Using Poetry in Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is an excellent tool for the psychotherapist. This treatise provides insight into how it can be used effectively, along with specific examples. The paper also examines how poetry can be used in the counselor training program. Specific illustrations are provided.

From the onset of the profession well-trained counselors have utilized a number of helpful tools in gathering information about their clients. Samples include the information or data sheet, the letter writing exercise, the family history, the autobiography, the “Who Am I” essay, the sociogram, the checklist, the journal, the diary, assorted tests, the interview, and a variety of other objective and subjective techniques. As therapists continue to expand their knowledge and increase their repertoire of methods for gaining insight, a valuable tool for consideration is the use of poetry in psychotherapy. The reasoning for such a usage is twofold.

First and foremost in this proposal is the obvious notation of revelation. Poetic expression provides innermost thoughts, transcends the superficial and in many cases demonstrates the arousal of emotions. The counselor is given first hand testimony of expression, feelings, and emotions. This is indeed vital information for better understanding of the client.

Secondly, is the fact that poetry is inculcated into our society globally and historically. The use of poetic verse is found in education, religion, industry, journalism, historical writings, entertainment, and a number of other all encompassing identifiable areas surrounding our lives.

When using poetry it is important to stress that the individual is not required to be a Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, or Mary Anne Evans, or for that matter any recognized poet. Rather, the emphasis is on the importance of the individual writing and his or her expression of thoughts and feelings. Further, it should be stressed that one
should write his or her thoughts as they come or flow without regard to correctness of grammar. The emphasis as stated is on feelings, emotions, and ideas; which is not to be construed as a literary study. The therapist should factor in such things as mood, setting, and most importantly the message.

Several foundation considerations underlying poetic expression in therapy include the fact that the inculcation into our society incorporates, through nursery rhymes and other writings, morality, courage, good behavior, consequences, amusement, motivation, encouragement, and illustrations; and, importantly veiled or hidden messages. A knowledge of this point is particularly important to the therapist when using poetic verse. Of equal importance is the fact that many clients find comfort in this process of communication. It provides an opportunity for free expressions and can result in uninhibited as well as unconscious thinking.

Therapeutic values derived from this tool include personal expression, insight for the therapist and client, and the opportunity for discussion points which may have been suppressed. It also provides for the inward successful factor of accomplishment. A few examples of personal expression which would alert the therapist to possible areas of investigation or exploration are evinced in the following poems which are divided into the six categories: 1) general, 2) love, 3) harmful considerations – abuse, 4) death, 5) depression, and 6) violence – revenge. The reader’s perusal of these works (selected for illustration purposes only) will provide, in most cases, immediate revelation to underlying expressions of possible concern.

**General**

**Visions**

*by Bertha Soto*

Sometimes I feel like a puppet on a string,
The stage is very big,
I have no control over the strings,
My parents pull my strings,
My teachers pull my strings,
My friends pull my strings,
I am pulled left – I am pulled right
It feels so good when they put me on the shelf for the night.

**Feelings**

*by Heather Ross*

I feel glad,
I feel mad,
I feel sad,
I feel bad.
Everyone has feelings
It’s plain to see.
Everyone has feelings,
Even you and me.

**Recognition**  
**by Jean Sholk**

Do you see the same thing that I see?  
Are we going in the same place?  
Can I trace your footsteps and not fall?  
Dare I take a step with you and not feel dread?  
I hesitate.

My judgment is not clear,  
My thinking is opaque.  
The picture that I hold is blurred.  
The drawing is in ink,  
but the background is in black.  
I must think.

There is a frame that binds.  
A security set within a solemn rule.  
Such enforcement is a tie.  
Sometimes knotted, sometimes frayed.  
There are emotional bonds and sensibilities so cruel.

To what extent can I control my destiny?  
Each one is driven, yet at the same time guided,  
by a murmur deep inside.  
Am I deceived, or do I contrive?  
What is my arrangement with reality?  
Help me.

I can’t trust myself  
but I can trust you.

**Love**

**Outside**  
**by Christy Simmons**

I am mopping.  
Frogs are hopping.
I am cleaning.
Birds are singing.

I am mowing.
Flowers are growing.

Why am I pining,
While the sun is shining?

I’m going outside.

**Time**
**by Christy Simmons**

She is cute.
She is sweet.
How can I compete?

I’m told
I’m above,
So where is my true love?

Be patient.
It takes time.

How long?
Where will I be?
How will I know when he sees me?

Be patient.
It takes time.

