

Spirit Rock Meditation Center
Wednesday morning meditation class

March 3, 2010
Linda Graham

POETRY AS MEDITATION

A few weeks ago, someone in Rick Hanson's Wednesday evening meditation class that I sometimes teach recommended a new book by Kim Rosen: *Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words*. Even the title intrigued me. Then David Richo's book came out: *Being True to Life: Poetic Paths to Personal Growth* [and spiritual transformation]. Then I went to Dave's daylong here at Spirit Rock two Saturdays ago. Susan Felix had already asked me to co-teach the Cultivating Contentment day here at Spirit Rock yesterday, a lovely, contemplative day of meditation, poetry and music. And the momentum just seemed to go toward "Poetry as Meditation, Poetry as Transformation."

How is poetry a form of meditation?

a. Like the breath, poetry is a gateway to the essence of life, the essence of life energy that flows eternally, universally. Poetry gives voice to our deepest yearnings, allows us to connect with others in their deepest suffering, in ours, gives us access to the sacred, the mystery, the vastness that holds all comings and goings, everything that arises into form and passes away, everything that comes into being as a manifestation of the processes of being. Poetry allows us to perceive our troubled world and respond with care.

Poetry is a life-cherishing force. For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. Yes, indeed. – Mary Oliver.

b. Poetry can be a refuge from the din and discombobulation of every day life. In settling into a focused 10 minutes of reading, reciting, sharing from our favorite author or anthology, the mind quiets, the body relaxes, the breath deepens. Called into presence by the resonance of truth, we touch again what matters most. Poem strengthens and disarms the mind and heart at the same time. Living in poetry rather than in prose is like living in mindfulness rather than automaticity. It cuts through our habitual conditioned patterns, waking us up to a new vibrancy in the moment.

*And in the end, the poem is not a thing we see –
it is, rather, a light by which we may see –
and what we see is life.*

- Robert Penn Warren

c. Poetry helps us share our gratitude and ecstasy:

*Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,*

*Past the houses – past the headlands –
Into deep Eternity –*

*Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land?*

- Emily Dickinson

d. Poetry helps us communicate with others across the ages:

*A poem written three thousand years ago
About a man who walks among horses
Grazing on a hill under the small stars
Comes to life on a page in a book
And the woman reading the poem
In her kitchen filled with a gold metallic light
Finds the experience of living in that moment
So vividly described as to make her feel known to another, until the woman and the poet
share
Not only their souls but the exact silence
Between each word. And every time the poem is read,
No matter her situation or her age,
This is more or less what happens.
- Jason Shinder*

e. Poetry re-connects us with the divine

*I ask for a moment's indulgence
To sit by thy side.
The works that I have in hand
I will finish afterwards.*

*Away from the sight of thy face
My heart knows no rest nor respite,
And my work becomes an endless toil
In a shoreless sea of toil.*

*To-day the summer has come at my window
With its sighs and murmurs;
And the bees are plying their minstrelsy
At the court of the flowering grove.*

*Now it is time to sit quiet,
Face to face with thee,*

*And to sing dedication of life
In this silent and overflowing leisure.
- Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali*

f. We can think of poetry as a luxury, or irrelevant, but it isn't.

*A poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it going to sleep.
- Salman Rushdie*

*We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.
- Dead Poet's Society*

*It is difficult
To get the news from poems
Yet men die miserably every day
For lack
Of what is found there.
- William Carlos Williams*

To tie poetry to meditation, Sylvia once said “Meditation creates the conditions for revelation.” As does poetry:

Great poetry calls into question not less than everything. It dares us to break free from the safe strategies of the cautious mind. It amazes, startles, pierces, and transforms us. Great poetry happens when the mind is looking the other way; the heart opens, we forget ourselves, and the world pours in.

