

Hello, I'm Jim Hainlen and I going to build two concepts into our talk about poetry today. This talk and the previous lecture are to help you write a poem for VeDA's Poetry 4 Balance but more importantly, to put your thoughts and emotions about your vestibular disorder on paper. I believe that the process of writing is far more important than the finished product. The act of writing helps expiate some of our vestibular demons, gets things out into the open and give us some emotional detachment from the often too heavy burden.

Our previous session was focused on two concepts. First, the importance of metaphor in poetry. Through metaphor we invite the listener into our world, not directly but by issuing a concealed invitation within the metaphor and if that metaphor rings true – the listener understands in a startling new way what we mean, what we've felt, and what we know. That metaphor creates a community of understanding and that is what we all want. The second concept from the poem, *If You Wish to Know Me*, is the necessary two-way street of trust. The invitation is real – if you wish to know me you must seek me, but it is also necessary for me to reciprocate and extend the effort to let you know me. I am obligated to tell you who I am, “a bird,” where I live, “the clouds,” and where my voice can be heard, it “resounds over the earth.” This metaphor of understanding and community can be created through sharing poetry and that is what the VeDA poetry contest seeks to encourage.

Today I want to share several excerpts of poetry and talk about wisdom. Poetry is a small capsule with huge wisdom in it. Because metaphor compacts our thoughts and presents them to others, we are able to concentrate the wisdom of our experience, the wisdom of our inner world, and the wisdom gained through difficult circumstances. The first excerpt is from the 20th century poet, Galway Kinnell, from his book *Mortal Acts Mortal Words* and the poem *Goodbye*. The poem is a mediation on the memories of his mother's presence and the length of his life from childhood to the present. The last stanza contains such brilliant and true wisdom – that because our hearts know emptiness, we have learned that love is all. The four-line excerpt goes like this:

Well, one day the streets all over the world will be empty-
already in heaven, listen, the golden cobblestones have fallen still-
It is written in our hearts, the emptiness is all.
That is how we have learned, the embrace is all.

excerpt from *Goodbye*, from Mortal Acts Mortal Words, Galway Kinnell

The stunning metaphor is this, “the golden cobblestones have fallen still.” There is certainly a religious diction to the metaphor, but it moves past any specific religion to our “hearts.” It is an observation about the persistent quietness of the voices of people no longer in our lives, for whatever reason, lovers from the past, loved ones from the past, our past selves. All we know is transitory and the voices of the people we knew and loved are no longer audible. They are where the golden cobblestones have fallen silent – but, and this is the inner revelation of this poem – because we know “emptiness is all,” we are entitled to know that “the embrace is all.” This is to say, the love we have right now is really the totality of all of the love in our lives. It is a different way of saying what Shakespeare says in Sonnet 73, to love that well which thou must leave ere long. This wisdom is the wisdom of our bones, the very foundation of our lives, that this is the moment we must love because it is both the only moment we have and all the moments we have rolled into now.

The second excerpt is from Jane Kenyon’s poem, *How Like the Sound*, from her Collected Poems. Ms Kenyon captures in this poem how wild our journey is, how rapidly we swing between emotions in a moment, in an hour, in a day. And don’t we know the truth of that – how one moment the room is fine and the next moment we need a wall to lean against, or a floor to rest on. In this poem Jane is looking at her husband and sees the instantaneous sounds of laughing and crying.

Let me read the excerpt:

How like the sound of laughing weeping
is. I wasn’t sure until I saw your face-
your eyes squeezed shut, and the big
hot tears spurting out.

excerpt from *How Like the Sound*, from Collected Poems, Jane Kenyon

There is mastery of writing style in that first line where she places the words laughing and weeping side by side. The placement illustrates the meaning and then through the technique of placing the verb in next line we linger on the laughing/weeping juxtaposition and the strength of the verb is increased by what poets call enjambment – the delay to the next line of “is.” The metaphorical sense

of laughing and weeping, not just crying but weeping is something we all know to be true, and she invites us into that truth to linger there, to wonder if there are other opposites in life that meet-up at the extremes. Think about it – how like standing falling is, how like quietness talking is. Pick opposites in your poem and put them together is four lines of truth. Vestibular warriors know well about opposites from trying to live with them and explain the condition with mere shells of understanding for words.

The third poem is by May Sarton from her Selected Poems and is an excerpt from *Evening Music*. I chose this because she binds the poem together with musical assonance and consonance – similar sounding vowels and consonants. Instead of end rhyming words, she works the power of similar sounds into the lines. Let me read it then show how the language is music.

