

Chapters & Verses

Nora Zilkie

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Introduction

In *Poetry in Healthcare Settings*, Diana Hedges (2005) states that “Creating something—a poem, a picture, writing down your thoughts in a journal—strengthens your sense of identity at a time when you may feel you are losing it” (p.108). As I reflect on the major transitions in my life that have caused emotional blocks, I see that one of the things that has helped me cope with difficult circumstances is writing. Supportive friends and family have provided me with the social milieu I need; however, when I am alone, and thinking, writing out feelings by journaling or poetry writing has been a creative process invaluable for release and a kind of letting go. I remember who I am and regain a measure of strength.

Talking and writing about experiences forces some kind of structure to the experiences themselves. In *Emotion, Disclosure, & Health*, Pennebaker (2007) writes about this and says:

through language individuals are able to organize, structure, and ultimately assimilate both their emotional experiences and the events that may have provoked the emotions... talking both reflects and reduces anxiety... repeated disclosure over time gradually promotes the assimilation of the upsetting event, [and] brings about striking reductions in blood pressure, muscle tension, and skin conductance during or immediately after the disclosure (p.5).

The personal experience of talking and writing about trauma has contributed to my ongoing physical and psychological health.

A Chapter about a Northern Town

*Life does not really have a beginning, middle and end...
that is the prerogative of literature, stories of experience... (Bolton, 2010, p.43)*

I lived in the Northwest Territories for most of my adult life. I moved up there when I was single and 20, and left when I was 70. I love the north still, but it is a very difficult place to live as a widow, because of the extreme climate. One dark night I wrote this:

Yellowknife

This town was made for winter,
It protects us
from the cold and under streets
of ancient rock
miners mine for gold.

I’m playing “Crazy-crazy” and drinking
Zinger tea

to push away the spreading dark,
 November's hard
 on me.

This land locked long in winter
 broke my icy bonds of fear
 finding friends count
 more than comfort
 and love counts
 more each year.

Leaving the north proved to be a hard thing to do, and to settle my mind I wrote about the things I wanted to remember. Bolton (2010) says of this, "writing a story or a poem is organic, synthesising elements from life's muddles, weaving them to create a coherent communicating artefact" (p.75). The isolation of the Northwest Territories meant traveling long distances to visit friends and family and reach "civilization."

When my sister and I drove that long stretch between Fort Providence and Yellowknife, we had to keep a sharp eye out for wood buffalo. They had free run of the area and the males were often aggressive. They were frequently on the road and hard to move off. We dreaded spotting them.

Mackenzie Highway

Slow, slow, roary, loose
 shaggy manes
 come a herd
 rolling, slowing, stop.
 Scrape away the snow
 to grassy sedge
 and one, his old, old eyes
 and blood of all the bison
 once filling prairie plains, remains.

Ahead
 the buffalo stands,
 a hulk
 a midden of history
 that won't be moved.

Wait.
 He blinks
 away the past, rolls his heavy sea clock
 head of time contained
 from side to side and
 on his slender
 limber legs
 steps delicately away.

Driving back to Yellowknife, soon after spring break-up on the Mackenzie River, meant crossing on the Johnny Berens ferry.

Crossing the Mackenzie in May

Tires blocked, I stand with my friend to watch the river,

the narrow path through ice the ferry cuts—
 just wide enough.
 Far out to the right, chaos in stacked slabs
 loom so large I'm afraid to look,
 imagining that thick cold shell
 broken, rising and falling, rumbling
 with muscle and jostle
 to crush us all.
 I look ahead instead, while we push through bergy bits,
 white on white on white on black.
 A grate and grind of floe
 a shunt and shake so slow we almost stop,
 reverse, around a mass, a chunk
 so large we gasp, then smile secure in steel.
 At last we dock
 lug up the snowy bank along the long approach
 and drive beside the churning spring break-up to
 Providence.

In the text *Writing & Healing*, Anderson and MacCurdy (2010) report that psychologists Larry Dossey, Thomas Moore and John Bradshaw all identify writing as the single most effective therapeutic tool for healing. They further state that "Translating events through writing affects the way we organize and encode experience in the mind, changing the memory of it and allowing us to more readily assimilate the experience and set it aside" (p.342). By writing about various events and reliving the feelings, I manage to use poetry as a fixative in memory and then move on.