*In today's world it is deceptively easy to lose sight of our direction and the things that matter and give us joy. How quickly the days can slip by, the years all gone, and we, at the end of our lives, mourning the life we dreamed of but never lived. Poetry urges us to stand once and for all, and now, in the heart of our own life.
– Roger Housden*

The Lightest Touch

*Good poetry begins with
the lightest touch,
a breeze arriving from nowhere,
a whispered healing arrival,*

*a word in your ear,
a settling into things,
then, like a hand in the dark,
it arrests the whole body,
steeling you for revelation.*

*In the silence that follows
a great line,
you can feel Lazarus,
deep inside
even the laziest, most deathly afraid
part of you,
lift up his hands and walk toward the light.*

*- David Whyte
Everything is Waiting for You*

So we'll have a dharma talk of poetry today, exploring themes of life and death through poetry, learning how to use poetry as a refuge and as a resource in our own meditation practices. Poetry is meant to be read aloud, so I'll be asking for volunteers to read some of the poems for us today. And we'll do an experiential exercise in sharing with others, even creating, poetry.

1. One of the ways poetry is a powerful tool of spiritual transformation is that in the words of another we find a validation of our own experience. The sonnets of Shakespeare have been such a refuge and resource for people for centuries. I'll tell a story later about Maya Angelou coming to life again by memorizing Shakespeare's sonnets. Here's my favorite: (And the "thee" that Shakespeare refers to can be any beloved thee that works for thee.)

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

*When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least –
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate.
For they sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

- William Shakespeare
Sonnet 29

And then two more. Do these poems touch something in your own heart, your own soul?

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

*I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us — don't tell!
They'd advertise — you know!*

*How dreary to be somebody!
How public like a frog
To tell one's name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!*
- Emily Dickinson

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

The Journey

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,*

*as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.*

- Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*

2. Another way poetry can be a meditation is that poetry leads us deeper into our own experience.

Poetry may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate, for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves.

- T.S. Eliot

Poetry is the language of our time. It is a verbal excavation, digging us into and under that which is inarticulate, that which cannot be said but can be felt, that which cannot be stated but can be conjured. Poetry is a form of revolution. It re-arranges our thinking, our perception, our dialogue. It takes us out of the literal so that we can see what is real.”

- Eve Ensler

Poetry is processed in both the left and right hemispheres of the brain, certainly. But the deep knowing of poetry is processed primarily through the holistic, intuitive, imagistic capacities of the right hemisphere. We feel the meaning and metaphor of a poem in our bodies, traversing our emotional landscape, letting memory and imagination carry us beyond ourselves to new horizons, rather than logically analyzing what the poem is about. This deep knowing is what catalyzes the wholeness that transforms us from the inside out. Poetry re-patterns our neural circuitry, shifts our neurochemistry, unites our body-mind-heart-soul together in a new “aha!”, a new way of being.

Let these poems speak to you, stir the depths in you.

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

The Well of Grief

*Those who will not slip beneath
 the still surface on the well of grief
 turning downward through its black water
 to the place we cannot breathe
 will never know the source from which we drink,
 the secret water, cold and clear,
 nor find in the darkness glimmering
 the small round coins
 thrown by those who wished for something else.*

- David Whyte, Where Many Rivers Meet

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

*There is a brokenness out of which comes the unbroken,
 A shatteredness out of which blooms the unshatterable.
 There is sorrow beyond all grief which leads to joy,
 And a fragility out of whose depths emerges strength.
 There is a hollow space too vast for words
 Through which we pass with each loss,
 Out of whose darkness we are sanctioned into being.
 There is a cry deeper than all sound
 Whose serrated edges cut the heart as we break open
 To the place inside which is unbreakable and whole,
 While learning to sing.*

- Rashani

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

Farewell

*Peace, my heart.
 Let the time for parting be sweet.
 Let it not be a death, but completeness.
 Let love melt into memory
 And pain into song.
 Let the flight through the sky end
 In the folding of the wings over the nest.
 Let the last touch of your hands
 Be gentle like the flower of the night.
 Stand still, oh beautiful end, for a moment,
 And say your last words in silence.*

*I bow to you and hold up my lamp
To light you on your way.*

- Rabindranath Tagore

Again, do these poems speak to you; does hearing them read by another stir something in you?

