

## Portrait Of A Poet As A Recovering Anorexic

*But yield who will to their separation  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight  
And only when love and need are one,  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For Heaven and the future's sakes*

This poetical fragment from Robert Frost's poem, "Two Tramps In Mudtime" captures the way I feel about my work as a psychotherapist in general, and as a Poetry Therapist in particular.

### What is Poetry Therapy?

Poetry therapy is a practice that applies poems, myth, fairy tales, fables, stories, and other genre of literature for healing and personal growth. Poetry therapy emphasizes the evocative value of literature, and the potential healing benefits for clients who write responses to poems written by others or by writing original material, drawing from their own experiences and emotions.

Poetry in healing is nothing new. According to the NAPT (National Association of Poetry Therapy) website, poetry as a healing modality can be traced back to early humans who used religious rites in the form of chanting for the well-being of the tribe or individual. It is documented that as far back as the fourth millennium B.C.E. in Egypt, healing words were written on papyrus and ingested to relieve suffering.

The first poetry therapist on record was a 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman physician named Soranus who prescribed tragedy for his mania and comedy for depression. In the Greek pantheon Apollo is the god of poetry and medicine, as they believed in the strong link between the two disciplines.

In more modern times poetry for healing has been acknowledged by giants in the mental health and medical fields. Did you know that it was Sigmund Freud who said "It is the poet, not I, that discovered the unconscious." Other well known doctors of the mind such as Adler and Jung also confirmed that the poets were the first to chart paths that science later followed.

### **How Can Poetry Therapy Help Heal Eating Disorders?**

Poetry often takes one on a journey much like the one Orpheus took down into the deep caverns of the unconscious to find his beloved Psyche, or soul. The journey isn't necessarily an easy one, but finally connecting to those beloved parts of oneself and to the world makes the effort worthwhile. One of our great modern poets, Lucille Clifton, tells us "poetry is a matter of life, not just a matter of language." Healing from an eating disorder is also a matter of life; it is a matter of choosing life over death, both physical and psychological.

In my work with women suffering from an eating disorder, I realized they were making their bodies do and say what they often could not articulate. It is not uncommon that a person with anorexia cannot express herself. She can seem inarticulate. She can be confused and withdrawn. Alexithymia is a common clinical feature of anorexia nervosa and describes a dearth of words or expression. The seemingly stoic yet pained expression of the body is the sufferer's carnal shout to the world.

David Whyte, a contemporary poet, states "a poem can often articulate something you've only intuited, but haven't been able to say. And as soon as you've said it, you're in a new world." This new world is what poetry can help our clients enter - to see, to feel, and to imagine themselves living another way; a way out of a world ruled by the life-crippling rules and regulations of an eating disorder.

### **Working With Poetry Therapy and Eating Disorders**

Wisława Szymborska, one of the few women ever to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, said in her Nobel lecture that the inspiration of the poet is born more than anything else from a moment-by-moment attitude of

"I don't know." As a Poetry Therapist, this attitude of a poetic sensibility to being, and in working with women with eating disorders, suggests, even demands, that I remain in a state of wonder with what my clients present. Every person and every life situation breathes from its own source, and it cannot fit into a prescribed set of diagnoses or theories or research created by others.

What I do know is that I am here to help. I am present to hear what these women have to say. I help them to express it. I teach and encourage them to find the words and the ways into their hearts, into loving themselves back into existence again, or perhaps loving themselves for the first time in their lives.

I begin by listening to the client. Then I search the apothecary of poetry in my mind and go to the filing cabinet to retrieve a poem that might speak to what the client presents in the session. For example, she could be struggling with letting go of the eating disorder, and feeling conflicted by both hope and fear. Then once a poem has been selected, I give it to the client and ask her to read it aloud. The process of reading aloud is important; it is a body-centering practice, and it helps to build a strong voice. Building a strong voice is important, as it creates a vibration within the body that it can remember and access. The voice then becomes one's instrument that is played and practiced and tuned until it begins to make beautiful music.

