

Fear Confronted

What is poetry? From most of our experiences, poetry is found in the rhymes of childhood stories, the limericks of adulthood, and the lyrics of music. As a literary form, poetry has been categorized into periods, structures, and styles, all intended to define, and perhaps justify the legitimacy of, the form itself.

For me, however, a more important question is the “why” of poetry. While writing about one’s experiences and feelings when dealing with painful issues of life is an effective way of addressing the pain, I have found that allowing the words to flow in poetic shorthand gives me a look into my soul. It is a method of “checking in” to see who I am in relation to some aspect of life without the constraints of language structure and syntax. Often, when I write something, I cannot explain at the time why I choose the word combinations I do. The words just “feel right.” Later, in reading my work, I find I have gained a clearer understanding of myself, and appreciate the insights derived from the earlier communication with my soul.

During the depths of my pain, with my marriage in its 30th year, my 3 children having moved out on their own, and my wife having returned to Denver in a search to find what was missing in her life, I wrote the following words in anticipation of meeting her on “neutral ground” in Santa Fe, New Mexico:

*Among the chill winds of Santa Fe
our hearts are one again
offering a short reprise
before the final verse*

*Meeting more as strangers than as lovers
to gently pull our hearts apart*

*From this day
our lives will unfold separately
but nothing in this act
will quell the aching in my heart
for the wonder of what we shared
and the joy that might have been*

At the time, the words “felt right,” but I did not recognize the depth of pain they expressed, and was surprised when my therapist and daughter were brought to tears by them. I had not yet come to realize the extent to which I had suppressed my emotions in living with the guilt and fear stemming from the neglect, molestation, abuse, and incest of my childhood. In Santa Fe, I even agreed to give my wife more time, and to accept her back, not recognizing my fear of rejection, and not realizing that the pain would only continue in hoping to find love which was not there.

During the additional time she was away, I wrote *The Foundation* and *Who Am I?*, and sent them to her hoping to get a response which would fulfill my desire to feel loved. I did not get that response, and feeling that I could no longer trust myself, I became angry at my therapist for not providing me with answers. It was this anger which caused her to shift focus to the suppressed memories of my childhood, and to open up for me the truth of my long-denied feelings. From there, I began a course of recovery, and acknowledging the unmet needs of my childhood. I then wrote *The Child*, and sent it to my biological mother and my brothers and sisters. My mother wrote back that she “enjoyed” the poem, my younger sister found it to be “powerful,” and my older sister said it made her cry and wanted to know where I found the words. Neither of my brothers responded. I then wrote *Impatience*, naming for the first time the fear that had dominated my life’s experiences, and began discussing my feelings with my adopted mother and father. I also began to write *Childhood Lost*, allowing myself to experience the feelings of that period by describing in the first person the events as they occurred.

My wife then returned, and my recovery essentially stopped. After a month and a half of trying to make sense of things, I went to the Sierras by myself and completed *Childhood Lost*. I gave a copy to her and each of my children, still hoping to find a loving response without the childlike love expectations I had held throughout my marriage. Not finding what I was looking for, and realizing that our marriage was no longer healthy for either of us, or for our children, I soon moved into my own apartment, and began the process of bringing the marriage to an end. This is not something I had ever thought I would do, but at least my eyes now fill with tears when I read my Santa Fe poem.

I offer this background to demonstrate the depth of self-insight which can be found in using poetic expression. When the words flow from the soul without the filters of thought and the constraints of conventional language, truth can be found. You free yourself from making judgments of whether what you write is right or wrong. It just is, creating the opportunity to increase self-understanding by simply asking why it is, rather than the usual question of what it should be. Another example is in my poem *Who Am I?*, a poem written before I had retrieved the memories of my childhood, where I had written that love is “my deepest and most constant emotion.” How could that be, when I was later to come to learn how guilt and fear had dominated my emotional life? What my soul was telling me is that my deepest and most enduring desire is to feel loved, and to fulfill that desire, I am willing to love, unconditionally. That is a nice piece of self-understanding, particularly since guilt and fear are no longer constraints. Had I not written the poem before breaking through these barriers, I might still be wondering if I have the capacity to find the love I want. Having written it, I know that I do.

In a case like mine, the details of abandonment, abuse, and incest can be so traumatic that it is frightening to confront them. Experiencing them first through poetic reassurances from the soul, can ease that passage. Having written both *The Child* and *Impatience*, before taking on the details of *Childhood Lost*, I knew what feelings to look for, and was able to connect the specific

experiences to those feelings, thereby giving me a complete understanding of why the experiences had affected me the way they had. The poetic expressions of my soul provided me with a road map to ensure safe passage, and what more could you ask from your soul?

In the remainder of this section, I present the poems I wrote in breaking through my self-imprisoning barriers, beginning with *The Foundation* and *Who Am I?*. These poems reflect the high level of abstraction through which I distanced myself from my feelings over the years, but in them, I found that release must come from within, and that it all begins by accepting ourselves for who we are. I originally subtitled *Who Am I?* with *A Work In Progress*, in recognition of the fact that we must accept not only who we are, but where we are, in order to set a direction for our lives, but the balance of this book has replaced that subtitle.

The Child is a two-part poem, still highly abstract, with the first part describing the pain before accepting the loss of my childhood, and the second expressing joy of getting past it. I had not yet confronted the details of my childhood nor experienced the second half of the poem when I wrote it, but since I wanted to use it to “go public” with my biological family, I found reassurance in knowing that I would find joy at the other end while accepting the sadness of the loss. *Impatience* prepared me to face the fear, acknowledging its effects and granting its release, while giving me the determination to never again let fear stand in the way of experiencing happiness. In presenting these poems, I have placed *Childhood Lost* between *The Child* and *Impatience*, because it makes a better flow for the reader than the sequence in which the poems were written.

The Foundation

*When the cornerstones
of our lives
begin to crumble*

*The foundation shudders
and the edifice tilts,
leaning precipitously toward collapse*

*Where is the will
to break the fall,
as pieces drop like tears
and land on others,
inflicting untold pain?*

*While listing severely,
and producing a distorted image
of the former self,
a new structure must emerge
from the rubble
with a foundation on sturdier ground*

*Finding reinforcement from within
by mixing new mortar
from the tear-swollen soil
and placing it
around the strongest stones,
to form a new image,
greater in beauty and sturdiness
than the one which came before*

*But while the new edifice
may appear strong and secure,
the list remains,
forever reminding us
of our continued vulnerability*