

Poetry as Play

Kent Ira Groff

Writing Nothing

I write about
nothing.
No thing.
Ah! No thing
really matters,
only relationships.

In so few words, nothing led to everything (Einstein could agree). So when you can't write, write about not writing. What comes out of this Zen-like practice may be spare, often rhythmic phrases.

Why poems (if you write fiction or essays)? Poetry can function for writers like practicing arpeggios for a musician or stretches for an athlete. It sharpens one's eye to notice what Jane Kenyon called "the luminous particular" in the grit—and that leavens any writing.

Poetry taps the spiritual in the secular. It draws on intuitive, imaginative, and intellectual dimensions of our spirituality in undercurrents of dreams and disappointments, sex and suffering. The flow of words and images through our fingertips voices our deep yearning—and that's praying.

In India, attempting to pray, poems kept cascading in my head on a month-long "silent" retreat. I wanted to be still. What to do? My guru and I decided that one way I pray is to play with words.

India Vigils

At 4 a.m.
I am not sure
if the blare I hear
is the sound of a mosque
or a fierce mosquito
near my ear.
But I am sure
it is a call to prayer.

Poetry heals. In *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*, John Fox shows how poem-making renews the bruised child in each of us.

Writing Ledge

On this writing day, use my pain this way:
Let it take me to the edge of existence
till each phrase is a ledge for the Presence.

Poetry echoes the body's primal rhythms: waking sleeping—breathing, heartbeat. It focuses us with spare images while culture bombards us with myriad words.

Practical ways to play. Right on the spot, when an idea for a poem catches me, I scribble it in my journal or on a Visa receipt. In a day or so I let the poem come forth in my journal—with lots of strikeouts, arrows, corrections. Next I type it in my computer (making more word changes and line breaks); sometimes it takes a shape—a heart, a tree. Finally, I print the poem—and use a glue-stick only on the back edge (nearest the spine of my journal), then attach the print copy so I can peek underneath and see my messy original.

If you fancy you're not a poet, I recommend a simple exercise to folks whether in prisons or universities: Write about an obstacle that's blocking you, but instead of using complete sentences left to right, try writing short phrases down the page. Often it's a poem.

“Writing on the edge is the only way / to let your character see the light of day.” Poetry is edgy. It opens a door for the muse to roam around and turn your house upside down.

Loose Goose

This muse is on the loose.
Ah! She is the Wild Goose
and her egg of gold
is in the story told.

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