3. Poetry also leads us into the unknown, beyond our experience, beyond what we think we can experience:

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

INVITATION

*Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy*

*and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles*

*for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,*

*or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air*

*as they strive
melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine*

*and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude—
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing*

just to be alive

*on this fresh morning
in the broken world.
I beg of you,*

*do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.*

*It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
You must change your life.*

- MARY OLIVER -

I first heard Oriah Mountain Dreamer's poem *The Invitation* read by Jack Kornfield at a weekend retreat with him and Debra Chamberlain Taylor. Because Oriah's book hadn't been published yet, Jack didn't want to photocopy the poem for distribution, but he did let people hand-copy it, so for the rest of the afternoon, the poem was being handed from person to person, copied by hand, as I imagine poems were distributed before the printing press, or were passed on through memory.

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

THE INVITATION

*It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.
I want to know what you ache for,
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.*

*It doesn't interest me how old you are.
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love,
for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.*

*It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring in your moon.
I want to know if you have touched the center of sorrow,
if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have you become shriveled
and closed from fear of further pain.*

*I want to know if you can sit with pain; mine or your own,
without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.*

*I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own,
If you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy
fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes
without cautioning us to be careful, to be realistic,*

to remember the limitations of being human.

*It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling is true.
I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself,
If you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul.
If you can be faithless and therefore be trustworthy.*

*I want to know if you can see beauty, even when it's not pretty, every day, and if you can
source your own life fro its presence.*

*I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine,
and still stand on the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon,
"Yes!"*

*It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair,
weary and bruised to the bone,
and do what needs to be done to feed the children.*

*It doesn't interest me who you know, or how you came to be here.
I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.*

*It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied.
I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.*

*I want to know if you can be alone with yourself,
and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.*

Oriah Mountain Dreamer

4. Sometimes poetry helps lighten the load, lightens us up, we can step lighter and freer in the midst of travail and angst:

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

*Take the whole kit
With the caboodle
Experience life
Don't deplore it
Shake hands with time
Don't kill it
Open a lookout
Dance on a brink
Run with your wildfire
You are closer to glory*

*Leaping an abyss
Than upholstering a rut.
- James Broughton*

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

Ode To Gaiety

*Go gloom
Begone glum and grim
Off with the drab drear and grumble
It's time
its pastime
to come undone and come out laughing
time to wrap killjoys in wet blankets
and feed them to the sourpusses*

*Come frisky pals
Come forth wily wags
Loosen your screws and get off your rocker
Untie the strait lacer
Tie up the smarty pants
Tickle the crosspatch with josh and guffaw
Share quips and pranks with every victim
of grouch pomposity or blah*

*Woe to the bozo who says No to
tee hee ho ho and ha ha
Boo to the cleancut klutz who
wipes the smile off his face
Without gaiety
freedom is a chastity belt
Without gaiety
life is a wooden kimono*

*Come cheerful chums
Cut up and carry on
Crack your pots and split your sides
Boggle the bellyacher
Convulse the worrywart
Pratfall the prissy poos and the fuddy duds
Take drollery to heart or end up a deadhead
at the guillotine of the mindless*

*Be wise and go merry round
whatever you cherish*

*what you love to enjoy what you live to exert
 And when the high spirits
 call your number up
 count on merriment all the way to the countdown
 Long live hilarity euphoria and flumadiddle
 Long live gaiety
 for all the laity
 - James Broughton*

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

Forgetfulness - Billy Collins

*The name of the author is the first to go
 followed obediently by the title, the plot,
 the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
 which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
 never even heard of,*

*as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
 decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
 to a little fishing village where there are no phones.*

*Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
 and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
 and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,*

*something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
 the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.*

*Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,
 it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
 not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.*

*It has floated away down a dark mythological river
 whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
 well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
 who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.*

*No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
 to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
 No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
 out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.*

May the poems above have tickled your fancy and opened your heart to the wisdom of joy.

5. Laughter allows us to forget ourselves and connect with others. Poetry is a premier gateway for moving beyond ourselves and connecting with others.

