

## Poetry therapy techniques applied to a recreation/adult education group for the mentally ill

Charles Gillispie\*

4110 W. Sweetwater Dr., Tucson, AZ 85745, USA

*This article describes how poetry therapy principles and techniques, such as the isoprinciple and the collaborative poem, are applicable to adult education for the mentally ill. The author describes how these techniques were applied during a semester-long writing workshop conducted at a day-treatment programme for mentally ill adults. Samples of student-generated poems are included.*

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The purpose of this article is to report on the use of poetry therapy in a writing workshop designed for mentally ill adults. The workshop, which emphasized poetry, was part of a Recreation/Adult Education Group in a state-funded day-treatment programme serving the mentally ill.

The poetry workshop consisted of 10 to 12 adults diagnosed with a variety of mood disorders and thought disorders. The group met for 60 minutes on a weekly basis for five months. Each participant had a case manager at the site of the workshop, who provided the clients with a weekly assessment, which included an examination of general affect, medication efficacy and basic living skills.

Most of the clients who participated in the programme were able to live in the community independently by way of subsidized housing or federal assistance. Others required the structure and care of a group-home environment. Some of the participants had attended college courses before the onset of their mental illness. A few were barely able to read and write.

This article outlines some of the strategies I employed to facilitate the poetry workshop, in which I set out to build a bridge between a heterogeneous group of mentally ill adults and the sophisticated pleasures of creative writing.

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\*Corresponding author. Tel: +1 520-743-0411; Email: Charles.Gillispie@CottonwooddeTucson.com

**Establishing ethos and the isoprinciple**

As with any group of workshop participants, my first chore was to establish my character and intention as workshop leader. I wanted the group to have a clear idea of how I intended to fulfil my role. Ancient rhetoricians would have called this process of clarification “establishing ethos” (Crowley, 1994). Although we usually do not use this term in mental health settings, I find it helpful. In establishing ethos, I ask myself, “What kind of image do I want to project? What can I disclose about myself that will be most helpful to this particular group?”

There were two areas of my life that I wanted to communicate about openly to the participants in the workshop. First of all, I disclosed that a member of my family was diagnosed twenty-five years ago as a paranoid, delusional schizophrenic. I shared some of my experiences from a family-member’s point of view. Secondly, I described my years of education at the university, studying poetry and literature; and how frustrated I had become with my own writing. As my love of poetry was still intact, I hoped to work with writing in a different way, outside of the classroom. I let the group know it was my intention to learn something of value from them, as well as teach what I had already learned. And with the exception of a few basic ground rules to maintain safety in the group, I was very open to new ideas and improvisation.

I ended my introduction by reading an original poem titled, *A Letter to My Mother After Reading John Keats* (Gillispie, 1999). It was my intention to demonstrate to the group a willingness to share personal work, as well as demonstrate an important ideal of mine—that being the transformative quality of writing. Through poetry, even the most unpleasant experiences can be explored safely and gleaned for wisdom:

*A Letter To My Mother After Reading John Keats*

Barbara: I’m eating breakfast this morning  
on the patio, underneath the mock-  
orange. I have a box of maps beside me  
(my way of keeping in touch with family)

and the new edition of Peterson’s  
Field Guide. As I write this letter, I hear  
an English Sparrow crack sunflower seeds  
at the feeder. I have my own need

to penetrate the closed surface of things—  
Funny how silence, once established, clings.  
Most of all I want to hear your story—  
especially those years you lived obscurely

with some Private AWOL from the army  
in Texas, around 1963 ...

I want to hear about the campsite

he made by the river where you slept nights  
all summer in love, and later, trouble.  
Was that the first time you heard the gentle  
curve of water folding into a bank  
while stretched in the grass enjoying the dank  
odor of leaves and the shape of a man?  
What you can't tell I think I understand.  
I've been to Texas. I've looked for that place  
between small towns along the Interstate—  
plenty of room for the silence  
strung between us like a barbed-wire fence.  
We stand on opposite sides, embarrassed,  
talking birds and rivers and county fairs  
as if we lived in a different century  
when nature still provided transcendence.  
Better to describe the Western Tanager  
than some scar left from my father's anger—  
that Romantic who married you,  
who brought us together but pulled us apart, too.  
(As we admire nature's artifacts  
we forgive his involvement in things like that).

This particular poem had an effect on the group in line with Leedy's (1969) concept of the "isoprinciple". The emotional tone and essential content of the poem resonated with most clients. As would be expected, many of the clients were estranged from family members, or simply separated geographically, and unable to stay in contact.