Time....tick tock, tick tock, tick tock,
Time by who’s clock?

**Do You Know How Much You Matter to Me?**
**by Cynthia Diaz**

It is hard to know
How much to say
when we are both
testing our feelings
wanting to share
but afraid of sharing too much.
But I want you to know
I love you very much
and all that I want
is your love, trust,
honor, and happiness.

Is that too much to ask?

There is nothing in this world,
not past nor present
that would change
the way I feel about you
or the image of you I carry.

I just want you to know
and I hope that you can see
and with all of your heart
you know how much you matter to me.

Reunited
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

They embraced, it had been so long.
Both hearts pounded vigorously; emotions were high.
Tears of joy ran down their faces.
The long awaited reunion was an exciting moment.
Then there was a dull, quiet lull with bodies calm,
For there was now the realization of reacquaintence.

Adaleaf
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

He was the object of scorn and ridicule
from childhood into middle age.
The horrible disfigurement was an
enormous burden to bear,
One which would break the spirit
of any being of less character.

The social stigma of guilt was a given,
automatically inculcated into his being,
innocence never a possible consideration.
Seven years behind bars for a crime
of which he had no knowledge
Did all but cripple his faith,
and nearly broke his confidence in man.
But to the marvel of many
forgiveness and love overshadowed revenge and hate.
While in prison plastic surgeons gave
Adaleaf a new face and a new life.
He, as stimulus, now experienced different,
friendly, accepting receptors.

**Harmful Considerations—Abuse**

*This Evil Inside*
*by Judy Barros*

This evil inside will tear out your heart,
It will destroy your family and make your world fall apart.

This stimulant may speed up the activity in your brain,
leaving you hopeless and confused, your mind begins to drain.

It will take you up and bring you down,
The smiles you once had are left with nothing but frown.

Users tend to want to chase the initial rush,
All in all leaving you with dishonesty and mistrust.

It is known as cocaine, crack, coke and “C”,
Snow, toot, blow, Charlie and nose candy.

The cost can be high, the street price immense,
Why did you spend so much on this ridiculous nonsense?

Look where it’s taken you, on a long hard journey
A year of hard travels and a life of recovery.

Where is my sister, my best friend, my confidante,
In a place I could only dream about, nothing I would ever want.

But you are not me and I am not you,
I tried to help and come to your rescue.

You turned your back on your dearest family and friends,
I am hoping that this program will help you make amends.
We are all here for you through thick and thin,
Soon you will be back in our lives again.

For now is the time that you must take control,
“This evil inside” must be destroyed and let go.

You will have to live your life minute by minute and day by day,
You are the only one who can take charge and not go astray.

So I will leave you with these thoughts in mind,
You didn’t realize I knew so much about “This evil inside.”

**Coming Out of the Darkness**
by Jennifer Gilleland

A ticking time bomb,
I never knew it would set him off
Tick, tock.
Everything was fine;
We were having a good time
Then it happened—
The misunderstanding
Tick tock BOOM!
And that’s all it took.
Lying on my bed,
The feel of his body weight on mine,
Out of air, I knew what was coming—it always did
That cold, hard, dark, dead look in his eyes
Here it comes—
The stinging sharp slaps across the face.
He was keeping pace,
One after another after another.
Right in front of my little brother.
This was not the first time, but it was the last.
Because I never went back.
I get a lot of flack
Because of that.
Some people just don’t understand.
Don’t you see? I had to take a stand.
Yes, some of me still loves this man,
But I had to come out of my darkness,
Into the warm light of love of my family, friends, and mentors.
Especially Mom, for supporting every decision I’ve made regarding this man
No Escape
by Janice Mireles

Your blackened hand surrounds my soul
Refusing to let go
How I long for a sweet escape
Only to come face to face with your demonic visage
My only out is to cut and slice
At the membranes that encircle me
How pathetic when the knife is dull.

Death

Last Night I Dreamt of Heaven
by Rachel Garza

As I closed my eyes
With pain and no ease
A long night began.
It started with a dream.
I drifted away like a lost ship at sea.
I found my destination at the blinding light to be.

It began with a light at the end of a tunnel.
Then a golden gate, I then soon traveled.

St. Peter greeted me with open arms.
He said, “Welcome, Child, for you have traveled far.
Far from sin and hell and pain.”
Last night I dreamt of heaven.

I could run, jump, stand upright and sing.
I saw no flaw in anyone, and no one saw any in me.
For once in my life, I suffered no pain.
My soul began to heal and ease.
The scars were no longer pain.
Last night I dreamt of heaven.

