

Cathartic Poetry: Healing Through Narrative

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Most people are perfectly afraid of silence. —EE Cummings

ABSTRACT

This article explores the efficacy of writing and reading poetry as a means to help people living with chronic pain to explore and express their narratives in their own unique way. Throughout our narrative we have interwoven poems from Eugene Feig, one of the authors of this article. His poetry is sent out almost weekly to the members of our pain support group as a method of sharing his own experiences of living with pain, as well as to support and to inspire hope in others. The style of poetry we are presenting is that of a person who is not knowledgeable about poetry in a formal sense but who has an understanding of how it has helped him learn to live with his own chronic pain and suffering. These poems are the author's expression of the meaning of living with chronic pain for over 20 years. This article is a philosophical hermeneutic conversation about pain and poetry.

POETRY

Hermeneutic scholar HG Gadamer wrote, "It seems incontrovertible to me that poetic language enjoys a particular and unique relationship to truth,"^{1p105} helping us to acknowledge and understand the role that poetic recollection plays in the reflectivity of our own truth, and not just in the poetic freedom one might be permitted and encouraged in the telling of our stories of living with chronic pain. Gadamer adds, "... the task of poetry to instruct as well as to please has maintained its absolute validity in classical aesthetics and still remains valid for modern scientific thought—at least in a more reflected and indirect form ..."^{1p105} In this way, we can consider poetry as a relevant resource, within a scientific and academic context, for the exploration of the chronic pain experience. The cathartic poem is an attempt at self-healing through self-empathy. The poem and the person endeavor to make sense of chaotic thinking, restoring a feeling of balance and of wholeness in oneself through words. By better understanding their own experience of their pain, and of the internal chaos that inhabits them, people may begin to open up to learning to accept their lives with pain.

The cathartic narrative or poem, when offered by the suffering person, is an

invitation with encouragement to say, to write, or to artistically represent an interpretation of their suffering.² It is clear that this process is one that is not guided by a templated rubric about how someone should tell their story, but rather is freely given, often from personal, chaotic reflections from a precise place and time, such as in the poem "Pain Journey" by Feig (see Sidebar: Pain Journey). Gadamer wrote that "Reflection [is] the free process of turning in on oneself"^{3p50} and that our minds are thus enabled to examine their own content about what we understand and why. Reflection can give us distance from ourselves: "[The] ability to stand back from oneself is a fundamental prerequisite for linguistic orientation in the world, and in this sense all reflection is

Pain Journey

I'm on a road that never ends.

I'm on a road that has lots of turns and lots of bends ...

I come around one corner I see black clouds and stormy sky

I go around another corner and I witness the most spectacular sunrise ...

For some of us our pain will never end.

in fact freedom."^{3p51} It is during these times of reflection that we are open to possibilities of the expression of self beyond merely a chronic pain patient. With the help of others, we express ourselves openly while creating conversations that both provoke and promote transformation of oneself. Poetry is one way we can open up these conversations. This article offers an example of the poetic narrative, from chaos to cathartic.

POETIC NARRATIVES

It is essentially the narratives people keep about themselves regarding why they are doing what they are doing, what their goals are, and what their views of their past are—all components of ongoing stories people maintain about how they see themselves as distinct persons, whether rightly or wrongly.^{4p61}

The act of reflection allows for an interpretation of our narratives, especially the ones we keep suppressed and often take for granted or dismiss as unimportant. Finding a means to express these internal thoughts and interpretations, such as transposing them into poetry, provides a novel form of expression. This transposing process moves our internal thoughts onto the written page, creating a space for our inner thoughts to be in the world in a tangible way as if we were pulling the narratives out of ourselves and laying them down before us. We now can hear and see them differently. We could say that our written reflections allow for a ritual of being honest with ourselves. The written page is our truth written out at that moment and time. Gadamer goes on to say that poetic language experiences a particular and distinctive relationship with truth.¹

Gadamer continues,

First, this is shown by the fact that poetic language is not equally appropriate at

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all times to any content whatsoever, and second, by the fact that when such content is given poetic form in language, it thereby acquires a certain legitimization. It is the art of language that not only decides upon the success or failure of poetry, but also upon its claim to truth.^{1p105}

Cathartic narratives through poetry illustrate Gadamer's supposition that language gives us an expressed description of our experiences through our particular and unique relationship to a personal truth. The person living in pain may not look ill because that chronic pain is lived inside of the person. Their truth of living with pain cannot be seen externally as with other traumas. No wound is exposed, no cast is setting a broken bone, and there are no visible signs that a person is living with serious, persistent chronic pain, other than the grimaces on their faces.

The invisibility of chronic pain requires a deeper kind of expression about our pained lives, one that disrupts the brevity of medical narratives and allows us to "negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others"^{5p8} Whereas the biomedical narrative works to anesthetize the person's pain and to reach an objectively determined single truth, the poetic narrative serves as an expression for the person's claim to their truths. The poetic narrative provides an intimate, detailed representation of the person's pain.

