

Healing techniques

In the same place: Therapeutic ground- ing in poetry groups

Father Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ

"We spend our whole lives in the same place and never leave . . ."

—Charles Wright,
"Returned to the Yaak
Cabin, I Overhear an Old
Greek Song" in *Appalachia*

In this line, Charles Wright identifies both who we are and the Appalachian Mountains. These mountains, some of the oldest on the planet, have not strayed from where they have always been. They have slowly changed shape—some erosion here, and an alluvial fan

there—but they have not gone away.

Our lives are like those mountains. We tend not to stray too far from where we are. There are pieces of our identity that follow us through all the days of our lives. Some of this is a result of our family ties, our social orientations, or our faith; however, some of it simply seems to be part of this magnetic collection of cells and atoms we call "I."

I have noticed this steadfastness and grounding more and more each day I am alive. I have also noticed it in the lives of the elderly. Many of the men and women living as institutionalized elderly are not having their basic needs met. By basic needs, I

do not mean their food, clothing, medicine, or shelter. Instead, I am talking about their basic need to remain attached to the lives they have lived.

At this moment, our lives are built on all of the countless moments that have gone before. Each event we have experienced and each trial we have surmounted comprises our present day identity. We are, like the universe, the sum total of our matter—some of that matter exists down in the basement of our years, out of sight and hidden from the present time. However, we tend to neglect the past in order to focus on our present. Nevertheless, the past continues to inform who we are and how we behave.

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People spend their lives attached to things around them and things that come their way. Sometimes these things include a song, at other times it is a poem, story, painting, letter, person, place, or pet. You could add to this list for hours; but, my point is, there are things that make up who we are, things that inform our identity, that alter and enrich our lives.

Five months ago, our hospice began a program designed to add value to the lives of residents in facilities within our service area. This program offered a poetry reading once a month in three different facilities. The poetry readings lasted from 15 to 30 minutes and were offered to all those who were interested.

Thus far, interest in and attendance at these poetry readings have been wonderful. Although I felt this project would add some dimension to life in an institution, I was unaware of how deeply the connection to art was needed in the lives of the elderly.

Bringing art back into their lives produced some encouraging results. Participants in our poetry groups have been reminded of their many days gone by. Simply hearing a line about "cold white snow" produced five minutes worth of conversation about childhood memories of snow and winter. A line from a poem about a "warbler" produced a 10-minute talk about walks in

nature and color.

The mere mention of Robert Frost, Goethe, or Tagore opened the eyes of the men and women with brightness. I was amazed to see previously silent attendees sit up and talk about poets I did not believe they would know. These were people that had formerly only listened, but when their ears heard a name from the annals of their past, they engaged with vigor—acting like 20- and 25-year-olds.

The new vitality that these simple poetry sessions have added to the lives of the residents has astounded me. The original goal of the poetry sessions had been to decrease isolation among the residents; however, the impact of these groups has been more extensive than I had hoped. They have connected people to a fuller version of their lives—to their greater selves. They have enhanced resident's memories of how large their lives really are. They have bridged the gap to the person they had forgotten they once were. This has been true even for the Alzheimer's patients. I often wish that the entire staff of the facility could be present at the poetry sessions so that their residents would dumbfound them as well. I am sure that their presence would alter the mix, though.

So deep and so wise are the hearts of the people for whom we provide care. During one session

in which we read the haiku of Basho and Issa, a resident perked up and added, "I like these. My daughter wrote one a long time ago. It went something like this, 'Your tear falls on my ear, that I may know your pain.'"

I was rendered to tears myself. This particular resident had never spoken during the first two sessions. Her words, which came from a deep place within—a place that we tend to forget does exist for those who are institutionalized—brought tears to the eyes of many in attendance that day.

There are numerous other examples I could give to demonstrate the value of these poetry sessions. As a result, we have decided to devote more effort to this program. We have found volunteers to work with us to help expand it. We challenge churches, schools, and our community to send us volunteers.

Coping with who we are at the present moment is only possible if we consider all that we have collected along the way. Our present is informed and enhanced by our connection to the larger "I"—all in the past that has made us who we are. When we recognize this bridge to fullness and commit to its value, then we move further away from the helplessness and depression that the institutionalized elderly often feel. Reintroducing poetry has been an effective way of doing just that.