The silhouette of a man dressed in purity of white.
Spoke gently to me about the reality of life.
He said it was my imagination that I have dreamt of one night,
The creation of all with such divine life.
“You are fortunate my child, my son, to experience this divine life.”
That night I dreamt of heaven.
I found eternal resting full of youthful play.
You see, last night I did not dream of heaven,
    Last night, I came.

Mourning The Loss of a Loved One
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

Life was filled with sadness
for a loved one had fallen.
Grief prevailed while the cloak of dark shadows
    held back the sunlight.
Hurt and passion of sorrow was overwhelming
And lo, the radiant beam of God’s love broke through..
    The mourning was over.

Depression

I’ll Show Them What I Can Do
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

They think I’m just a joke
    someone to make fun of.
The coach said I was too slow
    and could not jump.
Some day I’ll show them,
    I’ll show them what I can do.
Maybe I can get everyone’s attention too.

The teacher said I wasn’t good enough
    to be in the play.
Not even good enough to take up
    the tickets each day.
Looks like I could do something
    perhaps be a stage hand.
But it was not to be.

“I know what I can do,” said I to Mrs. Hightower,
    as she was so attentive to Mary Sue.
“I can carry the sign across the stage
    which reads, ‘Act One and Act Two’”
“No, Bobby, that job has been given to Billy Ray,
    his Dad wants him to.”
Someday I’ll show them what I can do.
I finally got up enough courage
So I asked Mary Jane for a date
She said, “No, Bobby, you’re too late,
   besides I’m going with Kevin.”
Each time I try to do something
   it seems it’s for someone else to do.
Now, I’m thinking even more strongly,
I’m going to show them what I can do.

There’s a tree in my front yard
   as big as a tree needs to be
It’s quiet and dark in the morning around three
   and it will be the tree, the rope, and me.
And you know what, when day light comes
   it will be for the whole world to see.
I’ll show them what I can do.

Fighting Back
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

Tuffy Brown was strong. He was
   two years older than his classmates
Tuffy had two friends his age
Bullies all, but never kept in a cage.
They stole my bicycle, roller skates,
   lunch money and tennis shoes too.

I did the best think
I knew to do.
The police, teacher, and principal, all,
   investigated and studied my report well
But they were evidently up against
   a blank wall.
How do I fight back
   without taking the fall?

I’d tell my dad,
   but I don’t have one.
My mother told me to stay away
   from those bad boys.
Monday they caught me after school
   told me I was a rat and beat me up.
Tuesday, I told the principal
    and he said I ought to stand up for myself.
Wednesday came and with it
    a very hard rain.
My little brother was running home
    as fast as he could
When the three bullies
    as you might expect that they would,
Grabbed my little brother
    and pushed him to the ground.

They took his books and back pack, too,
    and cast it all into the storm sewer.
They told my brother he should go
    and tell me of my woes to be
My brother was shaking, shivering,
    and crying as he delivered the message.
He did his best
    to tell me what was to be.

I thought of everything I could
    which would make me the target of their fun.
I thought of nothing but realized that
    I would always be on the run.
Friday night came and bullets
    whizzed through my bedroom.

Saturday came and the police came
    with a camera and took pictures, too.
They said they had no suspects
    and there was nothing they could do.
They asked me if I was the
    member of a gang
The answer, of course, was “No”
    and never to be.

When the next Monday came while
    at school in the hallway, I was surrounded by the three.
They told me that my house
    would make a nice big fire.
Well, a week has gone by now
    and I don’t think I’ll be their fun
You see, I let them know, I showed it to them,
    I now have a gun.
The poetry tool is a very good instrument to assist the therapist in dealing with the consequences in today’s extremely violent environment which often produces melancholy behavior. We are also witnessing an era in which much attention is focused on spiritual considerations. Many clients are searching for inner peace and a desire to break from the mundane pressures of life. These two problem areas are reflected in some of the poems provided in examples of the six categories reviewed.

There also exists a few examples in the sample which would require a knowledge of the client. However, with some insight into the person’s life and circumstance the works become meaningful. This would certainly be true in the practical utilization of this tool.

Poetry is also an excellent tool for emphasizing certain points in the counselor training program. Four illustrations will be provided in this paper to serve as guides for practitioners who might like to utilize the method. The first example is especially helpful to the instructor who is teaching a unit in a course dealing with career development and life planning. The poem, “Married To The Hangman Am I”, makes clear the various roles individuals play in society, demonstrates the importance or value of an apprentice, shows the vivid impact of a profession or vocation in the life of an individual, and provides an expression of appreciation toward a vocation in society. This vehicle, a prized tool for discussion, opens the door for extensive exploration of the many variables impacting vocational choice.

