

Research Space

Journal article

The ears of my ears awake

Field, V.

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The Ears of My Ears Awake

Poetry as a portal to Personal and Transpersonal Growth

Abstract

Many people have experienced an 'awakening' which has led to positive changes in their lives, and a sense of an enhanced reality. In 'The Leap', Steve Taylor (2017) documents the different catalysts for an awakening experience and describes how a transformation may be gradual or sudden, conclusive or temporary. In my work over the past twenty years using poetry therapy techniques with groups, I have often witnessed how a poem facilitates insights and acts as a portal into an enhanced reality. This familiar experience was suddenly made new for me when I read an account by Eckhart Tolle of the first flowers blooming on this planet (Tolle, 2005). Taylor (2017, *ibid*) notes that spiritual literature can facilitate awakening. He describes how poetry 'encourages stillness in the reader' because it requires attentiveness and receptivity. In this reflective essay, I will look at three characteristics of poetry as an art form that may be factors in facilitating awakening, namely: form, rich ambiguity and metaphor, and include reflections on the similarities between poems and flowers.

Introduction – What is a Poem?

One of the earliest uses of poetry, dating back to the biblical Book of Psalms, is to praise. In his 1950 praise-poem, 'i thank You God for most this amazing day', e.e. cummings (as he styled himself), expresses gratitude for the 'leaping greenly spirits of trees / and a blue true dream of sky ... everything / which is natural which is infinite which is yes'. He ends the poem with a description of awakening:

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)
(Cummings, 2008)

It is as if the act of writing the poem has cleansed what eighteenth century visionary William Blake called 'the doors of perception' (Blake, 1994, p.xxii). After expressing wonder and gratitude, the speaker of the e.e. cummings poem can now see the world in its infinite wholeness. Their eyes and ears are fully awake and open. As readers of such a poem, we participate in the process of this cleansing and may ourselves see the world afresh. To quote another North American poet, Robert Frost, a poem is a 'fresh look and a fresh listen' (Pack, 2005, p.193). Poems not only reflect these new perceptions but, I will argue, also facilitate them, creating a fresh awareness, or even awakening.

Poetry is ubiquitous and common to all human cultures. Oral forms include incantations, spells, lullabies and songs. Written forms have existed since the 18th century BCE (the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh). If we use an elastic definition, 'poetry' in Western culture today, includes spoken word and performance poetry, nursery rhymes, prayers, rap, greetings card verses and song lyrics, as well as literary works of art published in book form or online. Many people who report being 'put off' poetry at school may nevertheless respond to some aspect of the 'poetic' in the list above. As an art form, poetry is unique in that the memory of the work of art, is the work itself. The medium is immaterial. A poem handwritten on a paper napkin, reproduced in a letterpress book, or recited from memory, is still the same poem.

Poems, like flowers and other natural elements, come in a multitude of forms and appeal differently to different people. The OED defines a poem as:

A piece of writing or an oral composition, often characterized by a metrical structure, in which the expression of feelings, ideas, etc., is typically given intensity or flavour by distinctive diction, rhythm, imagery, etc.

Poem is also related to the Greek word 'poesis', meaning the process of bringing something into being, from the verb 'to make'. A poem is 'something made' of words and it brings into being a specific way of viewing the world.

I would now like to elaborate on some of the characteristics of poetry suggested by the OED definition.

- A poem uses the sounds of its language in a heightened way. For example, auditory devices such as rhyme, half-rhyme, metre, alliteration, assonance and repetition, move language away from prose towards the qualities of music.
- A poem stretches the meanings of words through innovative syntax, imagery, synaesthetic language, metaphor, allusion, resonance and reference, engaging the imagination and opening up, rather than closing down, possibilities of interpretation. This may be termed a 'rich ambiguity'.
- A poem is satisfying aesthetically, offering a sense of meaning and completion, often on many levels simultaneously. In a poem, form, sound and intention work together to make a pleasing whole.

These characteristics are, for me, the most salient when considering poetry as an art form or a tool for awakening. There are exceptions, of course, where poetry comes close to prose, or is didactic, or deliberately alienating, but most poems with a wide audience meet the above criteria.