We enter this evening as we enter a quartet
 Listening again for its particular note
 The interval where all seems possible,
 Order within time when action is suspended

excerpt from *Evening Music*, from Selected Poems, May Sarton

The plain meaning of the words is clearly in the last line – that time is a way of ordering our lives – our evenings, but when we enter into music, action is suspended. May Sarton suggests that to be present in music is to move out of time and the irony of course is that time is what holds music together. But at its best – when we listen to a piece of music we love, we move out of time into a realm where past, present, and future; internal and external simply flow together. Ms Sarton employs two techniques you might want to try – the first is assonance. The “first line highlights the sound of “e,” enter, evening, “we,” and the repeated word enter. The e sound binds the line together horizontally without obvious rhyme. The letter “l” holds the next two lines together; listening, listening, listening, listening. The sound of the letter not only binds the poem, but the “l” gives us an entrance to our thoughts, the internal space, not existing in the realm of time, where we listen to possibility. The last example is the consonance of the letter “w;” where, within, when. They are not rhyming words per se, but they have similar sounds. When you are writing – roll around the sounds of words to enhance your meaning. You don’t have to deliberately try for assonance, consonance, or alliteration, just trust your ear and go with musical words. The grounding metaphor of the poem is the

impossibility of entering a quartet – but we can and do enter the music of the poem, of the concert, of our lives to take us away from the constraints of time. Listen for the particular notes of your life, the interval between things where possibility exists and the delicious moment when time and action are suspended, and we just exist.

Wang Wei was a Chinese poet who lived from 701 to 761 C.E. He created and mastered the four-line poem – which is the requirement for our VeDA poetry contest. He also mastered the use of words to capture place and mystery within nature. This is rich, fertile ground for writing your poems – mystery rather than certainty and the many aspects of nature are metaphors for human emotion. Let's read the poem then look at meaning.

In mountain forests, I've lost myself completely:
identity's nothing but the role we play in public.
So how do you know an ancient recluse master?
Not by the old-timer's form he somehow took on.

excerpt from *In the Mountains, for My Brothers*, from The Selected Poems
Wang Wei, (701-761 C.E.)

The first line of the poem creates a place that is distant yet knowable. If you hike, like I do, you have specific mountain forests pictured in your head. But that's not necessary because we can all conjure a mountain forest where we lose ourselves completely. And there – identity is nothing. Ironically, long distance hikers get to choose or have given to them a trail name. When you backpack on the nation's trails you don't do it with your given name – you hike under a pseudonym. My hiking name is Andante because I'm a violinist and andante is the Italian tempo word in music for slow walking tempo. But of course, the poem is deeper, more significant. Our identity is inextricably tied to our roles and who we are at our core is not only the roles we take on. It is more expansive, greater than our occupation, bigger than how others see us. The last line states that clearly for the master, he is not the form he took on. Try writing a poem about who you are that is separate from the role you play, the role others assign to you – if you existed in your own mysterious mountain forest what would your identity be? Go toward that and share it with us. As you define that for yourself, you may glimpse again the possibility of taking control of your life as it is – not as others define you.

Walt Whitman may still be America's great poet and his one epic poem, *Leaves of Grass* covers everything. It is as big a poem as America itself is big – as the world is big and diverse. This four-line excerpt contains such a nugget of truth that we must look at it. No one else, says Whitman can travel your road for you – you must travel it for yourself. So much is said in four lines. There is a deep mystery in how we got set on the road we now travel – but this deep wisdom is secure – we must travel it ourselves. It is a simple truth, but we all know well-meaning people who want to tell us what road we must travel – push back in your poem against well-meaning people, think about your road, perhaps you have been on it since you were born and it is time to identify the road, time to claim your road. Not the one you thought you might be on, but the road you are on.

Not I, not any one else can travel the road for you,

You must travel it for yourself.

It is not far it is within reach,

Perhaps you have been on it since you were born, and did not know...

excerpt from Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman

Our last quatrain is from the incredible poet, Patricia Smith who says in her poem, *Stop the Presses*, we need soft words for hard things, silk brushing rock. That is the purpose of poetry – to speak the truth at a distance from the emotion of the moment. To find the contour of few words that can communicate hard things. Try finding those soft words, try birthing truth in this way, as Ms Smith says, just once and overcome what is difficult but within reach. Craft for yourself words of healing, words of aspiration, words of a vestibular warrior – not for others, not for the roles you play, not for the past that is gone, but for you right now, a reason as the poet says to turn the page. Write a poem to author a new story for yourself not a final story but a story that is sufficient for today. A story that has you standing vertical, a story that places you in your own mountain's forest, a story that finds its truth in quietness and music, a poem that jamps opposites together, a poem that in a few words let's us know who you are and where you live. A poem that hopes for love and the embrace that is all.

We need soft words for hard things, this silk
brushing the inevitability of rock. Birth truth in
this way, just once. Craft the news and overcome
all that you ever were – a reason to turn the page.

excerpt from *Stop the Presses*, from teahouse of the almighty, Patricia Smith

After you've written your poem let it sit for a day or two then read it out-loud and listen to the music and wisdom of the words. Revise it, move words around, then take a breath and send it into the address that is at the top of this screen. You get only four lines and one entry but that doesn't stop you from becoming the poet of your moments. To sign the vivid air with your honor as Stephen Spender said, "born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun, and left the vivid air signed with their honor. Write a poem that rings true for you. Don't worry about writing the world's best poem, just your poem that captures in words the emotion and truth of your journey. As I finish writing this, a Pileated Woodpecker just landed on the Black Walnut tree outside my window. Spring is coming and I need to go write a poem.