My mother, Jenny, came to live with me in the Northwest Territories after the death of my father. She lived with me until her death in 1990. We had a happy relationship and everyone deserves to have someone like her in their life. She believed in me and trusted me. However, she refused to talk about her early life and her family. After her death, I got in touch with her youngest sister, Jessie, now the only remaining member of her family of origin. I suggested we take a trip together, and I hoped to find out more about the family. Jessie and I took a long bus trip across Canada and the southern United States and back. When I tried to get her to tell me about family history she would change the subject and say something like "Let's talk about food" or "I taught school for 44 years and would still be teaching except I wanted to let a young person have the opportunity." Once, at the end of the trip, she said, "When we go up North to play [she was in a band], the guys say 'it gets pretty dark up there,' and I feel bad." She knew that I knew they were referring to 'Indians.' I wrote this after I got back home—about one leg of the trip, just outside of Yellowknife:

Fort Rae to Enterprise

She has a chocolate cupcake for the boy in front of me,
 Then sits beside the driver and offers him her tea.
 Dark brown eyes are flashing, lighting up the night,
 The girl from Rae is lovely on this October flight.

Jessie/We have a wandering bone/Jessie

It comes from somewhere, not from home.

Let's go down south to Musicland

Drifting like a country band.

A puffy yellow jacket's on the seat across the aisle,
 A Dene throws his duffle there, leans back against the pile.
 He looks out at the frozen lake, then turns and falls asleep,
 Watching by the window I've forgotten why I weep.

Jessie/I have a restless nerve, and/Jessie

This nomad blood that needs a curve.

We'll look for drums that drum us free

To follow the Cristinaux Cree.

A Chapter Regarding Parental Loss

We learn about our culture by story, from history books to the news or bedtime reading. Stories tell us how to see our place in society and its place around us, telling us what to expect of each other and ourselves, and enable us to communicate meanings, insights and articulate complexities. (Bolton, 2010, p.203)

A family story is one we treasure because it explains who we are. By constructing family stories out of experience we splice together the phenomena of our own existence. In *Reflective Practice*, Gillie Bolton (2010) writes that "a story is an attempt to create order out of a chaotic world, strong stories have unique power to make sense of issues. Stories penetrate human understanding more deeply than the intellect: they engage feelings" (p.9). The death of a parent is a world of loss to the child and leaves unanswered questions for life.

Our father, Lars, immigrated to Canada from Norway in 1930. After traveling across the United States and Canada, he ended up in a small town in the prairies called Robin Hood, where our parents met. Our mother, Jenny, was teaching school there and stayed at the boarding house our father visited while looking for a distant cousin. She was Cree on the maternal side; my four siblings and I are Métis. This poem was written to echo my feelings about being Métis, for my mother:

In Praise of the Red River Jig

Listen to the turlitage
 Music of Métis
 Count coup in triple time
 Because the slide of the fiddle pulls us into life
 of moccasins and sashes woven colours of our people
 Because of bannock and tea breaks on the trail
 carts a-rumble deepen grooves to the west
 Because the tune is the beat of our Red River hearts
 Jig a jagged rhythm for our bright ribbon shirts
 Shiny satin flash
 Fringes flare and fly
 Because our floor is the earth of the buffalo hunt
 and pony runs
 Because slippers slap as signal to step a story of then
 and now
 Because when we dance we cry for joy and not
 the past
 Because of Riel, Batoche and Greybonnet, Cut Knife Hill and

Gatling guns
 Because slipjig muskeg 6/8 time silences the swingdance of
 the gallows.

For my father, a poem on my "maiden name":

Née: Oland-Andersen

My name is ship's caulking creaking
 in cooling sun-long days of summer, north of the
 horizon. My name is

 a foot-weary walker of strung-along songs, speaking a
 cardamom tongue. My name has the conqueror's
 gaze drawn to restraint, changing the world
 of a prairie-grass girl. My name became a sign, a
 signal, a visage

 of ties to a faraway country
 where lineage lies.