Poetry and the Human Condition

Throughout this article, I draw on my experience working with biblio-poetry therapy techniques. Whilst not recognised in the UK by the Health Professions Council (which regulates other expressive arts therapies such as art, dance-movement, drama and music therapy), biblio-poetry therapy has been codified and regulated in the US and internationally by the International Federation for Biblio-Poetry Therapy (www.ifbpt.com). In brief, biblio-poetry therapy is in the intentional use of the reading and writing of poetry to promote health and wellbeing. This intervention works with the natural impulse of people to engage with poetry at times of heightened emotion. There is an increasing evidence base to show that engaging with the expressive arts

in general, and poetry in particular, is beneficial to the whole person, mind, body and spirit.

Poems can be talismanic and are often carried on a person, pinned on a wall at home, or passed on by hand or email. Neil Astley, editor of Bloodaxe Books, a major poetry publisher, had commercial and artistic success with three large anthologies containing a total of 1500 poems that speak to the human condition ('Staying Alive', 2002, 'Being Alive', 2004, and 'Being Human', 2011). What do we mean by the human condition? On the Bloodaxe Books website, the subjects of these poems are listed as:

love and loss; fear and longing; hurt and wonder; war and death;
grief and suffering; birth, growing up and family; time, ageing and
mortality; memory, self and identity; faith, hope and belief;
acceptance of inadequacy and making do...all of human life in a
hundred highly individual, universal poems.

That poems are both individual and universal is a paradox that I believe is central to their efficacy in awakening consciousness. Being able to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity is an indication of psychological maturity. A poem enables us to enter the experience of another person and by doing so, we may deepen our understanding of our own experience. This can happen in two ways: if the experience is a shared one, there can be a powerful sense of not being alone. If the poem expresses something that we have not felt ourselves, then our understanding of what it is to be human is expanded. A poem offers a dynamic sense of inclusivity which is enlivening and can be consciousness raising.

In a companion volume (Staying Alive: Essential Poems from the Staying Alive Trilogy, 2012), Astley selected the 100 poems from these anthologies that had elicited the greatest response from readers of the big anthologies. From those, he singled out 'Wild Geese' by Mary Oliver for the frontispiece. This poem speaks to the moment in a profound way. It addresses the reader directly as 'you', invokes the natural world, engages the physical self, and admits vulnerabilities such as loneliness. Whenever I have introduced 'Wild Geese' in groups, there is often a strong physical response from participants, such as sighs, a visible release of

tension and nods of recognition. There is also sometimes resistance which for me is an indication that the poem is touching important parts of an individual's psyche. 'Wild Geese' might be considered a powerful poetry portal for our culture at this time. The opening line, 'You do not have to be good' is immediately provocative and permission-granting. The closing lines refer to how the wild geese call, 'over and over announcing your place / in the family of things'.

Biblio-Poetry Therapy

Nicholas Mazza (2003), one of the chief theorists of poetry therapy has described a model of a biblio-poetry therapy session comprising three modes: Receptive (R), Expressive (E), and Symbolic (S), collectively known as the RES model.

The receptive element is when someone 'receives' a poem, cognitively, physically, spiritually and at a soul level. Often, a poem is felt before it is understood and the practice of poetry therapy encourages participants to receive the the poem holistically, paying attention to physical responses, such as a sigh, holding the breath or the hands moving towards the heart.

Sometimes this 'taking in' means that a poem becomes part of the person who memorises it. We talk of learning poems 'by heart'. I believe this turn of phrase conveys a profound understand of how poems are received. In Eastern medicine, there is no perceived separation between the nervous systems of the brain, heart and gut. In recent years, Western medical writers (for example, Mayer, 2018 and Rediger, 2020) have described the enteric nervous system as effectively a 'second brain'. We talk about 'gut feelings' when it is difficult to articulate precisely the source of our knowledge. To say we know a poem 'by heart' is not simply a metaphor but a reflection of how we literally embody what is fundamental and important. In Soviet Russia, such learning of poems by heart was a sacred responsibility. Poems on the page could be dangerous for both writer and reader and works by poets such as Anna Akhmatova and Vladimir Mayakovsy only survived Stalin's terror by being learned 'by heart'. In my own groups in the community, people will sometimes show that they have received a poem by spontaneously putting their hand over their heart.

After receiving a poem, we may be moved to write something of our own, what Mazza calls the Expressive mode. There appears to be a natural impulse to write at times of heightened emotion. Many people find themselves (and I use the passive form of words deliberately, as they are often surprised) writing poems at such times. Poems may be happy or sad, written in response to significant personal milestones such as bereavement, funerals, weddings, the birth of a child, falling in love, or in response to public tragedies such as school shootings and the drowning of refugees. One possibility is that, in times of stress or change, the creation of a poem is a form of self-medication, enabling the writer to gain some control over the material of their own life. There is a well-documented link between mental distress or variable moods and creativity in general but establishing a causal link is problematic (see, for example, Kay Redfield Jamison, 1994).