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

*While spoon-feeding him with one hand
she holds his hand with her other hand,
or rather lets it rest on top of his,
which is permanently clenched shut.
When he turns his head away, she reaches
around and puts in the spoonful blind.
He will not accept the next morsel
until he has completely chewed this one.
His bright squint tells her he finds
the shrimp she has just put in delicious.
Next to the voice and touch of those we love,
food may be our last pleasure on earth—
a man on death row takes his T-bone
in small bites and swishes each sip
of the jug wine around in his mouth,
tomorrow will be too late for them to jolt
this supper out of him. She strokes
his head very slowly, as if to cheer up
each separate discomfited hair sticking up
from its root in his stricken brain.
Standing behind him, she presses
her cheek to his, kisses his jawl,
and his eyes seem to stop seeing
and do nothing but emit light.
Could heaven be a time, after we are dead,
of remembering the knowledge
flesh had from flesh? The flesh
of his face is hard, perhaps
from years spent facing down others
until they fell back, and harder
from years of being himself faced down
and falling back in his turn, and harder still
from all the while frowning
and beaming and worrying and shouting
and probably letting go in rages.
His face softens into a kind
of quizzical wince, as if one
of the other animals were working at
getting the knack of the human smile.
When picking up a cookie he uses*

*both thumbtips to grip it
 and push it against an index finger
 to secure it so that he can lift it.
 She takes him then to the bathroom,
 where she lowers his pants and removes
 the wet diaper and holds the spout of the bottle
 to his old penis until he pisses all he can,
 then puts on the fresh diaper and pulls up his pants.
 When they come out, she is facing him,
 walking backwards in front of him
 and holding his hands, pulling him
 when he stops, reminding him to step
 when he forgets and starts to pitch forward.
 She is leading her old father into the future
 as far as they can go, and she is walking
 him back into her childhood, where she stood
 in bare feet on the toes of his shoes
 and they foxtrotted on this same rug.
 I watch them closely: she could be teaching him
 the last steps that one day she may teach me.
 At this moment, he glints and shines,
 as if it will be only a small dislocation
 for him to pass from this paradise into the next.*

Galway Kinnell, "Parkinson's Disease" from Imperfect Thirst

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

Otherwise

*I got out of bed
 on two strong legs.
 It might have been
 otherwise. I ate
 cereal, sweet
 milk, ripe, flawless
 peach. It might
 have been otherwise.
 I took the dog uphill
 to the birch wood.
 All morning I did
 the work I love.*

*At noon I lay down
 with my mate. It might
 have been otherwise.
 We ate dinner together*

*at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.*

- Jane Kenyon

6. And poetry connects us with the sacred. Here are two poems by the beloved Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913:

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not. Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own. Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger.

I am uneasy at heart when I have to leave my accustomed shelter; I forget that there abides the old in the new, and that there also thou abidest.

Through birth and death, in this world or in others, wherever thou leadest me it is thou, the same, the one companion of my endless life who ever linkest my heart with bonds of joy to the unfamiliar.

When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut. Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many.

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

Stream of Life

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

Now I'll suggest seven different simple ways to work with poetry:

1. Find your favorite poems. Keep them safe in a poetry journal, or on a computer data base. Use them as refuge. As Kim Rosen says in her book *Saved By a Poem*, poetry is good medicine.

Kim tells the story of poetry as medicine for Maya Angelou, author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Maya had been raped at age 8 by her mother's lover; when the man was murdered, she stopped talking for almost 6 years. She became mute because she imagined her own words had caused his death. In those years of silence, she memorized poetry – Shakespeare's sonnets, Edgar Allan Poe, Lawrence Dunbar. When she was 11 years old, a wise but fierce teacher challenged Maya to speak the poetry out loud. Maya was terrified and refused for six months. But one day, hiding under her house, she recited a sonnet of Shakespeare's and heard her own voice again for the first time in half a decade.

2. Find good resources of good poems.

Nowadays, you can google any poet, any title, any first line, any line of a poem at all, and find a dozen links to what you're looking for in less than 10 seconds.

[Steve: I need to create this:] Posted here is a link to the resources page passed out in the dharma talk and to my own selection of 50 great poems. Here are some samples from that page:

Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words by Kim Rosen, Hay House, 2009.