Confronting Fear

The world has changed, where do we go from here? How can we move forward, how do we get over this exaggerated fear? Where do we go from here?

Bridges must be built; values have been maintained. We must work together, if anything is to be gained.

Pain is universal regardless of your accent, or where you live. It's time for all of us to rise up, it's time for all of us to forgive.

The morning came, the sun shined bright. Children playing together, there was not a dark cloud in sight.

If the world could only see the smiles on their faces. Isn't this the basis of being part of the human race?

The night sky was luminous, the moon was bright. As I gaze up to the heavens I know in my heart everything is going to turn out all right.

Fear if we let it consume us, it will take its toll, it slowly eats away at our soul.

Fear is an emotion that can help us define who we are. If we harness it, if we listen to what it's trying to say. It brings out the best in us, it points out a different way.

Feig's poem "Confronting Fear" (see Sidebar: Confronting Fear) becomes an invitation for others who share an interest in this topic. We must be ready to hear something that we did not notice before. This readiness is the only way the word becomes binding, because the poem has the potential to connect one human being to another and to help a person become open to being struck by something written, read, and reread. Unlike telling a story in its entirety, we write poems to express an intensity of emotion; we bring it out into the world with intensity of feeling.

This article explores the relationship between the cathartic poem and healing in the context of chronic pain. Through an understanding of how poetry can provide an access to a different experience of healing, cathartic expression of our personal narratives suggests that the act of recounting one's new narrative (re-storying) leads to restoring and learning to live with pain. The sharing of cathartic poetry also opens up a space for dialogue, for exchange (the hermeneutical), which is central to healing. We recognize the distinction between curing and healing. Pain in the context of a theory can be thought of as a "primarily neurological phenomenon ('nociception'), not a spiritual phenomenon, whereas a great deal of suffering is of a properly spiritual or 'existential' nature, 'psychic pain.'"^{6p8} The goal of health care is to cure the patient of their pain, whereas poetry offers a means to heal the person's suffering.

Chaotic Thinking

... that day my pain was winning, I was falling behind.

I was feeling sorry for myself, I was really getting fed up with life's everyday grind.

Everything looked grey to me, nothing was going right.

I was getting so angry, so frustrated, I was feeling so helpless, I truly felt I was losing my grip to fight ...

This feeling really scared me, I felt like this before.

I know how destructive it can be, it affects you right through to your core.

THE CATHARTIC POEM: HEALING SUFFERING

Gadamer¹ says that there is a fundamental difference between a genuine poem—one that is articulated within a specific structure and form—and the well-intentioned poetic communications, which are less structured and without literary constraints, that people compose to express their experiences. When someone writes a healing poem, there is an abundance of sincerity and emotional influence in it, and as such these verses are best understood from the motivation behind them. Structure, technicality, and poetic tradition become secondary to the process of expressing one's experience and emotions for a primarily cathartic purpose. For example, Gadamer³ notes that while in extreme pain, Rilke wrote in one of his last verses: "Oh life, life, remaining always on the outside." So powerfully does pain cause us to withdraw from all external experience of the world and turn us back upon ourselves.^{3p75} As pain incarcerates the person from their previous lifeworld into one with a profound sense of loss and despair, an inward spiraling of self occurs through suffering and the endurance of pain. The cathartic poem promotes movement from the inside to the outside, moving a person to open up to a new reality, releasing words onto the page; it is an act of unburdening instead of coiling in on oneself.

Regardless of form, any poem such as Feig's "Chaotic Thinking" (see Sidebar:

Chaotic Thinking) is worthy of being called a poem and is clearly different from other forms of emotional speech, even as it helps to sort out our chaotic thoughts. When we read a poem that touches us deeply, it may not occur to us to ask who the author is and why they wrote the poem the way they did; it just speaks to us and captivates our attention. We are moved on an emotional level rather than stimulated intellectually by the words. We are only aware of those words, as though they were written specifically for us. The poem becomes our interpretation of the interpretation of another's profound experience, which is in that moment independent of both reader and poet; it is now in the world.¹ The author's interpretation, presented through the act of writing the poem, makes it available for others to interpret because of its surplus of possible meanings. Our ability to interpret poems differently to find individual meaning, which may not have been the intention of the author, makes poems uniquely available to many different readers. As with all thoughtful works of art, each time we see a picture or read a poem we may find something new that grasps our attention. There is an intrinsic motivation among humans to try to find meaning in our day-to-day living. We learn that there are no persistent truths, and that change is continuous. Even with our planning, wanting, and needing, we cannot always be confident of what we think we know or believe.

The cathartic poem is one that arises from within the poet in an attempt to make sense of chaotic thinking. Actually writing

The Fight

As the day turned into night and the stars shined bright, I looked to the heavens and told myself, I'm not ready to give up this fight.

That does not mean I'm going to forget this moment of fight.

Pain and depression go hand in hand, always pushing you to your limits.

Always crossing that finish line, we keep drawing in the sand.

With help from outside and time to accept.

Our love of ourselves will most defiantly resurrect.

the cathartic poem is not a process in which the writer sits down and beautifully crafts a poem, stanza by stanza, but rather it is created to relieve the dialectic tension of thoughts that have become too overwhelming, confusing, and painful to make sense of. "The Fight" by Feig presents an example of this type of poem (see Sidebar: The Fight).

Pain Relief

I look through the trees, down by the lake. The sun is setting, it's beyond breathtaking.

The lake is like a pane of glass, a mirror, a reflection. It takes my mood, my demeanor in the right direction.

A flawless moment in time. A vision I will retrieve from time to time.

I notice the birds; I hear the frogs. I see the dragonflies hovering over the water's edge.

Off in the distance a blue heron was landing, with its magnificent wing span exposed in the light, it ... brought my spirits to new heights.

There is something about being around nature, that makes everything so right. If I get to see a sun set, there would not be a single reason to get upset.

Pain and despair, anger and frustration takes a back seat when I see that reflection.

Humanizing pain, which returns the meaning of pain to the person living with it through reflection, writing, and accepting, becomes a way to learn to live with pain with the goal of more than merely managing it, but rather learning to live well with it. Pain for the person living with it exists within the experiential realm, where "learning to tolerate pain brings us closer to an understanding of the pain."⁷ This means overcoming our resistance to change. Life consists of continuous movement through various emotional states. We can neither hold onto the comfortable ones with apprehension of what might one day change nor can we remain paralyzed by the grip of nostalgia for a past (painless) existence. We must embrace what is, right now, in this moment, and breathe, imagine, and learn. This approach strongly echoes the mindfulness school of thought, which has been increasingly valued over the years by many health care practitioners such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, who said, "When we can actually be where we are, not trying to find another state of mind, we discover deep internal resources we can make use of. Coming to terms with

things as they are is my definition of healing."⁸ Just as breath is the vehicle through which one brings oneself back to the present in mindful practices like yoga or meditation, cathartic poetry becomes an instrument through which the mind can be trained to live moment to moment once again.

HEALING THROUGH RE-STORYING

The cathartic poem, like Feig's "Pain Relief" (see Sidebar: Pain Relief), calls for renewal through an exploration of what it means, in our own life, to live with chronic pain. It allows us to take a step back and observe our experience from a different perspective in order to find new meaning. It is an approach that requires us to involve every part of ourselves while we acknowledge not only the pain, but also our emotions, our shifting sense of identity, and how we can grow from the experience. The pain becomes our teacher, adding a richer dimension to our story instead of robbing us of what we once had.

Rediscovering or reclaiming our story through poetry is a holistic process and a form of care toward ourselves that can improve healing. It moves us to prepare for and fulfill the inevitable task of continuously re-storying ourselves as we learn to live with chronic pain. Perhaps the process of writing poetry becomes an approach to take our chaotic, pained thinking and to turn it into cathartic narratives, ones that may confront our suffering. Perhaps it can be an approach to become whole again in a different sense than before pain. The

world of the person living with pain can only be expressed through their personal narrative. How this narrative comes into

Hope

Who's to say our best moment isn't waiting for us after we finish our latest descent ...

Yes, life is difficult and yes there will be setbacks too.

Every time you take a step backwards, you learn something new ...

Life is not over just because things suddenly had to change.

Give it some time, chaos always manages to come back into range ...

Yesterday I discovered a new direction.

Today I could master my new discovery with perfection ...

Life stops for no one, it's up to you to make the first move.

If you don't, how are you supposed to improve?

You can get through this, you are not alone.

The most rewarding thing about this road trip of ours, is discovering the unknowns ...

You will get through this, and so will I.

We have to conquer the impossible, we have to at least try ...

the world is through many potential expressions of text. The silence of speech (spoken words) is replaced by the written text. Where text is any form of expression (eg, art, photography, sculpture, or poetry, as in this case), it helps to let the person living with pain heal cathartically.

CODA

Rather than naming this section of the article the Conclusion, we decided to use the term *coda* to say something about the ongoing possibilities of expression to help people living with chronic pain to heal. Coda is a musical term, originating from the Latin word *cauda*, which means the tail, the end. However, chronic pain does not end, so we adopted another interpretation of the word: *coda*, “used in a more complex sense, as in a movement in music that echoes and replays the basic structure and motifs of the work as a whole, and, in doing so, reminds us of how a story has unfolded in both what was amplified and perhaps what is still hidden in the silences.”^{9p131} This is where the possibilities of poetry reveal themselves over and over by breaking through the silence of our hidden thoughts and lived experiences of pain. To write cathartic poetry means bringing into presence our inner reflective thinking, emotions, and self-empathy to help ourselves and others who suffer alongside us. In the spirit of the coda we offer the poem “Hope” by Feig (see Sidebar: Hope). We invite you to take this opportunity to pause, read, and reflect. ❖

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The author(s) have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Opportunity

Healing is a matter of time, but it is also a matter of opportunity.

— Hippocrates of Kos, 460 BC-370 BC, Greek physician of the Age of Pericles