A poetry program for the very elderly—Narrative perspective on one therapeutic model

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The focus of this report is a poetry program that the author has been conducting at a nursing home/short-stay rehabilitation facility for the past three and a half years. The program involves reading poetry to groups of very elderly residents who have significant mental and/or physical disabilities. This article includes a description of the program and the author's observations of its beneficial effects. Poetry readings were also given to individual seniors who have significant dementia. The therapeutic value of the program to the elders and to the person reading the poetry to the elders is discussed.

Keywords *Elderly; poetry reading; nursing home; therapeutic*

For the past three and a half years, I have been reading poetry once a month to a group of very elderly and infirm residents at a very well-respected nursing home/short-stay rehabilitation facility in Westchester County, New York. I had approached the facility with a proposal for this poetry program. I had some previous experience reading poetry to groups, but those groups were composed neither of the very elderly nor the infirm. So I did not know whether this idea made sense, or, if it had merit, whether I could successfully implement it. But I thought it worth a try.

I found the first few sessions challenging. Several of the elders fell asleep in their wheelchairs during the reading, one or two snoring audibly. Some could not see, or understand, the PowerPoint pictures I used to accompany each poem, and a few were disturbed by that. Some others interrupted with questions or comments, or by asking to be taken back to their room—which would have been less problematic if they had not done that in the middle of a poem.

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I gradually learned to accept these difficulties and adjusted to them, and as I relaxed into the environment something wonderful happened: I noticed that many of the elders were responding. They were becoming more alive. They were enjoying themselves. They were connecting in ways described below. The response was so positive that, about nine months into the project, I was asked to take on a second, more compromised group at the facility. I did that, with similar, very positive results. I have also given some of these presentations to other groups of elders, at a retirement community and other venues, and to individual elders.

Without intending to do so, I believe I have developed a model and curriculum for one kind of a poetry program for the elderly that has therapeutic value.

I applied a broad definition of poetry, and I found that very useful. If the poetry were limited to the academic canon, it would be much harder to succeed with this kind of program. So while I used some of the canon, I went far beyond it. For example, I included popular “song” that has strong and relevant lyrics—including “pop” songs, folk songs, songs from Broadway musicals, and so on. Song has always played an important role in our culture, and in our consciousness, and song is a great way to tap into memory. Much as I well remember, for example, the Beatles’ “I Want to Hold Your Hand” (Lennon & McCartney, 1963) and can readily bring back into consciousness where I was and how I felt when listening to that song in my youth, the very elderly can do the same with, for example, “Ol’ Man River” (Hammerstein & Kern, 1927), from the 1920s.

I thought it important to make these presentations lively and balanced, so I included in each session a variety of genres, voices, eras, styles, moods (serious, comic), and so on. I also included in each presentation several poems that I thought the elders would remember, like old friends.

In choosing which poems to read, I was guided mostly by what moves me. It was much easier to make a poem come alive if I had some connection with the poem. So I started with poems I knew and enjoyed. Then, several months into the project, I started organizing the presentations into themes. In February, around Valentine’s Day, we listened to love poems. In March, we listened to nineteenth-century “Americana.” In April, the theme was Spring. In May, it was food. In June, marriage. In July, America. Then came three sessions on life stages—from babyhood through high school; the world of work; and post-work. Then a session on Jewish poetry, followed by a session on Islamic poetry. Then a session on protest poetry, then miracles and prayers. Then family, travel, animals, music, the night, New York City, and so on. And, of course, The Holiday Spectacular (Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year).

While the subjects changed, we returned with some regularity to certain poets I especially enjoy—Dickinson, Whitman, Yeats, and Longfellow, among others. The group came to know them, for example, as our friend Emily, our Uncle Walt.

We also returned to certain themes. While the contexts changed, each session contained poems that speak to significant and relevant matters—to hope, to courage, to beauty, to love, to trust, to spirituality, to loss, to redemption, to belonging, to nature, to family, to time, and what is timeless/the soul. We also returned to some particular poems, which reappeared in different presentations.

I came to appreciate that my selections were working in part because I did not speak down to the elders. While I stayed away from inaccessible poems, many of the poems I read were in some sense deep. As I remarked at the end of the session on Islamic poetry, the group now knows more about that subject than almost anyone in the country. There is no condescension in this program, and I think that is greatly appreciated.

I also encouraged the group to tell me what poems they would like to hear. One elder requested “Abou ben Adhem” (Hunt, 1838), so I used that English poem to introduce the session on Islamic poetry. Another elder gave me a book of poems she had written, so I incorporated a few into the readings.