As our discussion deepened, I asked each member to write a "letter poem" of their own, to any person or any object, that might express their feelings about being connected or disconnected from others. The two examples I include in this article represent the wide range of basic writing skills in the group, but also the effectiveness of the exercise, regardless of skill level:

Dear heart,

What are you trying two  
do [to] me[?] I still miss my Grand-  
daddy. My father is 72 years  
old. and he is handy capped.I [met] him at the circus  
parade [in] downtown Washington DC.I miss all of my parents  
except the kool breeze.I have been doing great (LT)

In spite of obvious deficiencies in spelling and basic grammar, LT's poem communicates a profound sense of emotional loss. The first sentence alone, ("Dear heart, what are you trying two do [to] me[?]") resonated with other participants in the group, and drew comments such as, "I know what you mean". In this regard, it too operated on the concept of the isoprinciple, corresponding with the emotional tone of the group as well as its collective experience.

That being the case, as workshop facilitator, I directed the clients toward an aspect of hope in the poem as a way of diffusing this enormous sense of loss (Mazza, 1999). When asked directly, "Does this poem have hope?" participants focused on two aspects within the poem. First of all, LT herself mentioned the circus parade in lines six and seven, recognizing this as a pleasant memory. Other participants shared memories of parades that they experienced as children, remembering how exiting it was to see clowns and other costumed characters.

Secondly, a client recognized line nine ("except for the kool breeze") as an aspect of hope, even though it was hard to determine what it actually meant. I asked LT, the author, to let us discuss this line as a group to see if we could make sense of it without any guidance from her. Someone suggested that the cool breeze was like Mother Nature comforting LT because her parents had died. Someone else talked about the cool breeze in a metaphoric sense, stating, "There's always something that comes along, like a cool breeze, just when you need it most". A dependable roommate was offered as an example. Or finding money in a coat pocket unexpectedly. In this manner, the group "revised" LT's poem, reading their own interpretations of hope into the line. After sufficient discussion, I gave LT an opportunity to clarify what the line meant for her.

Here is a second letter poem generated from a member of the workshop:

To: The Higher Power Co.

From: Me

Re: My Soul

Dear Sir or Madam or Whoever  
this concerns, I have written to ask you  
for a new soul. I am afraid mine has a  
defect in it that is also connected to  
my emotions and brain but those are  
in another category from yours and I  
will write to the respective companies for  
replacements for those but back to my soul  
matter. Mine has left me or it has an extreme  
defect. I think (ha ha) I am just a husk  
walking and talking, floating from day to day.  
I feel that the one I was issued at birth  
was flawed and I am asking for a  
replacement (if such things can be arranged)  
or does one have to die and [be] born again

to have one's soul replaced? Please respond  
and let me know what I must do to gain  
a replacement.

Sincerely but Soulless,  
A.

In contrast to the first example, A's poem demonstrates a very sophisticated use of language and convention. Her choice to address her poem to God, as it were, in the form of a business letter is both funny and deeply serious. Her piece operated on the concept of the isoprinciple insofar as each member of the workshop resonated with the emotional and intellectual premise of the poem: "As a mentally-ill person, am I defective beyond repair? Have I lost my soul, the very thing that makes me human, because of my mental illness?"

Many members of the workshop shared experiences of being misunderstood by family members or even strangers because of their mental illness. Some complained of being treated like a child, or worse, treated like a "freak". Others related to feeling like their brain and emotions weren't connected properly, noting that their medications often exacerbated the sensation.

When I asked the group directly, "Does this poem have hope?" participants focused on two aspects. First, someone pointed out the fact that that A had direct access to the "Higher Power Co." at all was hopeful. To get a new soul, all she had to do was write a letter! This led the group into a discussion about prayer and if prayers are ever really answered. Secondly, someone mentioned that fact that the poem itself was a sort of joke, meant to make people laugh and, in that regard, was hopeful. This led the group into a discussion about laughter—how it feels good to laugh, especially when depressed or sad. A, the author, admitted that she often makes jokes and laughs, even when she's depressed, as a way of trying to feel better. Interestingly, she actually performs that kind of laughter in the poem, during her parenthetical "ha ha" in line 10.

Again, as facilitator, I gave the group an opportunity to discuss and develop hopeful aspects of the poem in an attempt to balance the sarcastic despair expressed in A's letter to God.

### **The sociopoetic process**

After meeting weekly for a month, spending our time together in the manner I have just outlined, I introduced the group to the idea of collaborative poetry. At this point in the workshop, the core group had dropped to seven regular participants. These individuals exhibited a great deal of investment in the workshop and, more significantly, a great deal of willingness to experiment with poetry in new ways.