Married To The Hangman Am I
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

Married to the hangman am I
and happy I am to be.
Married to the doctor are you,
painstakingly proud, prestigious and poverty free.
Married to the pastor is she,
refined, respected, as dignified as one must be.
Married to the banker, the judge, and the senator
are the three,
sophisticated aristocrats they are glad to be.
Married to the carpenter, baker, driver,
surveyor, and mailman are they,
Content in their positions from day to day.
Wed to the hangman am I,
my life cloaked in a shroud of mystery
without regard to my heritage or ancestry.
Strange, this my destiny.

The hangman has asked the questions
What model am I?
What pride in my job is there to be?
Must I wait until I meet my angel of death
to be set free?
Why apprentices have I none?
Who will in the future train to see
that the job is done?
What must his qualifications and credentials be?
Is the commission bestowed from
an adequate level of authority?
Have philosophical and religious
issues not been resolved?
What other mind-probing problems
must be solved?
Why torment my brain, a rogue am I not?

His answers were in one,
the same as each time before
When he vowed he would ponder
the issues no more.
The answer in one
Leave it be, the job is done.

The hangman came home today
tired, drained by the strain of his work.
He spoke not a word of his job
bowed his head and cried.
The hangman cried and cried and cried,
wept he for a long time.
Even harder when provoked by
his thoughts,
Which like the slipknot binds tighter
as the cord is drawn through the knot.

Married to the hangman am I
his support I am to be,
Wherever I go
though dark shadows follow me.
Eyes will not meet me
they quickly glance away.

Friendships and conversations lacking.
It’s truly a long day.
Of all rejections, the parson’s scorn pains most;
it drives me to my knees to pray.
I placed my hands upon his shoulders
reassuring him that justice had prevailed.
Consolation was not to be.
So I queried my husband, the hangman,
Why weep ye so?
He looked straight into my eyes,
tears streaming down his cheeks.
I hanged three today, worthy they were,
and justice did prevail.
Why then so blue?

I cry not for those hanged, nor myself,
but rather for all the victims
Whose destiny brought the villains through
all steps leading to my gallows.
And what were these heinous crimes?
The first, and he cried for forgiveness,
murdered a man, woman, and a child.
The second, and he expressed no signs of guilt,
but cowardly cried and begged to live,
raped a thirteen year old girl,
severed her head from her mutilated body,
and dismembered her arms and legs.
The third, and he too had no remorse,
committed such a despicable,
diabolical atrocity that I would
rather not describe the crime.

I held tears back as best I could
Said I to my husband, the hangman,
Weep no more.
Leave it be, the job is done.
For the morrow
there is more work to do.
And I, when passing through the passageways,
byways, and roadways of life,
Note the eyes
which glance quickly away,
Will forever remember
where your heart is
from day to day.
Married to the hangman am I
and proud I am to be!
The second example, “He Had a Fever,” is very useful in a course dealing with psychopathology. When discussing diseases affecting the mind this work clearly illustrates the impact of strange and unusual thought patterns or configurations.

**He Had a Fever**  
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

He had a fever and  
thoughts ran wild  
Some of which made little sense;  
hallucinations were rampant.  
Elephants were on a walk  
three to five entering the doorway together.  
People moved about the room normally  
while his warnings went unnoticed.  
No one made an effort to get out  
and this frustrated him intensely.

Tigers were circling the house  
and none turned to butter.  
He fell windlessly into the magic circle  
where getting out was an impossible task.  
The clown picked him up above his head  
and thrust him into a new dimension  
Where being was a puzzle and all about him a slow moving charade,  
and giant bugs gained on miniature people.  
Slow motion was his pace and existence  
was where life was inside out and upside down.

He was sweating profusely  
the desert was unbearably hot  
The unwanted rays of the sun were radiating  
through an enormous magnifying glass.  
His thirst was unquenched, his  
lips parched, and clothing soaking wet.
He coughed and choked briefly
before moving swiftly toward the mirage.
He landed hard upon the bare sand,
pain dissipated and he dreamed of a distant place.
The cool air was pleasant as the south breeze
Blew gently inland.
Then there was calm and
gnats swarmed about him.
His eyes and ears were ever so
irritatingly agitated.
While mosquitoes landed on
his ankles, arms, and neck.

