

FOREWORD "SPARKS" Andre Novac, 2917

Increasingly, medically-themed poetry by patients, physicians, and nurses has come to prominence and is published regularly in journals such as *JAMA* and the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. In recognition of the value of poetry to the practice of medicine, the physician poet Raphael Campo observed that everything about being human can be found in poetry; and Jack Coulehan, another physician poet, once commented that poetry is all about self-awareness and healing. Andrei Novac, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California Irvine School of Medicine and Founding Director of the School's Traumatic Stress Program, exemplifies this same breadth of spirit in his deeply humane collection of poems "Sparks." The title refers to a Chassidic teaching that everything in life contains a latent spark of the divine, which reveals its meaning and purpose. Like embers from a fire, these sparks always have the potential to ascend toward fulfillment.

Novac's poems are suffused with imagery from the natural world to help us understand our human situation. These images convey both struggle and hope. The narrator of a given poem is often lost at sea, tossed by turbulence, swimming against the current or through oil, trudging through swamps, struggling up a high mountain, encountering clouds and fog, buffeted by hurricanes, stranded in frozen lands, or gazing into the icy firmament.

Yet flowers bloom, sunshine bursts forth, birds sing, stars shine encouragingly. Green growing things pierce the ground. Seeds that are planted blossom. Nature helps to reassure us that spring follows winter, and better things are to come. If we listen carefully to the world and the universe around us, Novac suggests, they are sending a consolatory, hopeful message. Rebirth is a constant theme in these poems, as is awakening. New beginnings are continually possible.

The poems in this collection acknowledge sorrow, struggle, and failure, but their purpose is always to inspire, uplift, and provide hope. They celebrate laughter and joy, and counsel gratitude. Often the poems are organized around a yin/yang unity. Age and youth are venerated equally, the former for its generativity, the latter for its idealism. There is darkness, but it can lead to light and warmth. Suffering is real, but so is deliverance from suffering. Terror can morph into splendor. Even evil can lead to renewal. The poet recognizes that life is fragile, but he refuses to relinquish the ever-present possibility of joy.

Through his poems, Novac counsels us to climb out of our constrained "tunnels" into an "expanded universe." We are surrounded by potentiality, the poet enjoins us, if only we could embrace it. The poems frequently acknowledge human agency and choice. We have free will – what will our choices be? How do we choose to go forward in our lives? Do we choose hope or despair, joy or sorrow? There are plenty of second chances in life. What will we do with them? Renewal and revival are options we can choose daily. Each moment offers the possibility of a better life, the possibility of happiness.

Many poems challenge the whole idea of a "ruined life" or "wasted time" and we can imagine these directed equally toward a disconsolate patient – or toward any of us. Novac's calm and compassionate voice assures the reader that everything in our lives leads to creating who we are in

this moment – and that this person is of value and worth. We can detect the compassionate physician behind these musings, the one who believes in his patients even when they have stopped believing in themselves. Do not despair, the poems plead, you are more resilient than you think, tomorrow is a new day. Believe in yourself – you can be your own engine of change. Trust yourself and float in that trust; you can arrive on the shores you imagine. You are not alone. You have companions (including, perhaps, a caring psychiatrist!) who will help you on this journey. You can move forward with their support and love. Even when Novak acknowledges that we are only “crawling toward rebirth,” he argues that “slow movements create large territory.” We make progress that sometimes seems invisible, but eventually we realize is vast. A moment of life’s blessings can heal the “wounds and whines” of our suffering.

One of the most intriguing and appealing aspects of this collection is that each poem is accompanied by a meditation, also created by Dr. Novac, intended to deepen and explore the poem to which it is attached as well to develop a sense of wellbeing and calm in the reader. For example, the first poem describes the travails of a turbulent sea. The companion meditation encourages the reader to envision herself “charting a steady course” amidst the waves. The meditations focus on relaxation, breathing, and positive imagery. One meditation cautions: “Recovery is a big word. Use remedy, a word of gradual return.” Another meditation gives permission to let the “storm” in the mind rage for 5 minutes, and then instructs the reader to “let it go.” Another meditation envisions birds flying away, taking our troubles with them. Still other meditations focus on dwelling on moments of renewal and exaltation, and on the blessings of friends, who can raise you to “unimaginable heights.”

The poet respects the influence of dreams and the unconscious on waking life, and through his writings urges us to welcome these intimations of alternative perceptions and realities. Novac encourages us to allow our thoughts to flow like musical notes in a stream of consciousness to help us connect with the spiritual force of the universe. Finding a safe space in life is a recurring theme, and the book itself creates such a space for the reader, one in which it is okay to drift and dream and hope. “A wandering spirit finally welcomed home” summarizes the poet’s firmly held belief that those who are lost and suffering will find a place to land. We can always find a steady trail when we feel lost through receptivity to daydreams and the unconscious.

Often, at the conclusion of the recommended meditation, the reader is instructed to return to the poem to reread and contemplate afresh. Having practiced this approach myself, I can attest that this method of savoring (as it is more than merely reading) the poems releases unconscious associations and intensifies the delight in the poem’s imagery. There is also space at the end for the reader to jot down thoughts and feelings. Throughout the book, we encounter an emphasis on pausing, slowing down, spending time with oneself in a relaxed, reflective state, thus allowing the potential of our human spirit to flourish.

In one sense, this book is a paean to the Jewish toast “L’chaim,” to life, life with its infinite possibilities for renewal and repair. Despite his many years of psychiatric practice, Novac is uncertain precisely how this rebirth happens, but he is confident that it can and does with persistence, hope, self-compassion, and love. Novak’s primary tool for accomplishing this metamorphosis of souls, as

both psychiatrist and poet, is crafting language that teaches, guides, and inspires. In one of the book's final poems, he acknowledges both the beauty and the limits of words. Yet despite the constraints and imperfections of his chosen tool, Novak continues on, trusting that his words will remind us of the healing benefits of nature, friendship, love, and daydreams. Reading the poems and practicing the meditations in "Sparks" offers the opportunity to be illumined by their light and raised up by the promise they extend of becoming our best selves. Novac's poetry, created with compassion and caring, make us believe in the brightness of our present and the hope of our future.

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December 21, 2017