



The Rhyme and Reason of Poetry Therapy

WRITTEN BY GARY GLAZNER

“*I shot an arrow in the air.*” The man’s eyes popped open as he replied, “*It fell to earth I know not where.*” I was reciting the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem, “The Arrow and the Song,” at a day care center for people with Alzheimer’s disease in Northern California. Moments before I started the poem, this particular man had his head down, eyes closed and apparently was not conscious of his surroundings. When he heard those words, something clicked, and for a moment he was back with us, lucid and repeating a poem he had learned as a child.

As a poet, I was hooked. I was astonished at how well-loved poems from childhood could help spark memories in people with dementia. Poetry was connecting to community in a way I had not experienced before. This was the seed that led me to create the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project (APP), which utilizes poetry as a powerful therapy for individuals with dementia.

One of the true strengths of poetry is that it can be an effective tool to reach people in all stages of the disease, and it offers something for everyone—whether the person with the disease, family member or healthcare professional.

Poems, like music, seem to be stored in a person’s long-term memory in such a way that people with dementia can still recall them. For people in the earlier stages of Alzheimer’s disease, when verbalization is easier, a poem’s emotional impact can help them express their own feelings, jump-start conversations and bring back memories. In the later stages, classic poems work well to help connect to a person’s long-term memory; they can reach deeply into a person’s history and prompt reminiscence.

Tapping into the rhythms and rhymes of classic poems, you can make people with dementia laugh, dance, cry, or talk about gardens they grew, how a favorite food tastes, or even about odd colored cows. Poetry can be playful or heartfelt, and it can stir passions when read with a strong rhythm.

For healthcare workers, reciting poetry to clients can help break up the day and give them a chance to be creative.

What a dynamic outlet for family members as well. You can read a well-known love poem, write your own poem to convey feelings about your loved one or recall special times in your life together, or help your loved one compose a poem. Putting thoughts in verse can help us say things we might not be able to say otherwise.

There’s one major rule to making poetry therapy work: You need to run with it. Most importantly, poetry cannot be recited from behind a podium. Reading poems to people with dementia is all about interaction.

With the opening lines to William Blake’s “The Tyger,”—*“Tyger, tyger burning bright/in the forest of the night,”* I approach each person and see if he or she will take my hand. I bounce their hands to the rhythm of the poem. I dance a little jig as I say the words, anything to get a laugh, a reaction. Once, I was reciting the poem to a group that included a woman who had a distinguished writing career, including being published in *The New Yorker*. She looked up at me and said, “You know that poem has more than two lines.” When I recited the rest she replied, “Oh, so you do know it.”

When reciting the last lines of “The Owl and the Pussy Cat,” by Edward Lear—*“And hand and hand, on the edge of the sand/They danced by the light of the moon,”* I take a person’s hand and sway in a dancing motion, or I invite one of the healthcare workers to waltz with me. Often the shyest client, who has been sitting quietly through the whole session, will smile the tiniest smile. A gleam will fill his or her eyes, and I witness, once again, the power of poetry.

A recitation of “Silent Night” often gets everyone singing. I don’t have a good voice, but several of the residents do, and they lead the chorus.

Two years ago when I introduced APP at the Sierra Vista Assisted Living Center in Santa Fe, NM, I wanted to bring something tactile, something the residents could touch and hold. I searched the house and nothing came to mind; then I looked outside and noticed a snowbank. I filled an ice chest with snow and gathered a selection of winter poems.

On arriving at the center, I opened the ice chest and scooped out the snow. The residents made snowballs and tasted the snow. I recited Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

*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.*

As this poem ended, the residents, with the encouragement of the activities director, began to throw the snowballs at me. It was playful and fun. I don’t imagine Frost ever thought his poem would set off such a flurry.

I have also had success with other props to enhance a poetry reading—familiar items like flowers, leaves, seashells, soft cloth balls, and balloons. I group the poems by subject matter around the props. For instance, I pass around bark and leaves from a tree while reading the opening couplet—*“I think that I shall never see/A poem as lovely as a tree”*—from “Trees” by Joyce Kilmer. It encourages people to talk about trees they have planted or nurtured.

But verse goes even farther than this. It can release an individual’s personality. As caregivers, you don’t need to be told this, but I was surprised at the sense of humor people with Alzheimer’s disease retain. On another visit to Sierra Vista, one of the men in the group, John Alderette, played an imaginary violin when I read “How Do I Love Thee” to let me know he thought it was sappy. When I recited a poem he liked, such as “The Tyger,” he gave me a hearty thumbs up. But my rendition of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven” in the style of modern rap brought a harsh thumbs down.

I like those three poems because they are among the most memorable. “The Tyger” and “The Raven” have the added benefit of a strong rhythm. With a little practice, you can bring out the rhythm when you read the poem; musically, they both have an underlying four pulse beat.

Old Favorites

Here are some of my favorite poems to use with people with Alzheimer’s disease. They are arranged loosely by stages of the disease, but they might work in other stages depending on the person.