There is extensive research showing that expressive writing benefits physical and mental health. James Pennebaker and Joshua Smyth (2016) have studied the effects of expressive writing in many settings and for many issues, concluding that there are measurable health benefits (physical and mental) in using writing to process life events, especially challenging ones. The literal externalising of painful emotion onto the page and the symbolism of 'getting it out' can be releasing, cathartic and comforting. The benefits of expressive writing have also been used in the workplace and extended to include journalling, reflective and reflexive writing techniques which enable the writer to both discharge emotion and process their own performance (Field and Taylor, forthcoming).

Whilst I see the value of journalling and reflective writing, I believe that working with published poems can bring additional benefits. A poem is an entity that can simultaneously take us out of ourselves and reconnect us to our inner life. Another paradox is by developing a personal response to a poem, especially in the group setting of poetry therapy session, we can experience a deeper sense of oneness with others and the wider world. I will consider how three specific characteristics of poetry - form, rich ambiguity and metaphor – facilitate a transpersonal experience of poetry.

Form

In the opening chapter of 'A New Earth' (2005), Eckhart Tolle imagines the first flower appearing on earth 114 million years ago, emerging from the vegetation that had already covered the earth for millions of years. He says the flower was probably rare and would not have lasted long, as conditions were not yet favourable for flowering plants. But then things changed.

One day, however, a critical threshold was reached, and suddenly there would have been an explosion of colour and scent all over the planet – if a perceiving consciousness had been there to witness it.
(Tolle, 2005, p.1)

Flowers encourage contemplation just as poems do. Tolle suggests that flowers may have been the first objects that human beings valued for their own sakes, with no link to survival. I take this to mean no link to *physical* survival. Flowers have graced rituals, been used to bring beauty into living spaces and as forms of dress, in other words, to promote the survival of the spirit. Until strict infection control, the bringing of flowers to a hospital bed was part of nurturing the whole human being back to health and wholeness. Reading Tolle's account of the beginning of flowers was the impetus for this reflection on poetry and the transpersonal. I had a sense of revelation when it struck me that poems can function in a similar way to flowers.

A poem typically has a characteristic shape. It is possible to distinguish poems from prose on the page without knowing the language in which they are written. The white space around the words is as important as the words themselves. Poetic forms vary from free verse, to ballads, sonnets, villanelles and may include regular metre, repetition and rhyme. A poem is typically boundaried, concise and many fit a single page. It is possible to create a taxonomy of poems in much the same way a botanist might categorise flowers.

Here, I am using 'form' to suggest a satisfying shape, which can be a gateway to the transpersonal. In the natural world, we can be transported by the forms of flowers,

trees, butterflies, birds, leaves, clouds and constellations. All of these can be infinitely variable in form, and yet recognisably an example of the category. In the built environment, cathedrals, temples, mosques, castles, palaces and bridges, may also inspire wonder and a sense of awe.

Poems are forms of language that, like flowers, do not have a utilitarian function, such as passing on information or warning of danger. However, words, in the form of poems, prayers, hymns and incantations, address the spiritual and transpersonal needs of people and may facilitate access to the divine. Tolle cites Jesus and Buddha as two spiritual teachers who used flowers in their teaching. He writes:

The Buddha is said to have given a 'silent sermon' once during which he held up a flower and gazed at it. After a while, one of those present, a monk called Mahakasyapa, began to smile. He is said to have been the only one who had understood the sermon. According to legend, that smile (that is to say, realization) was handed down by twenty-eight successive masters and much later became the origin of Zen. (Tolle, 2005, p.2)

The role of flowers in the teachings of Jesus is more complicated. For example, a reference to the 'lilies of the field' appears in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels. However, the Greek word (κρίνον) can denote any showy flower, including lilies, poppies, narcissus, iris or gladiolus. The reference to 'field' suggests wild rather than cultivated flowers. It has been suggested that 'lilies of the field' could even be a metaphor for wild beasts (Harrington, 1991, p.101). 'Wild' of course has other connotations and an alternative word might be 'free' as used by environmental writer Barry Lopez to describe animals 'still undisturbed by human interference'. (Lopez, 2020). The essence, though, of the teaching is that flowers are inherently beautiful and do not have to labour to become so. Human endeavour will never be able to create something as perfect as a flower. A poem too is an aesthetic object and may, like a flower or wild creature, have a life independent of its writer and readers.