As I became more comfortable, some of the “readings” became, in part, “singsings,” and the singing was not only by me. For example, at one session, I read and discussed “Amazing Grace” (Newton, 1779), which was written by a slave ship captain who gave up that life in disgust and became a minister; the session concluded with one elder commenting on it, and then singing it “like I used to do in church,” and other elders joined in.

Another part of the program that was very helpful was the PowerPoint pictures I used to accompany each poem. Some of them were true illustrations—a field of daffodils in front of a lake, for Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” (Wordsworth, 1807); a beautiful cardinal, for Dickinson’s “Hope is the Thing with Feathers” (Dickinson, 1891); cherry trees in bloom, for A. E. Housman’s “Loveliest of Trees” (Housman, 1896); pictures of Hiawatha and Nikomas, for the opening portion of Longfellow’s “Hiawatha” (Longfellow, 1855), concerning Hiawatha’s childhood and the importance of his grandmother; for Frost’s “Two Roads Diverged” (Frost, 1916), there was a picture of two paths in the woods, dividing.

Other pictures concerned the poets and served to highlight certain biographical information that the group was quite interested in. For example, pictures of the young Bill Yeats and Maude Gonne, to whom Yeats proposed a half-dozen times over the course of several decades, accompanied his poem “The Song of the Wandering Aengus” (Yeats, 1899), about how Yeats met her, decades before, and what she, and that magical meeting, still stood for in his mind. Accompanying the lovely “The Path That Leads To Nowhere” by Corrine Roosevelt Robinson (1919), younger sister of Theodore Roosevelt and “Aunt Conie” to Eleanor Roosevelt, was a most interesting picture of the poet in period formal dress, at the 1920 Republican Convention, where she became the first woman to move the nomination of a national party convention candidate.

Other pictures were of performers/actors or from movies associated with the song-poems. For “These Are Some of My Favorite Things” (Hammerstein & Rodgers, 1959), there was Julie Andrews dancing with the Swiss Alps in the background. For “As Time Goes By” (Hupfeld, 1931)—a poem whose second half was used in the film *Casablanca*—there were Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman looking intensely at each other. And there was Marilyn Monroe in diamonds introducing “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” (Styne & Robin, 1949).

Often before reading a poem, I would pause and ask if anyone recognizes or recalls the poet, or the poem, or my picture associated with the poem. And regularly one or more elders in the group would recall that—whereas the young person from the facility

who was supervising the group and sitting in on the readings confessed ignorance. For that moment at least, a lost competence, and a proper balance, were restored.

As the presentations progressed, I became more experimental with the pictures. I made use of some wonderful material available on YouTube. To take a few examples: After reading “Invictus” (Henley, 1888), we watched the scene from the movie of the same name, in Nelson Mandela’s cell, where the poem is recited in Mandella’s voice. After reading “Everybody Eats When They Come to My House” (Burns, 1948), famously performed by Cab Calloway, we watched a dramatization of the song-poem, with its music. After reading “Sixteen Tons” (Travis, 1946), we watched Johnny Cash (1987) sing it, accompanied by pictures of real, back-breaking coal-mining. After reading Rumi love poems, we watched several beautiful videos that combined readings of those poems with visions of nature.

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Some attention has been given to the therapeutic value of poetry to the elderly. Reiter (1994) in discussing poetry and the frail elderly stated that a poem can be seen as an “empathetic friend” that is not going to leave, and Reiter argues that poetry can help elders recall their past experiences and thereby help with what Erikson (1963) and Butler (1974) identify as a person’s last developmental task: integration.

Reiter describes a poetry program that is different from what I have been doing. That other program focuses on the needs and concerns of individual elders and employs a trained therapist to work one-on-one with each elder (Reiter, 1994, p. 140). As I understand it, the therapist chooses a poem designed to address the elder’s particular circumstances and needs, and the therapist and the elder work together with the poem. Such therapy seems to concentrate on getting elders to discuss specific poems and to express themselves, including writing poems of their own (Mazza, 2003).

That other kind of poetry therapy no doubt is of more value to some elders than the kind of group program I have described above.

In this respect, as in many others, it is difficult, and not helpful, to generalize. In fact, one central generalization that needs attention is the definition of “the elderly.” That term encompasses, among many other things, a broad spectrum of physical, mental, and emotional abilities and disabilities.

I have given some poetry presentations as described above to groups of elders who are not significantly disabled and who continue to live independent lives. I have given some presentations to groups of elders who live in group settings where they receive “well care.” As described above, I have given the vast majority of these presentations to groups of elders who live, some temporarily and some not, in group settings where they receive fairly intensive care for significant disabilities. And I have presented poetry one-on-one to individual elders who have even more severe deficits.