EARLY STAGE:

“Sonnet 18”- William Shakespeare
 “Kubla Khan”- Samuel Taylor Coleridge
 “The Kiss”- Sara Teasdale
 “Annabel Lee”- Edgar Allen Poe
 “She Walks in Beauty”- Lord Byron

MIDDLE STAGE:

“A Red, Red Rose”- Robert Burns
 “How Do I Love Thee”- Elizabeth Barrett Browning
 “Daffodils”- William Wordsworth
 “The Arrow and the Song”- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
 “Swift Things Are Beautiful”- Elizabeth Coatsworth

LATE STAGE:

“The Tyger”- William Blake
 “The Owl and the Pussy Cat”- Edward Lear
 “Purple Cow”- Gelette Burgess
 “Rock Me to Sleep”- Elizabeth Akers Allen
 “The Raven”- Edgar Allen Poe

These poems can be found in “Sparking Memories: The Alzheimer’s Poetry Project Anthology.” Profits from book sales support poetry therapy in assisted living facilities.

DETAILS www.alzpoetry.com

Bringing Poetry Home

MIX UP POETRY STYLES. Try a high energy, rhythmic poem, followed by a funny poem, and then a love poem. Alternating between these different styles helps to keep people's attention.

MAKE YOUR VOICE COME ALIVE. Be playful, use funny voices, or try sounding like a carnival barker or an auctioneer.

BE ATTENTIVE TO A PERSON'S RESPONSE. Sometimes reading a quiet love poem with sincerity is the most effective approach. Don't be afraid to move on if a particular poem is not triggering a response.

PROJECT YOUR VOICE. Take a deep breath before you start, just like when you sing.

CLAP ALONG WITH THE POEM. This helps bring out the poem's rhythm. We do it with music all the time; why not with poetry?

INTERACT. If a person comments in the middle of reading, don't hesitate to stop and respond, or to incorporate the comment into the poem. Hold a person's hand during a reading. For love poems, a gentle embrace works well. For a lively poem, bounce the person's hand to the rhythm of the poem.



BUILD A GROUP OF POEMS AROUND A PROP. For instance, gather a bunch of flowers and read "Daffodils" by William Wordsworth, "A Red, Red Rose" by Robert Burns, and "Spring" by William Shakespeare. Other examples: poems about baseball, trees and the seashore.

USE POEMS AND PROPS TO START A DISCUSSION. After reading a poem about flowers, for example, pass around blooms to smell and touch, and then talk about the flowers—how they feel, how they smell. Also consider writing a poem about what you've discussed.

HAVE FUN.

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Think of how you would dance to a song with a ONE, two, THREE, four beat. Feel that pulse when you read the poems. TIGer, TIGer, BURNing BRIGHT!

If you are enthusiastic and playful, that will come across in your performance. Think of how bubbly and excited your voice sounds when you run into an old friend; put that emotion into your voice when you read poetry.

The poem that gets the biggest laugh is “The Purple Cow” by Gelette Burgess. It represents one of those poems that many people recall because of its rhyme scheme, and it really works as an ice breaker to get people talking. Last Valentine’s Day, before this same group, I recited this poem, which reads in its entirety:

*I never saw a purple cow
I hope I never see one
But I can tell you anyhow
I’d rather see than be one.*

I use this poem to create discussion, asking each person before my reading, “Have you ever seen a purple cow?” It’s a silly question, but many people have confirmed that state fairs in the 1930’s often displayed purple-painted cows. So I find people who were alive then who actually have seen purple cows, and others who play along saying, “Oh yes, I have seen many.” Some shake their heads no; some say, “Only when I drink.”

On this particular day, when I got to Alderette, whose wife of 55 years was present for the Valentines’ Day celebration, he said, “No! But I married one.” A mean thing to say, but even his wife, Rosy, had to laugh. This sweet fellow in the very late stages of Alzheimer’s disease who often has a hard time speaking had composed and verbalized a joke with perfect timing.

Also well-liked is “A Visit From St. Nicholas” by Clement Moore. Its famous opening, “‘Twas the night before Christmas,” leads to a discussion of Christmas, holidays and family.

On another front, I have also had success in writing poems with people in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease. “I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing to Old People” by Kenneth Koch is a great resource book. One of its writing prompts that works best is to ask: What is the most beautiful thing you ever saw? Wonderful answers emerge, like, “The sun on the tops of grass waving in the wind.” In a group setting, you can ask this question to each person and create a group poem, reading back each person’s answer. I like to end the poem with, “The most beautiful thing I ever saw was, this smile, these eyes, this face,” going around to each person and complimenting them.

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In one of the many times that I have invited guest poets to assisted living facilities, John Milton Wesley, a poet who lost his fiancé in the attack on the Pentagon on September 11, chose to read his poem, “Quo Vadis,” about that experience. If he had asked me before how the residents would respond to such a poem, I would have told him, “I don’t know if it would be a good idea.”

Wesley recited the poem, which ends with,

...you are not in your usual places.

Your voice does not echo back from the open door.

*Your singing no longer breaks my train of thought, only
the thought of you.*

When he finished, several people in the group got teary eyed, and one woman said, “That is the most beautiful poem I have ever heard.”

That was one of many moments when I am certain that the poet gets as much, if not more out of the session than the residents. It is the passion of poetry coming full circle.

Gary Glazner is the founder and director of the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, Sante Fe, NM, a nonprofit organization created in 2004 that utilizes interactive poetry readings to enhance quality of life for people with Alzheimer’s disease and their families. He is the author of “Ears on Fire: Snapshot Essays in a World of Poets” and “How to Make a Living as a Poet,” and the editor of “Sparkling Memories: The Alzheimer’s Poetry Project Anthology.” *Glazner’s dream: to bring poetry to every assisted living center.*