

Why poetry? What has observation of nature and recording it got to do with writing poems? These are useful questions. Let me suggest some answers.

I will coach you toward a way of writing that will help you and your students discover and express ways our human senses and minds interact with the rest of nature.

When we think about communication, it is usually communication with others. This is interpersonal (between persons) communication. Poems certainly reach from person to person.

More importantly, I suggest, the act of writing poems allows us to speak intimately with ourselves. This is intra-personal (within the person) communication.

Consider the human condition. We are notoriously divided beings. We “civilized” people are perhaps the most fragmented creatures on Earth. This is not news. Plato wrote of humans as astride two chariots at once, teams of horses thundering apart as the driver struggles to keep them going in one direction so he is not torn in two.

Colloquial language has its wisdom. We say we have to get it together, “it” being the divisions within the self.

We argue with ourselves; we natter at ourselves in endless internal dialogues. We want to go in all directions at once. We dream that we can separate thought and emotion. In the sciences, we steadfastly pretend that we can be “objective”, ignoring the fact that most scientific discovery originates in the subjective interior world of intuition and association.

We look at brain research. We speak of the division of the neocortex, right hemisphere, left hemisphere, and their varying ascendancies in persons. We study the whole brain, and see that

we contain the essentials of three brains: an old alligator at the brain stem that takes over in road rage; a general mammal-pattern brain atop the stem (the limbic system) that is the seat of memory, emotion, and valuing; and plunked on top of that the enormous human neocortex—two thirds of brain mass.

(This is the triune brain paradigm developed by neurologist Paul McLean. See a brief discussion here:

<http://www.kheper.net/topics/intelligence/MacLean.htm> )

We struggle to be whole, to find a sense of oneness within. We observe infants with deep envy of their wholeness. We sense the incredible NOW presence of other mammals and birds. We seek ways to integrate our scattered strands of self—mind & body; emotion & rational intellect; short-term & long-term; pleasure/pain, and so on.

We seek this whole, integrated self in religious belief, in spiritual seeking of many kinds, in voluntary simplicity.

The process of making poems is a way to give the speechless parts of ourselves the power of words. Creating poems is a way to discover what needs to be said by parts of the self that are usually out-of-awareness. When we have allowed this intra-personal communication to take form outside the body, in words, we feel more nearly whole.

When we speak powerfully to the self, using the techniques of poetry, we discover, often with surprise, that this speech also speaks powerfully to others.

Perhaps the smartest and simplest thing I've ever said is:

Shared pain shrinks.

Shared joy grows.

When we hurt, we are quick to share that; we have practiced it from birth. On the other hand, many flounder when they try to

express their joy, their pleasure in life. We have been quite thoroughly trained to use and respond to worn-out clichés by Hallmark and the other card companies. To write from your joy means finding personal ways that rise from your unique personality. Advertising and the market economy have debased most visual images of beauty by tying them to products I don't want to mention. So it has become more difficult to write about beauty, or even discuss it in our culture, and it gets short shrift in our schools.

A great many of our daily joys, even in cities, have to do with nature. Being suddenly captured by a quality of light in afternoon, appreciating the stubborn weeds that refuse to let blacktop stop them, splashing water in a fountain, the arch of trees along a residential street, sparrows making sweet noise in the ivy on a building.

Earth Journaling with kids is intended to strengthen their intuitive bonds with the natural, and where they have been suppressed, to reawaken them. This begins with learning the concept of daily gifts from Earth. No matter where we live, there are many. We are offered gifts of beauty, gifts of laughter and surprise, intricacy of pattern, and gifts of learning, some of which is difficult, but gifts nonetheless.

We do not accept all the gifts we are offered. We ignore many, because we can't really afford to see them all. It would overwhelm us. Instead, we tend to notice and accept those gifts that fit our current emotional state. If you are attentive, Earth will offer you images you need to help you heal. That sounds extraordinary, but it's true. We urbanized and sprawlized folks suffer from nature deprivation. We cherish the myth of wilderness—places where no human has ever trod—(Native Americans have a good laugh at that one), and we confuse wilderness with the wild, which is among many things, the power that centers every seed, and greens that blacktop parking lot.

Journal entries do not have to be entirely made of words. They

often benefit from visual settings, as in my Morning Earth entries. Especially in the classroom, brief poems of celebration often benefit from added elements that give the poem a context, such as a prose comment before or after, a pencil sketch, color, a rubbing, a nature print, a photo, or an actual natural object from the moment you received the gift.

One goal of this kind of writing is clarity. Another is simplicity. In celebrating a gift from Earth, there is no particular reason to show off your ego by being clever. We are all smart and clever. Big deal. The kind of writing I want from you is quite different from much recent poetry, which is often obscure, complex, too long, allusive, ambiguous, and celebrates the writer's ego more than the subject of the poem.

Poetry exists in every human culture, every language. It all shares certain strategies. All cultures' poetry uses rhythm, which is a sequence of silences and sounds in a variable pattern. All cultures' poetry uses repeated sounds in several ways. All cultures' poetry uses the sense image to engage the emotions as it presents experience.

Poems rise from brief experiences, catch breaths in our lives, intense moments of sensory experience that we remember with emotional impact. Poems rarely rise from ideas. They often rise from moments.

The joy of writing is discovering what you have to say as you perform the physical act of writing. If you succeed in giving speech to your speechless parts, the conscious you does not know what is about to be said. (This is why we don't outline poems.) Robert Frost said, "I write to find out what I know that I didn't know I knew." It is pure pleasure to find yourself saying likeable things you didn't know were inside you.

Making art is part of our genetic endowment. We arrive on earth with a full array of creative potentials. Too often, life and school suppress those potentials and replace them with fear.

To sum: I'm asking you to write a kind of poetry because the strategies of poetry speak to the body and senses. Rhythm and sounds engage our physiology, the sense image leaps into our eyes or ears to make a picture in the mind's eye, which in turn swings around the heart and creates emotion, and the meanings of words engage the thinking mind.