My experience suggests that such a poetry program, even conducted by a person untrained in these matters such as myself, can help considerably, even in cases of substantial dementia.

For years I have rehearsed my poetry presentations with a women in her mid-nineties whose mind is a mixture of muddled and sharp, a condition that has progressed over time from mild to significant dementia. Our poetry sessions have

been extremely helpful in keeping her alert and positive. Going over with her certain poems she remembers from her youth takes her out of any shell she might be in and right back to “the head of the class” where she was for so many years, as the recesses of her memory kick in and she sometimes recites “by heart” what I read aloud from text. When I recite a first line and she responds from memory with the next two or three, we both get a big positive charge.

I have also read/sung some of these poems over an extended period of time one-on-one with someone in her early nineties who has advanced dementia. It is impossible for me to know how much is being understood. But the poems have a calming influence—although that may only be the effect of the sound of a trusted human voice. If the latter is the case, then one could think of the poetry as nothing more—and nothing less—than an excellent vehicle for having one’s helpful voice heard in a sustained and comforting way.

And how different is this state of uncertainty from what my seventh-grade English teacher, Mr. Wolf (who memorably challenged me to develop my imagination beyond that of a hippopotamus) was doing with me and my classmates back in Junior High School? Or with what any poet or playwright does with an audience? As Longfellow (1845) wrote concerning the enterprise of poetic publication:

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.

How much of what any teacher, or any poet, or any playwright says gets through, unbroken? Is the listener even consciously listening, or is he/she sleeping at the desk or in the wheelchair (perhaps having been lulled into a comforting nap by a little listening) or daydreaming (perhaps quite creatively)? Is he/she listening only on the most superficial level, hearing only the voice, not the words? Are the words being

understood, but not the meaning? Is the superficial meaning being understood, but not the secondary meaning?

More particularly as concerns the kind of poetry presentations to the elderly described here, what is the nature and extent of the therapeutic value that I only intuit? Would that value differ depending on such variables as the nature and extent of the elders' disability? With the frequency of presentations? With the size of the group, or with individual attention? How does that value differ depending upon the extent to which the material corresponds to the elder's prior life experience, including experience with poetry? Or subject matter? How does that value differ from simply talking to the elder for an hour or so on a regular basis? Does the therapeutic value vary depending upon whether the speaker has established a relationship with the elder and has a voice that is known and trusted? How do the accompanying pictures affect the process?

I do not pretend to know the answers to such questions. There are many empirical studies concerning the value of reading to the very young. We need similar studies as concerns the very elderly.

But I suggest that Longfellow's metaphor has particular relevance for the elderly—that the poems that were breathed into the air of their early years, five, six or seven decades ago, can often be found, unbroke, in their hearts. In Walt Whitman's poem "Proud Music of the Storm" (1871), which was part of the poetry presentation on the subject of music, Whitman says that the first music he heard was his mother's voice and since then all sounds are music, and that he fashions his poems from those sounds. Maybe listening to the sounds of poetry—or at least some poetry—has the power to recapture, and build, on that deepest of levels.

I want to suggest, moreover, that the powers of poetry are attuned to the needs of the very elderly.

Allen's (1936) Introduction to the classic *The Best Loved Poems of the American People* identifies some of those powers. As you read Allen's words below, think of how they relate to the elderly:

The world needs poetry for its vitalizing strength ... It satisfies a hunger for beauty.... It recaptures vanished moments and recreates scenes that have grown dim through passing years. It stirs wholesome emotions and gives glimpses ... of eternal things. It entertains, it inspires, and, in time of need, it comforts.
(p. xxxii)

Keillor (2005), in his stirring Introduction to his excellent *Good Poems for Hard Times*, emphasizes that good poems give courage—something we all need, but certainly so the very elderly.

I would also like to bring to your attention, and urge you to read, a wonderful book by Kim Rosen (2009), *Saved By A Poem*. Rosen points out that poetry dares us to relax our rational thought in favor of something deeper. Because poetry's appeal goes beyond the mind, Rosen says, poetry can be a powerful medicine (2009, pp. xxv–xxvi):

In the “Aha!” that happens when the mind bursts open—at a breathtaking metaphor or an insight or a chiming among the words—all levels of being human come into alignment. You feel sudden integration of body, mind, heart, and soul.

The elderly may be more willing and able than most to allow the rational brain to relax. In fact, relaxation of the rational mind seems to be a natural part of the aging process. The real question is whether that relaxation will be constructive or something else entirely. Perhaps poetry can help to promote the constructive alternative.