In the next step we discuss the client's impressions and feelings evoked by the poem. We may discuss powerful images or metaphors in the poem. Often a client will connect what is said in the poem to her relationship with her eating disorder. Following the discussion I give a writing assignment to be completed outside the session. The assignment comes out of the discussion in session. It is a very moment-by-moment practice.

### **A Case Study, Katherine (Katie) Lawrence**

Katie began working with me in November of last year. She has been struggling with an eating disorder since high school. She is now 53, married and has raised 3 children. The following is a poem she wrote and the

discussion that ensued regarding her poem and how it relates to her recovery process.

"The Opening of Eyes" after David Whyte  
by Katie Lawrence

The dappled rays of sun shine forth through the branches and leaves of the  
ages old oak  
Its warmth gives the heart a measure it never believed in before.  
The eating disorder is shadowed by the mellowed light of the sun  
As it reaches all the dark places of the heart

The blindfold is cast aside and my eyes are opened to the deceit of anorexia  
It is life that takes its place and the truth it has heard before becomes an  
inspiration of  
Hopefulness.

The clouds cover the light at times and I am drawn back into the dark world  
of an eating  
Disorder, but slowly I begin to understand that even in the darkness of  
anorexia  
There is a pale grey light that insists there is life beyond it.

The curving, twisting road that has been beaten down by others  
Cuts its path through the forest and  
Leaves a trail for others to follow.  
Each must make their own way through the dense thicket of an eating  
disorder  
But those who have come out into the wide open places  
Are a beacon of hope for those who struggle.  
Their bright shining rays draw us towards the new beginning of life without  
an eating  
Disorder and open our eyes to a new way of life.

.....  
In referring to the lines:

The curving, twisting road that has been beaten down by others

Cuts its path through the forest and  
Leaves a trail for others to follow.

Katie says, I had an image of a wilderness, where there is a road that was made by others who have had an eating disorder, and who made it through. When I was writing this I was thinking of Sharon (a woman Katie met in treatment who is blossoming in recovery). She was so into getting healthy; like a beacon of light. She remained positive hopeful even with her many problems. She added "the bright shining rays" are the people who now embody the sunshine."

In writing "The Opening Of Eyes" it was the first time I saw myself as a poet.

**Dana: How did that feel Kate, thinking of yourself as a poet for the first time?**

**I know I've always been a writer** and chose short stories as a medium. Well, it was surprising because I didn't think I could be a poet. I never thought I could write poetry. I have found that writing poetry is an ego booster, it gives me a feeling of empowerment. At times it makes me feel that I have strength to overcome an eating disorder. Putting ideas down in a poem gives me that strength. The more time I spend writing, the more I move towards health and away from anorexia. I'm now working on a poem that speaks to this move toward health.

**Dana: What's healing for you in this process?**

When I first began working with poetry my writing was mostly responses and reactions to the poems I read and discussed with you. But in writing "The Opening of Eyes" I became a poet. When that happened it felt like a new world opened up to me, one that I had never seen myself in before. Somehow I sensed that this new world of writing also had something to do with leaving the eating disorder behind.

Reading a poem aloud is healing, and reading my own poems aloud brings me into a world of possibility. I read the poem and hear it and it sounds good. Then I look at the poem and it looks good. And then I feel the poem in the center of my being, and it feels good. And I say to myself "you wrote that,

you wrote that, and you are good." And I smile. And I feel good about myself. And this makes me want to share this part of myself with others. That's why I agreed to this interview and to share my poem with treatment providers and people who struggle with an eating disorder.

The more poetry that I work with and I read aloud, seems to touch my heart that a short story just doesn't get at.

**Dana: Talk about your writing process.**

I have to take time to come up with the phrases and images that I use in the poems. As I'm writing my poem, I read what I'm doing aloud, and if it doesn't fit right I go back into it to be more precise in the words I'm choosing. This practice of getting at just the right word, the feeling of what I want to express is also connected with how I want to see myself. It let's me see myself as more than Katie, the anorexic. There is more to me than that. I realize that I'm choosing more of who I am becoming just as carefully as I'm choosing the words for the poem I'm writing.