When I wrote the following poem I was thinking of family dynamics—the changes, gains and losses, illness and death, and how they affect our relationships.

Precession*

Astronomers say the earth precesses,

 ever so slightly leans,

 bows, and so the stars appear

 to move from their gold and ivory thrones.

 (and I am bent with loss)

We seem to stir their orbits,

 the slow circular procession

 of kings and queens,

 past our celestial poles.

 (my kiltered world askew)

Polaris to the fore we trail,

 turning in conical motion

 (your planetary shift)

lighting the dark matter

 in spinning spiral arms.

 (this long Platonic year)

**The slow change in direction of Earth's axis of rotation: one cycle takes nearly 26,000 years, or one Platonic year.*

In *Reflective Practice*, Bolton (2010) continues: "the narratives we tell and write are perspectival, values and understanding can be widened and deepened...a creative leap is required to support this perspective, and the effective ability to mix tacit knowledge with evidence based or explicit knowledge" (p.16). These samples of what I have written are part of the mechanism of poetry I have used to cope with the deaths of irreplaceable people in my life.

A Chapter Describing a Marriage

There is a process within the experience of loss that impels people to follow some path of change. Things can never stay the same. (Hedges, 2005, p.114)

In *Poetry in Healthcare Settings*, Diana Hedges (2005) discusses the use of writing in healing, and states:

there are plausible physiological reasons for thinking that the calming effect of the literary arts and especially poetry, is related to an interplay between the left and the right cerebral hemispheres of the brain: the left hemisphere analyses and responds to language, the right visualizes images and responds to rhythm. This interplay could activate the limbic system at the base of the brain where thought meets emotion (p.119).

Writing of the loss of my marriage, which was due to the death of my spouse, turned into an exercise of imagining a picture of achievement rather than defeat. A word picture reflecting the beauty, harmony and movement of the stars developed, to help me cope with bereavement.

A Geocentric Paradigm

You are a cool magnetic island on the surface of the sun
 And a vast celestial sphere to which the stars and planets seem attached.

You are the north circumpolar constellations that never set
 The ecliptic at vernal equinox, a place of rising energy.

You are a spectrum of analyzed light spreading infrared to ultraviolet
 The elegance of the idea, a symmetry among the motions

orbits circular
 orbits in ellipse.

In keeping with this imagery, binary stars are fascinating to me, and a study of them made me want to relate them to something I understood, or had a kind of grasp of: our marriage.

Gravitational Links

Two stars in a binary system
 Revolving
 Light years fill the space
 between us
 My companion

Transfers mass
 in the streaming
 Stellar wind.

I was married for forty-three years. It was a successful and happy marriage; one of my sisters says it was a marriage made in heaven. I don't know about that. What I do know is that it was very hard work because we were so very different.

Nebula

Deep in Orion's sword
 You live in a city of stars
 With four gates called Trapezium.

Across black space between us
 Your filaments twist and wave.
 Glowing, they turn and flare
 Pink-red pink-red pink-red.

I live in Pleiades,
 A distant reflection cluster
 With seven sisters who warn me of you
 Their narrow fingers
 Wind the wind
 Stretch streamers of light
 Cool-blue cool-blue cool-blue.

The parsecs of span between us
 Grows, no matter how strongly you pull
 While we orbit in proper motion,
 A galactic wheel in the sky.

In his preface to *Emotion, Disclosure, & Health*, Pennebaker (2007) asks, "why does translating an event into language affect physical and psychological health?" (p.xiii). He responds by explaining that "an important nonspecific feature of therapy is that it allows individuals to translate their experience into words" (p.3). I have found that translating what has happened to me into the form of poetry releases built-up tension and anxiety and provides emotional relief.

