particular kinds of information, and to expect it to be delivered in predictable forms and sequences. But when those forms and sequences are broken up into poems, one may begin to hear in new terms. Words become significant in new ways. Familiar data may be reframed and assume new kinds of significance and relevancy.

Poetry mirrors and organizes certain dimensions of experience more precisely than prose. It poses its own requirements: it requires us, for instance,

- to inhabit time a little differently
- to notice how, and why how matters
- to notice what is broken and possibilities that open in brokenness
- to entertain ambiguities
- to change the shape of our understanding
- to love the lively image
- to let images deliver information their way
- to involve ourselves with verbs

Poems offer both information and invitation: the invitation is to pause and reflect. Good poems summon us to stop even as they move us onward. Lines like Marvin Bell's "The darkness within me is growing"¹ or Chana Bloch's "That clumsy / pushing and wheeling inside my chest"² or Karen Fiser's "I am salvaging the day from the tides of pain"³ must give us pause at least long enough to consider anew how pain and fear alter one's sense of time, place, and ownership of the body.

Good poems offer guidance. They offer alternative models or maps of suffering, pain management, adaptation, and healing work. They help us imagine our way into a patient's anxiety, impatience, disrupted life, disheartened state of mind, or hope or healing humor.

The poems that will appear from time to time in this journal are included as invitations to reflect on the work of rehabilitation therapy from new, multiple vantage points, to awaken the empathetic imagination, and to inspire reader-practitioners perhaps to write a few of their own!

References

1. Bell M. The Condition. *Punch-In-The-Face-Poetry*. <http://poetry.newgreyhair.com/post/58361144409/the-condition-marvin-bell>. August 15, 2015.
2. Bloch C. In the land of the body – 8. *The Past Keeps Changing*. Sheep Meadow Press; 1992.
3. Fiser K. Cripple time. *Losing and Finding*. U. of North Texas Press; 2004.