Similarly, with respect to more compromised elders, dementia often presents with a dose of paranoia. Paranoia is the imagination run amok. Poetry engages the imagination and may help lead it in a calmer and healthier direction—toward faith and trust and away from fear.

Let me add some additional thoughts that touch on the place of the elderly in our society today and how that relates to the subject.

Our culture, with its laser-like focus on productivity and the material, treats the elderly as if they were irrelevant and have little to offer. Poetry could be an antidote to that poison—on both sides of that coin, that is, as to the elderly and as to the culture. As to the elderly:

- Poetry speaks to inner work, not outer work. The elderly are ready to take on that inner work, turning any irrelevance in the material world into an opportunity.
- Poetry speaks to the heart and the soul. The elderly, their egos battered, are more ready to step away from the ego-self and move toward the soul-self. In part, that is a movement from the mind to the heart, where poetry enters.
- Poetry insists that we slow down. Poetry can’t be speed-read. (In my presentations I read the vast majority of the poems twice; slowly the first time, a little faster the second, and I include some brief comments after the first reading). The elderly have slowed down. They are ready to listen.
- Poetry is best appreciated from a perspective of experience. Looking back from a high point of a long journey, the elderly may be more able to understand what poetry is saying.
- As one approaches the end of life, there is a natural longing for meaning. In the East, preparation for the end is supposed to begin early in life. In our culture, unless one has hewed to religious faith, it begins late if it begins at all. Poetry can aid that search for identity beyond the confines of time and space. Sufi mystics like Rumi and Hafez have used poetry to tear away the veil of appearance and thinking, to reach the deeper level of the wise heart. Or, to use a Buddhist metaphor, poetry can help to waken us from the daydream of ordinary life and remind us of our true nature.
- In poetry one can find validation of one’s own experience. So many times during my presentations, elders nodded vigorously, or sighed, “So true, So

true.” Especially in times of dealing with emotional or physical pain, it helps greatly to know that others have felt what you are feeling.

- Poetry is a leveler. Emily Dickinson (1924) wrote that good poetry makes you feel as though the top of your head has been taken off. (p. 276) When head tops are taken off, we are all the same age.

Some poetry directly addresses these subjects, including how the elderly need, and can find, such validation. In “Sailing to Byzantium” Yeats (1926), who was 61 when he wrote the poem, says quite explicitly that an aged person is a meager creature unless the elder teaches his or her soul to sing. When the elders began singing “Amazing Grace,” their souls certainly were singing. Perhaps this poetry project could be considered a soul singing class.

And in “Four Quartets,” T. S. Eliot (1943) urges elders to be explorers, not of the physical world but of other dimensions. Imagine how such an attitude—being on a path to a new beginning despite being aged—could help an elder. Perhaps this poetry project is an invitation to such an exploration.

There is profound need for attention to these issues. One impact of modern medicine is the large expansion of both the size of our marginalized elderly population and the percentage of that population who are significantly incapacitated. (At the same time, modern technology is increasingly becoming the province of the youngest generations, so that important matters are now often left to those immature of judgment, and increasingly even the middle-aged are threatened with societal irrelevance).

Moreover, a large percentage of our elderly who have significant disabilities, physical or mental, are segregated in facilities of one kind or another—some would say that many of them are warehoused, pathologized, and drugged. The challenge here is two-fold: to attend to the elderly, and to attend to the reasons why our society turns its back on these elderly.

With respect to the cultural challenge, numerous social critics have observed that the prevailing myth in our society is that we must always be making material “progress” and growing the economy, and that technology and “the market” will take us there, and there is little respect for anything that exists outside some marketplace.

The culture also tells us, with great pride, that this is the age of information, and technology has indeed made available a new flood of data. But one must “drill down” in sophisticated ways in order to capture anything relevant. Wisdom, meanwhile, seems to have become rarer than ever, as our minds are captured, and narrowed, by the fascinating new streams of data. At the same time, a tidal wave of commercial speech, combined with the 24/7 digital environment that virtually demands that our attention be fixed on some computer screen, threaten to drown everything that is authentic.

Keillor (2005) colorfully makes much the same point, in his Introduction referred to previously, and Keillor makes the connection to poetry. He writes:

America is in hard times ... the beloved country awash.... [in] incessant... spinning and... preening and strutting.... Everything you see and hear is

produced by people terrified that they might ... lose their ... expense account lunches... so there is mighty little courage or playfulness, as there is in poetry....