A Chapter Concerning a Man's Death

...it is through the concept of oral medicine, a "writing cure" to paraphrase Freud, and the words of that process that we begin to reconnect. (Wilentz, 2000, p.170)

It took two and a half years in the final stages of my husband's terminal illness for him to succumb. He died quietly, with no complaint of pain—but it was torturous for me. It took a long time for me to begin to want to live again in any normal semblance of order without that spectre hanging over me. I had to withdraw from the continued round of friends and well-wishers visiting in consolation. Eventually, I managed to order my day around reading and thinking about writing. Pennebaker (2007) states that "disclosure of traumatic and emotional experience can promote physical and psychological health. The underlying mechanisms for this phenomenon are cognitive, emotional, biological and social" (p.8). I talked it out and then I had to write it out:

That Morning

You rest against the counter
with the pallidus of morning,
sip Britta-clean water.

Coffee, that latest traitor, has fled.
CBC North plays the Red River Jig
honouring George Tuccaroo's retirement.
I whisper, "Wanna dance?"

You turn and smile, and it is as if
your whole life is still
stretched out before you,
like the Promised Land of milk and honey:
full of sweetness
and laughter
and tender, deathless love.

He was getting weaker each day and I wrote about an incident that happened while he was becoming too weak to get up:

Yucchi's Picture

Yucchi's on his roof again, I say.

The neighbour and his cat.

He takes pictures of aurora for Japanese tourists,
interprets and guides.

He frames a scene against the stars:

Hale-Bopp hanging over our backyard,
snow on the tamarack, and northern lights.

Come and look, I call.

But you're too weak to rise, even on one elbow.

Just tell me, you say.

Later he visits. Gives you a copy.

The comet's not coming back, you say.

He bows and smiles as if he understands.

Maybe he does.

Tough shot—but it turned out good, eh? I say.

Thank you. Enjoy, he says and bows once more.

Pinned to the south wall by your bed

Yucchi's picture reflects the window full of dark sky,

the comet wavers while gravid northern lights

danse sinistre as you lie.

When I think of these things, memories keep flooding back. How difficult the last year of life was in the north. I would remember the horror of watching a strong, healthy man gradually waste away, becoming weaker with each passing day, and the inevitable decline to that "long-lasting house"¹ of death.

"the manner of the mourning..."*

While you sleep beneath grey rock

Ravens sail the skies

They curl black ribbons in the air

As jack pines sigh and sigh

and I could dance the Dagon dance

I would dance the dance of death

carrying the death blanket

looking at the cliffs

through cotton to soak up the blood

of sacrifice

There is a map of sadness in the brain, they say

And with each death we lose our way.

I need to dance a dance of death

A Dagon dance of loss away.

**from Beowulf*

Rita Charon (2006), in the chapter "Telling One's Life," writes of narratives, or pathographies as they are sometimes called, that demonstrate how critical it is to tell of pain and suffering; the process of telling enables patients to give voice to what they endure and to frame illness so as to escape dominion by it.

Without the narrative act of telling and being heard, the patient cannot convey to anyone else—or to the self—what he or she is going through. More radically and perhaps equally true, without these narrative acts, the patient cannot himself or herself grasp what the events of the illness mean (pp.65-66).

This proved true for me, for it was only on reflection and writing that I could come to terms with the enormity, scope and severity of events. The moods of guilt as survivor, helplessness to stop what was happening, and resultant vulnerability could only be addressed by meditation and, later, expression.

⁴from Ecclesiastes 12:5

A Chapter of My Two Sons' Deaths

Our bodies are texts...clerking the records of what we have been through, hoarding evidence of past hurts, remembering as only bodies can the corporeal stabilities that keep us alive. (Charon, 2006, p.122)

On National Public Radio this morning, they played a poem by Ted Kooser that has been set to music by Maria Schroeder and sung by Dawn Upshaw. It is called "Spring," with the lines "*Spring, and the sky ripples with geese/the pond still numb from months of ice...*" It is spring now, but it reminded me of that fall—we were driving to Blackfoot, Alberta, to identify my son's body. We stopped for gas in some little town and, as we waited, I looked up and saw wave after wave of geese flying south. No one was interested. A few years earlier, one fall, we had taken my son to Oak Hammock Marsh, north of Winnipeg, to see the major continental flyway for geese in Canada where they fly over for hours and days on their way south—one of the signs in nature that marks significant events. Later, I wrote this:

Trail Ways

I remember the geese

Wave after wave

Flying vees

A Victory?