One of the most heartfelt, accessible guides to the power of poetry to change a life – ever. Kim shares her own personal journey with poetry as well as the insights and breakthroughs many students have experienced in her workshops. Includes Kim's own list of 50 Poems to Live by Heart and a CD of more than a dozen well-known authors reading and discussing their favorites poems. Check out Kim's website www.kimrosen.net for her enlivening, transformative "Poetry Dive".

Being True to Life: Poetic Paths to Personal Growth by David Richo. Shambala, 2009.

David Richo is a psychotherapist and writer who draws on Buddhist teachings, Jungian perspectives and poetry in his workshops on personal and spiritual growth. In *Being True to Life* David offers readers a comprehensive protocol to dive into the process of reading and writing poetry to heal wounds from the past, overcome fear, loneliness, etc., and find one's own authentic voice. Exercises in mindfulness, visualizations, active imagination and dreamwork enrich the reader's creative effort to write poetry for their own growth and emotional healing.

Ten Poems to Change Your Life by Roger Housden, Harmony Books, 2001.

The first of a most remarkable series of books: *Ten Poems to Open Your Heart*, *Ten Poems to Set You Free*, *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime*. Roger presents a poem, then leads the reader through the most fascinating commentary, opening the subtle nuances and rich emotional and spiritual tapestries of each poem. We become changed – open, free, sustained.

www.rogerhousden.com

Clear Mind Wild Heart: Finding Courage and Clarity through Poetry by David Whyte.

A CD exploration of the power of poetry to lend us courage, to give us the vision of those who have endured, and to bring us boldly to the “fierce edges” of our lives, by one of the world’s finest poets and a premier advocate for the transformative power of poetry. This CD set guides the listener into the wellspring of the poetic imagination, including the work of Emily Dickinson, William Blake, Rainer Maria Rilke, Antonio Machado, and many others.

www.davidwhyte.com

3. Share poetry with others. Kim Rosen says: “We come to poetry for moments of truth. We share poetry with others for moments of communion.” She also says, reading a poem aloud wakes it up from the page. Poems put into words and rhythm the deepest longings of our heart and deepest truths of our soul. They are meant to be heard, meant to be shared. In other cultures poems have been more shared. In ancient China, in ancient Greece, poetry competitions were held like the Olympics; it was among the highest honors to be a poet. Even in America before television, before the internet, T.S. Eliot filled the entire University of Minnesota football stadium with 40,000 people to hear his poetry.

For ten years now, I have met every three or four months with 10-14 friends to share a potluck dinner and to share our favorite poems with each other. This poetry salon calls itself the Gourmet Poets Society (GPS). Over the years GPS has deepened our friendships into a sacred dimension. The group expressed the essence of our gatherings in this collective poem written in February 2010.

GPS, as rich and mysterious as poetry itself.

*Free flowing evenings of
Intimacies, spontaneities, camaraderie,
Engagement, sensitivity, poignancy,
Genuine bonding and laughter,
Collective mind-meld as we*

*Share a few poems with intimates.
The fire we all warm our hearts around -
A 19th century salon where
Egos are subsumed to the art.*

*We explore without constraint,
The art of listening,
An opportunity so rare.
Each act of listening weaving a field all of its own.*

*We adapt in an instant to
What arises in the moment,
Illuminating, moving moments of openness
To the uncertainties of the creative process,
The excitement and surprise of "what next?"*

*We have created a sacred connection,
And a sacred container of un-knowing,
That invites each person to be with
Whatever currently draws them.
We can trust the accident, the synchronicities.
Anyone can be the conduit for
Creative organicity, gentle spontaneity,
Mutual caring and respect,
Creative phases of glorious independence;
Emergent preferences premised upon earned familiarity,
Unpredictable transcendence:
All the palpable truth of GPS*

*It is difficult to know what to do
With so much happiness,
Durability, creativity, and presence.
Magic happens when we come together
That weaves together our lives.
Since there is no place large enough
To contain so much happiness,
It flows out of us
Into everything we touch
We trust that mystery.*

- GPSers, February 2010

4. Choose a poem to guide a meditation, an inquiry

Poetry is a transformative agent. We can read a poem when our souls need a larger view, a reminder to be amazed and grateful than anything exists at all, let alone that life, in moments, can be uplifting and exalted. We can even write a poem, as we often do, when we need to plumb the darkness of the moment, to find in the pain and confusion a deeper meaning, to make sense of the non-sense of our experience. Poetry can bump us up against the places in our psyches that have become constricted, fragmented, avoided. The right poem at the right moment can crack us wide open again to truths long denied and to the resilience to face them now. We plumb the depths of the muck, then we step into an awareness, a gasp of recognition; we recover the essence of what is and re-awaken the faith, trust, and vision for life to go on.

