

Introduction: I loved poetry since high school – Read, write, analyze, teach it.

I taught music for 3 decades in Stillwater. Since retirement brought about from Meniere's I've taken up painting. I'm also a long-distance backpacker and am planning and training for a 300 mile hike this summer.

Poetry Contest: This contest came into being when Cynthia Ryan, the Executive Director of VeDA and I were sharing lunch last Fall and I said we should have a poetry contest. She thought about it and talked it over with Shannon Yentzer, the VeDA communications director and here we are today. Good people listening and making something possible within our vestibular community.

Let's talk about poetry and vestibular disorders: These are some of the crucial questions people with vestibular disorders face:

- How do we construct the self after the assault of vestibular disorders?
- How do we learn to get up after continual knockdowns?
- How do we search for and recover a center to our internal world?
- How do we not lose hope?
- How do we make sense of a life when our sensory system is damaged?
- How can we share what we experience and feel with another person?
- If we can't go back to who we were before – how can we move forward?
- How can we discover both who we are at this moment, and who we can become in the future?
- How do we find someone who can we trust to take the time to listen to us?
- How do deal with well-meaning people who say, "Just get over it," or "You don't look like anything is wrong."
- How do we get over blaming ourselves?
- How do we know when to seek professional help for our internal world?

Because I can articulate the questions – doesn't mean I have the answers. Or put another way – because I can articulate the questions – it means that I have gone through and continue to go through this and can share what the power of writing means to me. Let's just flat out say it, I think that writing can help with these questions. Perhaps not entirely with answers but it can clarify where we are and where we might go.

Humans are story making and story interpreting beings. Much of our meaning comes from understanding our story. Stories are powerful because they are inclusive – they invite others into shared wisdom, they create community

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around similar experiences and perceptions of life. In this way – poetry is a type of story but in miniature, cut down to the essence. My definition of poetry is simple – the right word in the right place. And who better to write that poetry about disorders and share it – but people who experience vestibular disorders, vestibular dislocation in the real world.

But let's be real, can the act of writing give us a measure of control over our dizzy bodies, tinnitus filled ears, and painful migraine world? Can reaching into ourselves, our inner lives, the flinty emotion of our beings offer direction even a measure of healing? Maybe – maybe not. I don't want to exaggerate and claim more for writing poetry than is true, but I think it may be possible that the act of putting pencil to paper and authoring one's existence does give clarity, some direction forward, and ability to share what it feels like inside our brain and body. The words, *author one's existence* can seem trite – but they are not. Moral beings must be able to author the story of their own lives and use that as a guide to their goals, choices, and perceptions. To see ourselves sprawled naked on paper is to gain a moment of detachment from so heavy a concentration on ourselves. Perhaps then we gain some insight even humor that allows us to keep on. Ironic isn't it, that taking time to write about ourselves, lessens the obsession with the self and allows us to view our lives from different angles and see our predicament from multiple perspectives, to glimpse what we used to be and gain a foothold into what we yet could become. This is what I believe: Answers are not as important as the act of writing itself. Mary Oliver said, "The use of literature bends not toward the narrow and the absolute but to the extravagant and the possible" (p. 68 *Upstream*).

Vestibular disorders were unwelcome destinations for each of us. Not just unwelcome but unknown. Mostly, we had never heard the names or knew anything about these diseases before they hit us – a destination we didn't choose physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally. They have cost us careers, relationships, family, and educational opportunities. But here we are, and we can't go back. So how can we proceed to write poetry about our experiences? The first way is to share with others how they can find us – the world we inhabit in a metaphorical way. Let me share an Anishinabe, song/poem from the Orator of the family of the Crane in the north woodlands of Wisconsin

Listen the first time with your imagination, with your eyes closed if you are able and just take in the weight of the words.

If you wish to know me

if you wish to know me
you must seek me in the clouds

i am a bird
who rises from the earth and flies
far up into the skies
out of human sight

though not visible to the eye
my voice is heard from afar
and resounds over the earth

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Nodin Press, Minneapolis, MN

Now let me read it again – and this time let the mind create implications and associations. If you wish to know me, where do you live – what kind of bird or animal do you choose for yourself?

Read the poem again.

We know the poem is not literally true – I am not a bird, I don't live in the clouds, my voice is not heard over the earth – but what is the truth in those words. The truth lies in metaphor and my definition is not the academic definition that will get you through first year English in college but how do we interpret the hidden invitation in language to understand what is meant. Metaphor has two parts – one which is literally true and one which is literally not true but reveals a deeper truth. Let's take the phrase *I am a bird*. The literally true part is the first two words, "I am." The literally untrue part is "*a bird*." But it is not false in the paradigm of truth and lies – it is metaphorically true because it reveals the deeper truth of the poem. We could assign all kinds of characteristics to "birdness," but the orator does it for us – I exist in the clouds, I rise up from the earth, I fly far up into the sky, I'm not visible to the eye, my voice is heard over the earth.

