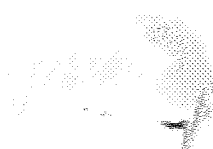


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American Pen
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Arlene Ang
August Highland
Bill Yarrow
Birgitta Jonsdottir
Bob Freville
Brent Bechtel
Chris Mansel
Corey Mesler
dPress
Daniela Gioseffi
Doren Robbins
Eric Chaet
Giovanna Mulas
Harry Polkinhorn

January, 2004 :: Issue #0001

I am presenting 36+ writers in this issue of the mini-MAG, which is the first issue of hopefully many more to come. You are being presented with many different kinds of writers, all of whom are very good. The writers come from different backgrounds - they are all independent minds whose work does not fit into a predefined genre or category. This isn't avant garde or experimental or speculative or underground literature. These writers are all forming their own brand of writing. All the work I select for the mini-MAG meets this criteria: "outside the ordinary".



We are very lucky to have the

The mini-MAG is an imprint of the Muse Apprentice Guild. I publish the mini-MAG monthly and in it I present extra-special material that crosses my desk. Everything in the mini-MAG gets published in the biannual Mega-MAG.

I might even publish the mini-MAG more frequently than monthly. It all depends on the position of the planets, my rune-casts, divinations of the i-ching and tarot card spreads. It also depends on whether I am having a manic episode or have ingested psychotropic stimulants. I'm just being frivolous of course. But I am not wedded to making the mini-MAG a monthly.

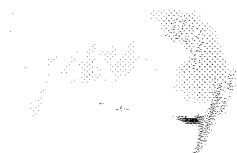
If I should get lucky enough to meet the right person to partner up with and who thinks like me and lives in San Diego and who can work together with me, then the mini-MAG could easily become a bi-monthly. There is plenty of material to fill two issues a month. So if you know someone who lives in this beautiful city, someone as enthusiastic as I am, tell him or her to get in touch.

the editor

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Writing for Health and Pleasure

"Writing is a form of therapy" -- Graham Greene

Writing Poetry For Liberation, Transformation, And Just Plain Fun
By Johanna Shapiro, Ph.D.

As a psychologist teaching and doing research in family medicine, I have long been intrigued by mind-body-spirit connections. However, it is only in the last several years that I have discovered creative writing, and in particular poetry, as a personally important mediator amongst these various dimensions. In 1997, I experienced a severe spontaneous retinal detachment in my right eye, and for a while it was not clear how much vision would be preserved. Although my first-rate retinal surgeon warned me to regard this event as "a brush with mortality," I persisted in initially approaching it as a technical glitch in the physical mechanism. I searched the scientific literature, and acquired enviable expertise about this condition. Yet, not surprisingly, nothing I read was in the least consolatory. I continued to feel afraid, isolated, and despondent, and unable even to acknowledge these feelings in other than a detached, analytical manner. Then, serendipitously, a friend gave me a collection of the poetry of Emily Dickinson. I began to read, I began to cry, and I began to feel understood. I devoured poetry about illness

and, after awhile, started writing poems myself.

Whenever someone asks me what kinds of poems I write, I always reply that I write poems about being sick. This reply is an excellent way to change the subject quickly, often after an involuntary comment, "That sounds so morbid!" Indeed, my family has been cursed (challenged?) by intimate experience with a large number of both garden variety and exotic diseases, from breast cancer, heart disease, depression, and alcoholism to scoliosis, ankylosing spondylitis, rheumatoid arthritis, and learning disabilities. But, as my interlocutors imply, isn't it bad enough to have these problems? Why write about them?

Of course, I write about them for all the reasons James Pennebaker, who studies the benefits of writing intensively about traumatic events in various populations, speculates about so eloquently in interpreting his own research (1). I attempt through writing to create cognitive order out of emotional chaos, to acknowledge and at times perhaps successfully confront deeply held fears, to assert mastery over the uncontrollable, and even, if the gods of poetry are smiling down, to achieve resolution and move on. There are other unanticipated benefits as well.

First is the sheer aestheticism of poetry. In writing a poem about a problematic experience, I am frequently surprised by the unexpected beauty of language and image that emerges. Of course, the artistic loveliness of a poem does not actually transform an ugly occurrence into a beautiful one. But when the suffering of each episode in my life is touched by the magic wand of craft, the interaction produces a sensation of wholeness and completeness. Through an inexplicable act of alchemy, the pain itself has become beautiful to behold.

Secondly is the realization, through writing, of the infinite possibilities embodied in events that once seemed implacably fixed by parameters of anguish. "My mother had a double mastectomy, my father had sextuple by-pass surgery." Presumptuously, my intellect tells me I know what these incidents meant and mean. But as I write about them, I discover uncertainty, ambiguity, and possibility. What appeared oppressively static, the unalterable burden of memory, through poetic examination becomes fluid, multifaceted, budding with potential. Their meanings grow multiple, ripe for the plucking.

A third experience related to the writing of poetry has to do with the opportunity for mutual recognition, a fulfillment of the desire to "be known" by others. Facts can be apprehended through purely cognitive modes of transmission: "My mother had breast cancer, my father had a heart attack." But pieces of the soul can only be disclosed through poetry. In the act of writing, I adopt an orientation of readiness, with all the potential vulnerability and satisfaction implied, for the possibility of recognition (2). Likewise, when members of my family, or students, or colleagues read one of my poems, they begin not only to recognize me deeply, but perhaps also to see some piece of their soul in me.

In summary, writing poetry produces beauty where before there was only pain; generates new meanings about personal historical events that previously seemed set in stone; and creates intersubjective transparency. Not bad for flinging down a few hen scratchings. Laden as they are with disease and suffering, in poetry these signs and symbols become so light they seem to take wing and rise from the paper, carrying me along with them. I experience a miraculous lightness of being (3), and in the process am liberated from my past, and made more whole. It is the undeserved grace of poetry.

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[Back](#)