Anorexia is so limiting. And this process of reading poetry and writing poetry is allowing me to open up. I am becoming so much more than my eating disorder. And I hope that some day soon I won't refer to an eating disorder as 'my' eating disorder, but as something outside myself.

Dana: How do you access the images?

Many images come from nature and my surroundings. I look at past experiences, nature; I picture a tree with the sun filtering down through the braches and leaves. Images also come from my life's experiences. When I read the poems I try to watch out for the powerful images in the poems. I want the images that I create to be as powerful as the ones I read in other's poetry.

Each time I write I feel like I'm moving away from anorexia toward a healthy way of living. As I'm doing it—writing—it sticks with me longer, the healthy side of life. I speak of this in the poem when I write about how the clouds cover the light at times as the eating disorder. Writing poetry has become one way that I can move back the dark cloud.

The more time I spend writing poetry, the less time I have to think about the anorexia. I'm writing 1 1/2 hours a day. Before I began writing poetry I would struggle to get out of bed in the morning, mainly to avoid eating breakfast. Now, I am able to get out of bed early more often. The days I do get up early I write things down long hand and then type them on the computer. Knowing that I will be writing for a couple of hours in the morning and that has helped give me a reason to get out of bed early, and it has helped me to eat breakfast, too.

There was a shift that took place after writing "The Opening Of Eyes." I felt like I was finally able to enunciate what the eating disorder does to me as opposed to what living a healthy life can be for me, and the need to give it up so that I can come to a place of peace and contentment. And I've written about that before, but for some reason this time it struck a new chord. Now it has become a possibility, not just words.

### **So What is Healing Here?**

For Katie the surprise of being a poet, and writing good poetry, has been healing. It has motivated her to get out of bed in the morning. However, writing good poetry is not the goal. The writing itself is never critiqued. The process of the poetry therapist presenting poetry and the client writing responses to the poetry or writing one's own poetry is to help the client access and express feelings and emotions she might not have been able to articulate before. The amazing thing about this process is that many times the poetry is good, very good, and it is exciting for the client.

Another healing outcome of this process is the client's willingness to be seen; to have her poetry out there in the world for you, the reader, to see. It is a testament to how good she feels about what she has created when she agrees to be acknowledged by it, by identifying herself with her own name next to poem, claiming that something beautiful has come from her, and claiming herself in the process as someone who is creative, imaginative, and talented. This is a stepping out into the world, something Katie still struggles with, and yet she is doing it more and more.

As Katie steps out into the world, she is also stepping deeper into the therapeutic relationship. It is clear that the therapeutic relationship is greatly enhanced by the reading, writing, and dialoging of poetry. Katie is now allowing those deeper parts of herself to be seen by the therapist. She shyly admits that when she began therapy she would almost always look to find a reason why she couldn't come. Now she looks forward to therapy every week, and our sessions are one and half hours instead of forty-five minutes, as there is so much to cover, so much poetry for Katie to share and talk about. Katie says it is affirming to have the therapist enjoy her poetry. "The process allows me to come in closer, and it helps to bring joy into the therapeutic relationship. The process affirms me and makes for a different therapeutic relationship than I have had in the past. I'm not just sharing my daily life experiences. I'm sharing things much closer to my heart. You can have a conversation with a therapist that is deep, but with the poetry I'm able to find places within myself I couldn't get to before. Sharing the poetry becomes one of the highlights of my week."

Most important in this process is the step of identifying herself more as a poet with a daily practice of writing, than as an anorexic, and finding that when she's writing the poetic voice brings strength to her body, mind, and spirit while the eating disordered voice is quieted and slowly losing is power over her.

Now Katie is learning her own poem by heart, taking it in to her body, mind, and spirit. She tells me it feels good; it is good medicine. "And when I recite it out loud I hear a new voice and am slowly recognizing it as my own." So much like the Egyptians in the fourth millennium B.C.E., who ingested healing words written on papyrus, Katie is bringing her poem into her body, learning it by heart, and it is beginning to relieve her suffering.

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