Now comes the fun part of understanding metaphorical truth. Let's first look at lines in the poem and label them literally true or metaphorically true. If you wish

etc. The poem exists almost entirely in the metaphorical realm – yet it reveals real truth. How does it do this?

Metaphors invite the reader, the listener to participate in a community that understands each other. Metaphors issue a hidden invitation to understand on a level that is not literal. If the listener cannot share the metaphor because it is outside their knowledge then there is no community. It is simply nice words without the power to communicate meaning. But if the metaphor strikes home and has meaning – a powerful sense of community is created – not what is literally true but what is emotionally true at our core.

Take the song/poem above; the wish to know another is the literally true part but seeking another in the clouds – that is literally not true. Being a bird rising up in the sky – not true, a voice that is heard from afar over the earth – literally not true. But taken together a deeper, profound truth is revealed. Can we put it into words – maybe, but it would take many, many more words to capture the intuitive truth of those few words. The truth that I am not contained solely in the shape of my body, that I do not entirely live at the address where my house is, that who I am is not confined just to sight – but mystery, feelings that are shared without words, emotions that bubble and burble over to others. We can also add just a bit of antecedent knowledge to this poem. Oratory in Native American communities, according to a University of Arizona Press article was more than telling the story – it was a way of establishing self-worth and was considered a supreme achievement. We might also want to know of the Spirit of the Crane because this poem is from the Orator of the family of the Crane. The Crane was thought to embody the essence of Earth, Water, and Air because the crane can walk, swim, and fly. With this background the sparsity of the poem takes on even more profound meaning.

However, and this is the big however, the poem has an important element that too often we back away from – we must act in good will and believe that another wishes to know us, then we fulfill the obligation tell them where we live, where we exist, where the essence of our being resides. That is taking responsibility for authoring our existence rather than assuming someone else has the super-human insight to see through our defenses, our sadness, our loneliness. If you wish to know me – than I will share who I am and where I live. I am a bird that flies up from the earth, I am not visible to the eye, but you can hear me because I speak the truth clearly and articulately.

How can we turn our privileged knowledge of ourselves into a poem? That is the question of writing. How can we deliberately make metaphors that capture the human heart. I would offer the following advice, start by writing out images,

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what you see in your mind, the moments and words that surround it. Then turn images into similes – they are metaphors except they slip in the words *like* or *as*. In our example from above, you could begin by saying, “I am like a bird.” Once you have that, let the writing draw the inferences of being like a bird; birds live in the clouds, they fly up from the earth, they live out of human sight. Then write and rewrite and drop the *like* or *as* and simply state it – I am a bird, and my voice resounds over the earth. The power comes from words that are straight and true to your heart, that ring with the power of your experiences, words that beg to capture the moment so that we can get to know you.

The VeDA poetry contest requires that you be concise – four brief lines. But that is difficult so you might want to start off with more than four lines. Very often when we write we are viciously attached to our words, but sometimes the first effort is not our best. We seem to need to get into the flow and our later lines are really our better lines. Edit down – play with the words, move them around. Cut some out, drop the seemingly ever-present “I.” Be bold yet mysterious, be assertive and visually rich with just a few words. Use your imagination to visualize telling someone where they could go to really know you. Don’t say too much but squeeze essence out of what you do say. Speak of the spirit that is wounded – not telling us you are on the floor throwing up. Speak of tentative wholeness – not entirely what was lost. Write about stumbling but not giving up. Tell us about trusting yourself in the stillness of your inner life – not about the rock concerts you can no longer attend and stand in front of the towers of speakers. Look at your sadness straight on – but with determination to start again and yet again. Forgive yourself in words and in the act of writing because as William Carols Williams said, what the power has love but – forgiveness. Love yourself, forgive yourself, be gentle with the parts of you that are sad, be strong with the parts of you that have triumphed over this awful cluster of diseases, and write it into a poem.

- The poem may be a rhyming poem or a free verse poem
- The poem length will be three or four lines (five-line poems will be disqualified)
- The total word count may not exceed 70 words
- One entry per person, open to people with vestibular disorders and those who love and support them
- I will select Ten semi-finalists’ poems from all poems that are submitted
- The ten poems will be posted on the VeDA social media sites
- Readers will vote for their choice for best poem

- There will be one winner and two runner ups based on vote totals
- The winners will receive (valuable) swag from the VeDA online store
- Deadline for submission: