

## POETRY READING TAIWAN II

**SLIDE 1 – I'd like to thank Dr. Peggy Lu, Dr. Anna Hsu and the Kaohsiung Medical University for their kind invitation to speak with you today. . I was fortunate enough to read some of my poems with this class last year, and I think everyone had a good time, so that is my hope for today – that everyone enjoy themselves and learn something in the process.**

**SLIDE 2 –**

**Something about myself: I'm a professor emerita in the Department of Family Medicine at University of California Irvine; and founding director of the Program in Medical Humanities & Arts at UCI School of Medicine. Medical humanities, as you may know, uses interdisciplinary studies to explore experiences of health and illness and believes that the arts and humanities offer different ways of thinking that can be used to dissect, critique and influence healthcare practices and priorities. I taught medical students and residents for over 40 years and published many research and theoretical articles in the area of medical humanities. In my free time, I write poetry, play guitar and spend time with my 3 children and their families.**

**Something about you: Why are you taking this class? What do you think is the connection between literature and medicine?**

### **SLIDE 3 – WHY DO PATIENTS WRITE?**

**Too many reasons to fully enumerate, but here are a few ideas:**

- ▶ **Control/empowerment – illness usually involves an overwhelming loss of control; writing restores a sense of control by describing their own feelings and experiences in their own words**
- ▶ **To be seen, heard – the healthcare system too easily silences patients; when patients literally speak up and speak out, they become visible, they are heard**
- ▶ **Tell a story not often told in medicine – doctors' voices are still dominate in medical stories; writing is a way for patients to reclaim their voices**
- ▶ **Create beauty, meaning out of something ugly, empty**
- ▶ **Create community, solidarity – scholars have pointed out that illness results in isolation, alienation and loneliness; by telling one's story and listening to the stories of others community develops and counteracts feelings of aloneness by providing emotional support**
- ▶ **Legacy – I was here**

### **SLIDE 4 – WHAT IS POETRY?**

**Here are a couple of formal definitions:**

**I turned to the dictionary, always a good place to start.**

- ▶ **Literary work in which *special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm***

- ▶ **Writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm**

They are true, so far as they go, but they are very unpoetical, technical, boring even. So I turned to the poets themselves.

#### SLIDE 5 – POETS DEFINE POETRY

- ▶ **A poem is being, against emptiness. - Miroslav Holub, Czech poet and physician – Holub is saying that poems are alive, they are beings that stand against the emptiness of the world.**
- ▶ **No poem solves life. The whole artistic enterprise is a kind of holding action, it's a little bridgehead for the spirit. – Seamus Heaney, Irish poet – a momentary stay – something that provides a place for the spirit to stand (bridgehead - a strong position secured by an army inside enemy territory from which to advance or attack); **uses a military metaphor that weaponizes poetry against the darkness and depredations of ordinary life****
- ▶ **It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day from lack of what is found there. – William Carlos Williams, American physician and poet**
- ▶ **If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way? Emily Dickinson, American poet – in her inimitable style, Emily Dickinson captures the unique physical sensation that poetry provides**
- ▶ **Poetry is a life-cherishing force. For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. — Mary Oliver, American poet; what a brilliant conceit – that poems which are made out of words are not words but rather fires to warm the cold, ropes to rescue those who are lost, and bread to feed the hungry.**

Now we're getting somewhere. But I felt I still hadn't discovered what a poem is. So I decided to see if there have been any poems written about poetry and, as it turns out, there are quite a few. Here is a sampling:

#### SLIDE 6 – POEMS ABOUT POETRY

##### Poetry and Grace Bruce Bennett (American poet)

Poetry is not grace;  
It can't absolve  
A sinner, or replace  
Lost faith, or solve

Conundrums by what's learned  
Beyond the grave.  
But it is swift, unearned,  
And it can save.

Like grace, we do not earn a poem, but still it can save us.

In a much more prosaic way, Some Like Poetry echoes this theme of salvation through poetry:

### Some Like Poetry Wislawa Szymborska

Poetry –  
but what sort of thing is poetry?  
Many a shaky answer  
has been given to this question.  
But I do not know and do not know and hold on to it,  
as to a saving banister.

Life is a shaky enterprise; poetry can be a strong banister to which we cling.

### SLIDE 7 SPECIAL FEATURES OF POETRY

These features are especially relevant for those here today who are immersed in the language of science and medicine

Poetry offers an alternative to the exactitude and objectivity of scientific language

Conveys emotion (engage heart as well as head)

Expresses particular, subjective experience (not generalities, not universal principles)

Relies on metaphor, imagery, rhythm (which we don't find a lot of in medicine)

#### Insight

New ways of seeing – a poem about the heart or about cancer makes us think about these things in different ways

Open to multiple meanings and interpretations – it doesn't say what it means, in contrast to science in which one word means one thing

Grapples with questions of morality and values, for which again the language of science is ill-equipped

Stress reduction and wellbeing – reading or writing a poem, at times it does save us; after hearing a poem, although nothing has changed, we feel better

### SLIDE 8 GROUND RULES FOR DISCUSSION

1. You can ask me anything – about the poem; about why I wrote it; about the events described; about my thoughts and feelings
2. How did the poem make you feel?
3. What did the poem make you think about?
4. What did you learn about the narrator? About the family?
5. What did you learn that might help you as a future physician or health professional?

**SLIDE 9**