[W]hat mustn't be lost, in this dank time, is the passion for truth and justice and liberty ... and when this spirit is betrayed by the timid and the greedy and the naive, then we must depend on the poets. American poetry is the truest journalism we have. What your life can be, lived bravely and independently, you can discover in poetry [P]oetry is the last preserve of honest speech and the outspoken heart.... (pp. xviii–xxi)

Throughout human history, poetry has helped people move toward a healthier perspective, and poetry retains its power and value today in part because poetry exists almost entirely outside of our market-fixated culture. In a society where virtually everything is for sale, poetry remains uncommodifiable: Goldman Sachs cannot cut poetry into pieces and securitize it.

Poetry, rather, takes us out of the marketplace, out of the world of speed, out of the world of multi-tasking, out of the world of Fox News and other pervasive media, out of habitual patterns. It gives us the opportunity to think and to imagine things that the culture ignores. It helps us with the inner work that we need to do in order to prepare us to do the outer work of saving the planet from ourselves and from the technologies we have created.

Metaphorically, we need to move from the shock and awe of our technology, and back instead to awe alone, and its implications; after all, awe is the beginning of wisdom (Heschel, 1965, p. 88). Poetry is a great vehicle for that movement. As Auden (1962) pointed out, “every poem is rooted in imaginative awe” (p. 60).

In short, we all need poetry, now more than ever, to restore us to ourselves, and to our place in the creation, in an ever more alienating social environment.

And perhaps the elderly have an important role to play in the societal renewal that is so sorely needed. Ram Dass (2000) speaks to this directly in his profound book, *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*. Ram Dass argues there that our society is ignoring the wealth of wisdom that our elders possess. He writes (*italics in the original*):

[W]isdom is one of the few things in human life that does not diminish with age. While everything else falls away, wisdom alone increases until death if we live examined lives, opening ourselves out to life's many lessons....

[W]ise elders... are capable of cultivating the very resources that our endangered world needs if it is to survive healthy and whole: qualities of sustainability, patience, reflection, appreciation for justice, and the humor born of long experience. Those qualities are in short supply in our society. (pp. 17–19)

Those qualities, however, are abundant in poetry.

I think Ram Dass would say that the elderly, far from being irrelevant, are positioned to be a kind of *avant garde* in a struggle to move our society to a new, more balanced and saner place. And perhaps poetry can be a significant tool in that struggle.

Maybe that is wildly optimistic. Poetry certainly will not by itself transform our culture. Neither will poetry transform all elders into wise elders. But the objective need not be so grand to make the effort worthwhile.

My experience over the past several years, working with poetry and the aged, suggests that even quite compromised elders can benefit from the kind of poetry program described above. And if we do not yet know—even if we are not given to know—what the extent of the benefit of such work may be, that is not reason not to go there. Indeed, it may be that in precisely such places of uncertainty we can accomplish the most.

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Finally, some words about what the person presenting the poetry can learn or discover in the process of doing the kind of work discussed here. Wholly aside from the obvious satisfactions, there is also a measure of self-discovery and what Rosen (2009) calls “radical intimacy” (p. 193).

For one thing, reading poetry aloud, to other people, can help you shed felt limitations and grow as a person. As you speak aloud, to someone else, a poem that speaks to you, the poem draws you out, while at the same time you bring fresh life to the poem. Rosen (2009) puts it this way:

Sometimes your real voice is cloaked by defenses.... As you invite more and more notes into your voice that don't fit with your normal “personality,” a remarkable and possibly startling phenomenon begins to occur.... Characteristics that once defined you may fall away... (pp. 163, 165, 171).

The partnership between the speaker and those who are listening creates another potential for the growth of the speaker. Rosen (2009) writes:

To speak [a] poem [that moves you] out loud, to one or one thousand people, is to be publicly private.... [S]peaking a poem to another person is entering into a soul-to-soul intimacy....

Every poem you love is such a terrifying angel. Add to that the wonder of hearing your own soul's voice and a communion with whoever is listening and it is not surprising that the ego's instinct is to hold on for dear life.... If you are lucky, your identity will burst open at the seams, awakening you to your true nature. (pp. 193–196)

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I urge academicians to look into the issues discussed above. I urge people who care for the elderly, whether professionally or on a purely personal level, to consider including poetry as part of that care. And I urge others to consider starting a poetry program for the elderly in their communities.

As Seamus Heaney (as cited in Kerrigan & Wylie, 1999), the beloved Irish poet who died last year, remarked: “The aim of the poet and of poetry is finally to be of service, to ply the effort of individual work into the larger work of the community as a whole” (p. 127). You do not have to be a poet to do poetic service.

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