Tolle suggests that part of our enjoyment of flowers comes from recognising something has value for its beauty alone. He claims that what is a seemingly

universal love of flowers, which have no utilitarian function is 'one of the most significant events in the evolution of human consciousness' (Tolle, 2005, p.2). Flowers are 'messengers from another realm, like a bridge between the world of physical forms and the formless' (Tolle, 2005, p.3). In this respect, flowers play a similar role to angels but with the advantage of a material presence that means they can be experienced by many people simultaneously. When we consider a poem such as Mary Oliver's 'Wild Geese', we are also looking at a bridge between physical forms and the formless. The poem invokes numerous forms from the natural world, and yet it is made of ephemeral words. When this poem is read aloud in a group, there is often a palpable, 'poetry tingle' that passes through people indicating we are in the realm of the transpersonal. When members of the group write in response, there are often images and ideas that appear in different people's poems, suggesting that a powerful poem can facilitate synchronicity.

Tolle extends the idea of 'windows into the formless' to include birds, crystals, new-born babies and animals, all of which 'delight even relatively insensitive humans.' (Tolle, 2005, p.5). The natural world is a perennial topic for poems and these images, conjured by words, are similarly a window into the formless, or to put it slightly differently, into a oneness that connects us to something beyond ourselves, something we may struggle to name.

Rich Ambiguity

To return to the analogy of flowers, some poems are simple and easy to 'get' on the first reading. Others are more complex and take time. Perhaps here we can think of daisies and orchids or roses and the way we might respond to different flowers at different times of our lives. Complexity does not equal obscurity, but rather that the poem can reflect different depths of experience simultaneously.

In poetry therapy, and for the purposes of this article, a poem is a piece of writing that is open or 'richly ambiguous'. That means that the reader can 'find themselves' in the poem without being told what to think or conclude. It means that there is no

single correct reading of a poem, even if classroom experiences have told us otherwise. There is no reaching after resolution with an open poem, rather, an embracing of uncertainty.

Reading is an active process where the reader, or listener, brings their entire life experience to bear on a text. The same poem might be seen by someone as sad, by someone else as ironic, or both simultaneously. We can read the same poem a decade later and experience it entirely differently. The same applies to novels and paintings, and this perceived shapeshifting could be one of the reasons great art endures. In Jungian terms, a poem has a light and shadow side and our own light and dark sides come into play as we read it. But this suggests a binary and Ben Knights (1995) in his book, 'The Listening Reader' argues:

But the either/or formulation is not enough. Different meanings may be entertained simultaneously, although the effort to do so requires listener or reader to be willing to tolerate ambiguity. The two planes throw mutual light on each other. They may even be interlinked by a third. (Knights, 1995, p.35)

In my experience, there may be more than three planes on which a poem can be experienced. A poem may seem straightforward on first reading, but closer examination yields wonders and beauty that were not apparent at first. This too applies to objects from the natural world. I have often brought seasonal flowers like snowdrops or daffodils, or autumn leaves, into poetry therapy workshops and encouraged sustained contemplation.

We might call this process 'Coming into Presence'. There does not need to be any agenda, nor any of what John Keats described, in a letter to his brother in 1817, as an irritable 'search after meaning' (Keats, 1947, p.73) In fact, in order to truly come into presence, it is important to cultivate a tolerance for a lack of meaning. John Keats went on to describe this state as 'negative capability' and claimed it is this kind of openness and freedom from agendas or purpose that is most likely to lead to creativity. In this state that we might also be open to the possibility of transformation or to move towards enlightenment or experience a form of *satsang*. Steve Taylor,

when describing how being in the presence of enlightened people can have a powerful effect, suggests that the idea of an aura might offer an explanation.

Spiritual experiences induced by satsang strongly suggest that the esoteric concept of an aura has a basis in fact. They suggest that our being or life-energy isn't just confined to our own mind or body – it radiates out from us, creating an atmosphere (or aura) which can affect the people we come into contact with. (Taylor, 2020)

I would like to extend this idea of an aura to objects which I believe also carry an energy field capable of influencing our sense of ourselves and opening us to the transcendent. The obvious ones, such as those listed by Tolle, include flowers, birds and crystals but as shrines all over the world testify, clothes, body parts and other objects which have touched or been touched by saintly beings are believed to have transformative powers. Everyday life for many people is hurried and goal-oriented and there may be few opportunities to stop and look and to contemplate. Being actively present and staying with the feelings that arise is an unusual experience for many, and one that may lead to profound change.