Death, where is your victory?

I said look

This must be a flyway

No one cared

Then, it was just

Another ending of

A summer

Of

A life.

It has been said that the death of one's child is the worst, the most painful loss that a human can face, and I have had to face it twice. Survivors need to tell their stories in order to survive...According to Anderson and MacCurdy (2000):

By writing about traumatic experiences, the dual possibilities of permanence and revision, the chief healing effect of writing is thus to recover and exert a measure of control over

that which we can never control—the past. As we manipulate the words on the page, as we articulate to ourselves and to others the emotional truth of our pasts, we become agents for our own healing (pp.6-7).

I had two sons, both of them are dead now. Each was killed in an accident several years apart. The biblical story of Rizpah motivated this poem as I imagined her agony, reflected in my own:

Rizpah*

My sons, my sons.
I lie on woven sackcloth of dark
goat's hair spread out upon the mountain
exposed to wolves and wind.

My sons, my sons,
killed on the first day of harvest.
Barley grain for bread.
I guard your still bodies
open to ravens and rain.

My sons, my sons.
Your vain dead father, King Saul, held you dear,
named your names, Mephibosheth and Amoni.
You died for his proud faults.
Let me bury your bones with Jonathan.

My sons, my sons.
My garments of mourning are heavy with tears.
Give me the burial place of kings
for the sons of a king.

My sons, my sons.
May this wilderness echo my cries,
for King David is kind.
He knows loss.
Forgiven, he'll forgive
my sons.

*Rizpah, one of the concubines of King Saul of Israel; 1 Samuel 21:1-10

For KGZ:

Clematis of Mental Beauty and the Willow

Willow drops its now pale leaves
floating down to winter
Clematis loses hold
on his climb to the sky.

Now
The willow hangs its shower curtain green
over my window
While rain streams down,

To the right clematis climbs its trestle

and I see him struggle on

And I can't watch it

anymore.

For DZ:

Lullaby

The Northern Lights

come down

around your head

But I wrote the stars for you

The constellations named,

and underlined in red

I wrote the stars for you.

The Northern Lights

grace

your lonely bed

I wrote the stars for you

My child

I wrote the

Stars.

Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (2000), in *Pathography and Enabling Myths: The Process of Healing*, writes:

the very act of writing about one's illness experience seems to be an integral part of an individual's healing process...the need to come to terms with a traumatic experience often involves the need to project it outwards—to talk or write about it; writing about an experience—any experience—inevitably changes it...these are things that enable human beings not only to live through severe illness or the death of a loved one but also to live beyond them... (pp.224-232).

Living beyond such losses seems insurmountable, but it can be done—with faith, family and friends, and a supportive writing practice. I know because that is what has happened to me, and I think I have heard...

"...the lowest note in the universe"

Is B-flat, fifty-seven octaves

Lower than middle C.
 Within the black hole of Perseus constellation
 Near the eclipsing binary
 Algol (when the hot star is hidden
 by the cool one),
 Sounding for two billion years.

But I have heard a lower note,
 It flows down centuries
 From my distorted gravitation
 Allowing escape velocity
 With time dilation and tidal forces
 at the event horizon—
 For my star core has collapsed
 into singularity.

Conclusion

Writing of the helpfulness of poetry in the healthcare setting, Diana Hedges (2005) says, “paradoxically, writing gives us the chance to both go towards the self, and to escape from it” (p.109). She explains that when we use writing for healing we “find places where we have been happy and confident—whole—and re-visiting those places as they have been experienced becomes an important part of the work” (p.113).

This work has been described by many writers in the course material for MAIS 621 (Narrative Possibilities: The Transformative Power of Writing, Story and Poetry in Personal and Professional Development)—Byron Katie (2002), Gillie Bolton (2010), and others. Each has provided necessary and practical information for use in assisting one towards resolution of the emotional turmoil that results from trauma in one form or another. Practical application of their suggestions does help one work toward regaining emotional stability and restoring inner peace.

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