The following poem was written as a collaborative exercise. I asked each member of the group to begin a poem describing how he or she felt, right at that moment. To facilitate collaboration, I had each member trade poems with someone else every 30 seconds. I encouraged the group to respond to previously written lines

without worrying about making sense. After six or seven rounds, I gathered the poems together and we discussed the results:

*Monkey Fever*

I am lonely within  
 But yet I'm not alone.  
 I feel Blue.  
 I still want to tame the monkey swinging  
 around in my head.  
 Don't even think of putting him in the soup!  
 Leave my Monkey alone.  
 I feel nothing like depression.  
 I have people with me.  
 And my Monkey is mine and mine alone.  
 It's my Choice to take him or leave him  
 at home alone.  
 I am like the poet Robert Frost  
 walking alone with others inside.  
 When I feel depression I walk  
 further on.  
 When I feel fine I slow down.  
 I have my monkey  
 But yet I have no one in my life.

As would be expected, this poem reflects a number of contradictory statements and positions: "I feel Blue", "I feel nothing like depression". "I have people with me", "But yet I have no one in my life". After I read this poem out loud to the group, for the purpose of process-discussion, I asked them to pretend that one person had written the poem. I asked the group to try and explain how so many contradictions could exist within one individual.

What followed was a rather sophisticated discussion about the nature of loneliness. One participant related to the first two lines, "I am lonely within/ But yet I am not alone". She described feeling lonely even when coming to the day-treatment programme, surrounded by people she considers friends. Another participant related to lines thirteen and fourteen: "I am like the poet Robert Frost/ walking alone with others inside". He stated that he enjoys spending time alone and didn't necessarily feel lonely just because other people weren't around.

I pointed out to the group that the word "alone" appears in the poem five times and asked other members to elaborate on their use of the word and their experience with loneliness. In this manner, our process-discussion exhibited the structural characteristics of the "sociopoetic process" (Schloss & Grundy, 1978/1994). We discovered a theme within our group poem and elaborated on this theme during discussion.

In an attempt to direct the group toward an aspect of hope in the poem, I asked them to explain the monkey, pointing out that it seemed to provide a kind of comic relief. I asked the participants who wrote about the monkey to allow the rest of the group to describe how the image works in the poem without any guidance or interpretation from the authors.

One participant suggested that the monkey was like a pet, although not always on its best behaviour, it still deserved to be cared for. Most participants either had a pet or had in the past and acknowledged what good companions they can be. Another participant related the monkey to his racing thoughts, which he usually experienced upon awakening in the morning. He stated, "Monkeys don't mean any harm but they can be irritating". Other group members related to feeling mischievous at times, like a monkey. One participant gave an example of playing a joke on a new staff member at the day-treatment programme.

After the group had its turn at giving meaning to the image, I asked the authors who wrote the image into the poem to comment as well. As facilitator, I summed up our discussion by suggesting that everyone has a "monkey" inside, metaphorically, who is child-like and innocent but also mischievous and troublesome at times. I pointed out that one of the messages in our group poem was to protect that part of ourselves but to also seek help from others. In this manner, I reiterated some hopeful aspect of our group poem.

The following poem is another example generated by the group during the same exercise. It is curiously similar in content and theme:

*My Dog Can*

My hair hurts,  
my meds are out of whack.  
I feel confused.  
I want to go  
Home.  
The dog snarled at me.  
Does he know something?  
The dog can see pain.  
He hears the thumping  
of my heart, slowly  
beating softer.  
He hears the breath  
of my soul slowly  
deteriorating.  
He dials 911.

As the group discussed *My Dog Can*, we continued our examination of loneliness and the role of animals as a source of unconditional support. However, the poem also introduced suicide to our group discussion. Lines 9-15 suggest a suicide attempt that is intervened upon by an amazing dog.

Although I wouldn't have directed participants to explore suicide via poetry, reference to the topic appeared frequently in their poems. As it turned out, almost all of the members of the workshop had either attempted suicide or least felt suicidal at some point during the course of their mental illness. Besides conducting informal assessments of the participants in my workshop, in order to determine if any were actively suicidal, I was diligent about communicating the content of each workshop to the programme director. It was my intention to protect myself from personal liability but also to protect the workshop participants from being challenged beyond their resources.

I was fortunate to have an entire staff available to intervene and follow up with participants if ever that were necessary. To my knowledge, none of the participants I worked with were actively suicidal. As a facilitator, the mere possibility made me that much more determined to end our discussion of each poem with an examination of hopeful aspects, no matter how remote.

### **Goals and Self-Esteem**

After the second month of weekly workshops, the number of regular participants dropped to five. I learned that many participants found it difficult to maintain commitments, such as regular attendance of an adult-education class. According to the case managers I spoke with at the programme, their biggest challenge was to motivate clients to take medications daily and observe regular schedules, especially sleeping patterns.

With this in mind, I welcomed participants to class no matter how sporadically they attended. I also planned each class as a complete "lesson" and always provided all of the materials necessary to participate, such as pencils, books and paper. My goal was to create an atmosphere of affirmation and self-acceptance. I wanted to create assignments and generate discussions in which the participants could succeed, regardless of the level at which they were functioning.