A poem though, unlike birds or flowers, is intangible but I believe it too may have an aura. As mentioned above, poetry is the only art form that is truly transcendent in the sense of being capable of existing solely as a memory. So, when a poem evokes our senses through mention of, say, coffee, a sunset, the song of a blackbird, hot tar on a road, or a finger caught in a door, our sensations are closely tied to our experience. Yet, despite the absence of actual coffee, in a group, its evocation can lead to a powerful collective experience. This can be achieved through leaps of association. If I were to say, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', many people would find themselves experiencing the wonder of daffodils growing along a lakeside. They would come into the presence of the daffodils. The words 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' have the aura of daffodils. (Wordsworth, 2001, p.126).

This relates to the earlier discussion of the Bible passage about the 'lilies of the field'. The New Testament is translated from Greek into English and as we have seen, there is discussion about which English words most accurately reflect the original

intention. A poet translates human experience, whether inner or outer, into a form of words to convey that experience to the reader. The reader translates the words into their own inner experience which is unlikely to be identical to that of the poet. This leads to the rich ambiguity that enables a poem to be read and re-read and still yield new possibilities.

When a group shares a poem aloud, there is a sense of 'coming into presence' as we all enter the same transpersonal space created by the poem. This space is mysterious and reciprocal. Sometimes, I perceive it as I have just described, with all of us 'entering the poem', at other times, it is as if the poem itself generates a space, opening us up imaginatively, spiritually and collectively.

Metaphor

A poem that I return to over and over again, both personally and when working with groups, is Robert Frost's 'Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening', first published in 1923. On the surface, it describes stopping to contemplate woods filling up with snow and it also acts as a metaphor for many other aspects of human experience.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Why does this poem have such power? The reaction to hearing it read in a group is often physical and visible: tears, sighs, gaze directed upwards, a visible relaxing of the body. Many people know it by heart, and it is a popular poem at funerals. Small children love the magical sense of a world transformed by snow and the horse shaking its bells. People at the end of life can see snow as obliterating the details of the world and darkness coming in. For those facing specific life situations such as relationship breakdown, incarceration, addiction, diagnosis of serious illness, betrayal, bereavement or whatever might constitute a 'loss of dreams', the darkness, the woods, the horse and the promises can take on powerful and specific meanings.

This is an easy poem to memorise as the rhymes form a chain from one stanza to the next. It also operates on a para-language level with four rhymes – sounding 'oh, oh, oh', 'ear', 'ear', 'ear', 'ake', 'ake', 'ake', 'eep', 'eep', 'eep'. Each of those endings sets up echoes of other rhyming words that form a subterranean poem in the psyche of the reader. Ted Hughes describes these sounds as 'organically linked to the vast system of root-meanings and related associations, deep in the subsoil of psychological life, beyond our immediate awareness of conscious manipulation' (Hughes, 1997, p. xv). It is difficult to read the final repeating lines of the Robert Frost poem above without slowing down and sighing in the last line. The poem itself slows and stops, taking the reader with it.

Like all great poems, this one is both specific and universal. It is possible for a group of people to create many different narratives based on this vignette, imagining who the person is on the horse, their relationship to the owner of the woods and where they are travelling to and from and why. The poem is wide open in that respect and again, the reading of it is an active process.

Conclusion

This essay has, to use a metaphor of movement, wandered through the related terrains of poetry and consciousness to examine some of the characteristics of poems that might lead to changes in the reader or listener. The inciting and inviting image for me to begin writing was reading Eckhart Tolle's account of the first flowers coming into being (Tolle, 2005, p.1). His assertion that their scent and colours were dependent on a 'perceiving consciousness' led me to explore poems as analogous objects, also dependent on a perceiving consciousness.

My many hours spent watching poems coming into being, offering their colours, scents, songs and stories to their readers were somehow transformed into an image of a rich meadow, every poem capable of seeding more poems. And these poems may change their readers, leading to the possibility of a new or renewed consciousness. In the words of e e cummings:

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)
Cummings (2008)

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