He was miserable
when the chase started.
Six frogmen gained on him as his
boondockers sank deeper into the sand dunes.
His heart beat violently with loud erratic thumps,
pupils dilated as memories passed swiftly.
Fear ran throughout his body,
gasping he knew he faced certain death.
There was the sound of a gun,
then he was seated at the kitchen table.
All were eating ice cream
but he could not reach his generous serving.
Time slowed even more
and motions hardly existed.

In black tie he reached in regal manner
for his fork to eat off Wedgwood
and saw himself in all khaki
eating from a paper plate.
Faintly, voices were discerned
separating reality from nonexistence.
“He should be OK. Once the fever breaks
give him this medicine.”

He shouted as loud as he could
the roar penetrating his body as his mind played tricks.
For his lips did not move
and no one responded.
Fragments of life passed by
as orientation was totally distorted.
The symphony started and he was late
riding bareback down the aisle, his horse at a slow gate.
    The music was loud,
rage with sounds generating violent thoughts.
The hurricane landed, the crop was lost.
He worried because he could not find a razor
with which to shave, and he was late for his date.
    Crazed with insanity his only
valued thought, as pure as it could be,
Was that “hard rock” was a million
    miles distant
Where as far as he was concerned
    it could forever stay.

The floods were overwhelming
the water faucet would not turn off the rain,
He received scrap iron for change
    and ink filled his cereal bowl.
He bought flowers for his date
    but handed her a sack of flour.
When he reached down to tie his shoestrings,
he was holding a water mocassin and a hose.

The running was tiring
but he finally reached the edge of the mountain.
    The crevasse was wide
and he missed the other side
    The fall was pleasant as he
drifted slowly through nothingness.

His mind was clear when he
landed on the Crabtree Grocery parking lot.
He said goodbye to Mrs. Kingston as he
    Pushed the cart into the store.
    His eyes opened and
    it was medicine time.

The third example is one that could be used in several counselor training courses. It would serve well in an introductory course, history and philosophy or guidance and counseling courses, and a course in career counseling. This poem is, “Life’s Journey.” The poem provides a number of discussion points which the professor or teacher can use to discuss various aspects of people as related to the above referenced courses.
Life’s Journey
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

What a puzzle it is
traveling through this labyrinth
called life.
I am amazed at the maze
Why am I here? Where do I belong?
Who am I? Where will I go?, and
Equally as important, What’s after this?
This travel continues to carry
me through a whirlwind of places,
events, feelings, emotions, frustrations,
successes and failures.
What keeps me on track, or is
there a track? For directions change.
And sometimes I doubt. However,
In the end most things are for good.
Hence the picture of greater depth
and many dimensions.
For there is faith, trust, and love,
components of a compass true.
When one feels he is drifting off course
that may not be the case at all.
For the All Powerful Creator may
be carving the path.
My input into the journey is definitely
to provide for self strong character,
integrity, responsible action, and love
of my fellow man.
Watching out for social influences which
betray instilled mores and proven values.
Watching out for deception, trickery,
false witnesses and unproven wills.
Watching out and dodging the evil
cast by infected and disturbed flesh.
Watching out for all that keep life’s
journey from being as successful
as one can make of it.

The fourth example for counselor training usage is “My Matriculation Into the
Magnaculture.” This poem can be of particular value as the instructor broaches the
subject of matriculation in multicultural counseling or a course in cultural diversity.
My Matriculation Into the Magnaculture
by Ben Wilson, Jr.

I saw the lifestyle of middle class America
I then caught a glimpse of upper class.
My, what a difference from where I lived.
I made a decision at an early age to escape.
How did I do it?
I broke from tradition.
I accepted the necessary change!

Poetry of course should be used by those who are comfortable with the approach. Therapists have been known to find a specific tool with which they find success. As a counselor trainer, or practicing therapist, the professional might want to consider trying poetry and perhaps adding in as a special means of assistance especially during difficult or awkward times of communication.

It should be noted that teachers and others in the education and human services professions have referred clients as a result of their findings. English teachers in the education profession have on a number of occasions given insightful information to counselors obtained through poetic expression. This is a valuable source and should not be overlooked in the training of therapists.

For a review of an extensive compilation of the poems of this writer, many of which could be useful in therapy training, see “Dithyrambic Musings of Benson O’Lottie,” National Forum of Teacher Education Journal, Volume 14, Number 2, 2004-05.

References