For those who were able to attend the workshop for an entire semester, I planned a class project that would commemorate our time together and provide participants with a tangible reward for their work writing poetry and discussing their experiences at the group level.

I informed the remaining members of the workshop that I hoped to create an anthology of their poetry and present it to them at the end of the semester. I would ask them to choose a title for the anthology and four of their favourite poems written during the workshop. In addition, I would ask them to write a brief biography of themselves, as writers. For my part, I would type the poems, have them copied and bound together professionally and give each participant three copies—one to keep and two to give to others as a gift.

In the two months remaining, we often referred to this project in our workshop. I used it as a point of reference when complimenting a participant on his or her work: "This is one of your better poems. I hope you include it in the anthology". Members

of the workshop also made reference to the project: "This poem is just a practice exercise. I wouldn't choose it as one of my four best".

Our final class together was organized as a poetry reading. Each participant was encouraged to invite a family member or friend and read poems from the promised anthology that I presented that day. It was quite touching to see how much meaning this collection of poetry had accumulated by the end of the semester. The clients were clearly very proud of the spiral-bound anthologies that documented their best work as a group.

I introduced each of the participants by reading the biographies he or she had written to be included at the end of the anthology.

The following pieces represent typical biographies written by members of the workshop that I utilized as introductions during the reading on our last day of class:

A.S. was born in Oregon in 1955. She moved with her family to Arizona in 1959 and has lived there most of her life. A. states she began writing poetry during a five-month stay at the Salvation Army in 1994. She has been writing off and on since that time.

L.S., 48 years old, was born in New Jersey. She has lived in 10 states and Egypt. She currently resides in Tucson, Arizona. L. is the mother of two and grandmother of one. She enjoys reading, travel, and shopping. L. has been writing since the age of 12, and is presently working on a book of short stories titled, *Tales of Miss Adventure*.

Unlike any of our other writing assignments, the biographies were written in the third-person. As an exercise, the biography allowed the members of the workshop to step outside of their current role as "client" in a mental-health system and become "writer" instead. As we staged our reading, I observed a great deal of pride in each participant who read original work, after receiving a rather formal introduction that affirmed their role in the world, apart from mental illness.

## Conclusion

When I agreed to facilitate the poetry workshop in a day-treatment programme, I understood that most of the participants had spent the better part of their adult lives struggling with a mental illness. Because I have personal experience with the mentally ill, as well as some professional experience, I was confident that I could develop an authentic, therapeutic relationship with the group and conduct a productive workshop. That, in addition to my training as a counsellor and a poet, led me to believe that the workshop could be a unique blend of therapy and the language arts.

However, what transpired within the group exceeded my expectations. I did not account for the fact that most of the participants had also spent the better part of their adult lives being diagnosed by psychiatrists, probed by therapists and coached to participate in various group therapies. They exhibited exceptional insight into themselves and each other as well as a willingness to explore psychological issues.

As facilitator, I soon realized that poetry was the catalyst for our group work together, but also the container. When the group dropped to five participants, this was especially true. The group was deeply bonded and members disclosed more and more of themselves—including suicide attempts, unresolved grief and even frustration about sexual dysfunction. As I have demonstrated, focusing on the hopeful aspects of a poem became an essential component of our work together. The poetry not only gave access to feelings and permission to process them, it provided a means of redirecting and reshaping them.

Although not my actual intention, our work with poetry also helped create a social bond between the participants, a bond that carried over to their lives outside of the workshop. By the end of the semester, the members of the workshop referred to themselves as the "Poetry Clique". The members informed me that other clients in the programme saw the workshop participants sitting together before and after our poetry class, smoking together outside and eating their lunch together. These clients jealously referred to the workshop participants as a "clique". The workshop members in turn proudly named themselves the "Poetry Clique".

However, their social bonds spread even further than the day-treatment programme. Two women in the workshop began having sleep-overs on the weekend. One would invite the other to spend a Saturday night at her home. They would share a meal together and watch a movie. Although they had known each other for quite some time, they did not become close until spending a semester together with the "Poetry Clique".

It was my intention during the semester to encourage participants of the workshop to look beyond their role as a consumer of services for the mentally ill. I communicated early on my intention to learn something of value from them as writers and readers of poetry. I consistently asked each member what moved him or her in a poem, what attracted them or repelled them, what interested them or bored them.

In this manner, I learned perhaps what I should have already known: poems that capture authentic human experience, no matter how simple or sophisticated, are the poems that generate the most discussion and identification. As a university-trained poet, I had lost sight of this basic truth. It took me a semester of writing poetry with a group of mentally ill adults, observing these men and women take bold emotional and psychological risks, to reconnect with such a basic premise of the language arts.

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