Self-Healing Through Poetry Writing

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The author (a psychiatric nurse) provides a personal perspective on the self-healing aspects of writing poetry.

It's true confession time: I've been a poet all my life, but decades went by when I didn't believe it.

I am also a nurse—a psychiatric nurse, which scares a whole lot of people into word constipation. Clients have told me, "If I don't say what I'm thinking and feeling, then you can't twist my words into something I don't mean." Words affect some people just the opposite—sort of a diarrhea of the mouth. When I taught business writing to Fortune 500 executives, they often told me, "If one word is good, two or three might be better. I want to make sure I have everything down so others will understand." Trouble was, it was usually down in passive voice and four-syllable words.

I realized that both these groups of people didn't trust words. And—here's the real shocker—neither did I. My entire professional life has been built around words, and I've either treated them like powerful beings I don't dare look in the eye or like slippery chameleons that would betray me at the turn of a phrase. Either way, I've kept my distance. Only now, half-way through my life, am I learning to trust their power to heal.

As a child I liked the sounds of words—'winding' and 'willow,' 'velvet' and 'magnificent.' I especially liked words in which the sounds imitated what the words meant, 'rushing' and 'gurgling' 'crack' and 'squeak.' I liked the way differently spelled words rhymed; I put moon/June and sea/me into some bad poetry trying to reconcile a past life as a sailor.

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with the present storms of third grade. I wondered why words spelled similarly were pronounced differently, like 'rough,' and 'bough,' 'through,' and 'cough.' In nursing school I took anatomy and saw an autopsy; I learned how the body was put together and how it functioned, but the way words worked often remained a mystery.

I did get some mixed answers from my parents. My father, the historian, the English teacher, the man, told me language was precise. My mother, the woman, the obedient daughter, the math teacher who wanted to be an architect, told me “Take a Dutchman for what he means, not what he says.” My father said, “Say ‘John and I went fishing’ not ‘John and me.’” Mother said, “When my sisters and me were in highschool, my mother bought we girls one good dress each year.”

I believed them both. Because of confusion about subject and object, I grew up with a boundary issue, as psychiatrists love to say about certain folks who aren’t always clear about where they leave off and the rest of the world begins. My mother’s directive to go beyond words to intentions sharpened my mind-reading skills, but it left me with the impression that my father’s precise words were never quite adequate.

I thought learning more about psychology might help me understand meaning and motives. I earned two college degrees, married, had two children, divorced, and went to counseling. All those activities sharpened my awareness of my love-hate relationship with words. This poem I wrote a few years ago expresses my feelings well:

**LANGUAGE IS A LIQUID**
its mercurial meanings
a heavy habit  intoxicating
like rare brandy  take an ounce
of verb and a jigger of noun
squeeze the adjectives over the rocks
distilled by the fire after midnight
ice melts  precipitating questions
diluted by too much talk  words
give no answers  only
partially quench my thirst

So there they were, all my feelings about words out in the open on the page. Whether you’ve had countless hours of counseling or only watched Oprah, there’s one thing you know about feelings—once you recognize them, you’ve got to act or you’re doomed to relive the same problems. I was tired of rejections—both in my life and from publishers. It seemed natural to write poems about my feelings and to read poems others