Use the poem as the morning contemplation for a week, and see if it doesn't change your life.

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

I

*I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost...I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.*

II

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I'm in the same place
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*

III

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit
My eyes are open,*

*I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.*

IV

*I walk down the same street
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*

V

I walk down another street.

-Portia Nelson

[Please read aloud, slowly:]

The Summer Day

Mary Oliver

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

- Mary Oliver

5. Learn a poem by heart; live a poem by heart.

Living a poem by heart is different than learning a poem by heart. Not just memorizing a poem but developing an intimate relationship with it. Letting the images, sounds and rhythms of the words on the page or spoken in our ear reverberate in our psyches, taking them in, feeling them in our body, breathing, sounding, dancing them, speaking them to those whose lives we touch.. Living a poem illuminates realms in our memory, in our imagination, bringing a blaze of discovery, a turning and transforming within. To take a poem into your life is to “ignite your true essence, aligning your thoughts, words and deeds with your heart’s wisdom and longing.” - Kim Rosen

Choose a poem to live by heart. [Steve: I have to create this:] (Check Sources of good poetry to find 100’s to choose from, ask friends, find a poet you like and explore their work in depth.) Live your poem; say a poem over and over, 10 times a day, for several days, hear nuances and subtleties of tone, rhyme, rhythm, tempo, internal rhymes, alliteration, new discoveries. Notice how your life changes as you live and breathe this wisdom.

6. Share a poem by e-mail or voice mail

A friend e-mailed me this poem yesterday morning; it made my day:

[please read aloud, slowly:]

In The Alley

*In the alley behind the florist's shop,
a huge white garbage truck was parked and idling.
In a cloud of exhaust, two men in coveralls
and stocking caps, their noses dripping,
were picking through the florist's dumpster
and each had selected a fistful of roses.*

*As I walked past, they gave me a furtive,
conspiratorial nod, perhaps sensing
that I, too (though in my business suit and tie)
am a devotee of garbage – an aficionado
of the wilted, the shopworn, and the free—
and that I had for days been searching
beneath the heaps of worn-out, faded words
to find this brief bouquet for you.*

- Ted Kooser

7. Write poetry. I’m not saying write a poem.

He who draws noble delights from sentiments of poetry is a true poet, though he has never written a line in all his life.

- *George Sand*

*Breathe-in experience,
breathe-out poetry.*

-*Muriel Rukeyser*

David Richo in his workshop would have us simply read a poem and respond to it, writing whatever was coming from the bottom up, for five minutes. The conditions are: Mindfulness, Openness, Imagination. Mindfulness is spacious awareness. Openness is spacious acceptance. Imagination is spacious exploration. Read this short poem by Hafiz aloud 4-5 times; you'll hear different nuances and emphases. Then write free-form, stream of consciousness, for five minutes. Don't worry about what you're writing or how it will sound to anyone else. Let your heart surprise you. Whatever you have written in five minutes, let it stand for now as one sincere moment of opening your heart. May there be many, many others.

*How did the rose
Ever open its heart
And give to this world
All of its beauty?
It felt the encouragement
Of light against its being,
Otherwise we all remain
Too frightened.
- Hafiz*

We'll close with one last thought about poetry as meditation, poetry as transformation.

When could be a better time for poetry than now? Poets can be truly courageous people, who are willing to stand up for what they believe. Who else to say what needs to be said but a poet? In times of pain, you need to know that other human beings have felt as you feel. And that feeling is not confined to race or class or issue or country or nation. It is the heart of the human being. Guy Johnson