

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 in this class last year and the year before, 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 School of Medicine; 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 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 (which I have a lot more of these days 😊), I enjoy writing poetry, playing folk guitar and a little classical piano, and spending time with my 3 children and their families.

Something about you: Why did you choose to take this class? What do you think is the connection between literature and medicine?

SLIDE 3 – Let’s start with a question: WHY DO PATIENTS WRITE?

There are too many reasons to fully enumerate, but here are a few ideas:

- ▶ Writing can restore a sense of control/personal empowerment to patients – illness usually involves overwhelming loss of control for patients; writing can restore a sense of control by providing a way patients can describe their feelings and experiences on their own terms**
- ▶ Writing also creates a way for patients to be seen and heard. The healthcare system, at least in this country, still too easily silences patients. The patient’s story somehow becomes coopted into the electronic medical record. When patients literally speak up and speak out, they become visible, they are heard.**

- ▶ Writing allows patients to tell a story not often told in medicine – doctors’ voices still dominate in medical stories; writing is a way for patients to reclaim their own voices.
- ▶ Writing also offers patients the possibility of creating something of beauty or at least meaning out of experiences that are inherently ugly and empty.
- ▶ Writing – and sharing writing – can create community and 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. Patients realize they are not alone, that others are experiencing similar challenges and therefore can understand what they’re going through.
- ▶ Finally, writing can leave a legacy, especially for patients suffering a life-threatening illness – it says, I was here, my life mattered.

SLIDE 4 – And here’s another question: WHAT IS POETRY?

Whenever I’m trying to understand something, I start with the dictionary. Here are a couple of formal definitions:

- ▶ 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

These are both good definitions, so far as they go, but they are very technical, boring, really they are so unpoetical! So I turned to poets themselves; and here are some thoughts poets have offered about poetry.

SLIDE 5 – POETS DEFINE POETRY

- ▶ A poem is being, against emptiness. - Miroslav Holub, Czech poet and physician – Holub is saying that poems are living entities 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 bridgehead means a strong position secured by an army inside

enemy lines from which to advance or attack); so Heaney is using 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. Williams points out that, while poems usually do not contain a lot of facts and figures (although they can!), without poetry we cannot meaningfully survive.
- ▶ 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, Dickinson captures the uniqueness of poetry by describing the tangible, experiential nature of poetry.
- ▶ 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 of course are made out of words are not words at all but rather fires to warm us when we are cold, ropes that rescue us when we are lost, and bread that nourishes our souls.

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

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 by reading it or writing it, but still it can sometimes save us.

In a much more prosaic way, this excerpt from a much longer poem *Some Like Poetry* by Szymborska echoes this theme of salvation through poetry:

Some Like Poetry Wislawa Szymborksa

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.

Szymborksa may be saying that life itself is a shaky enterprise; poetry can be a strong banister to which we cling, which literally can save us from falling..

SLIDE 7 SPECIAL FEATURES OF POETRY

Now I'd like to briefly mention a few special features of poetry that are especially relevant for all of you here today who are immersed on a daily basis in the language of science and medicine

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

Poetry conveys emotion (unlike technical medical language, it engages the heart as well as the mind)

Poetry focuses on describing particular, subjective experience (unlike scientific language, it is not interested in discovering generalities or universal principles; yet paradoxically, through its specifics it often reveals larger truths, which is why poetry has been described as the “universal particular”)

Poetry, as we saw earlier in the definitions, relies on metaphor, imagery, rhythm (which we don't find a lot of in medical textbooks)

Poetry also leads to Insight

For example, a poem can suggest new ways of seeing familiar things – a poem about heart disease or about cancer can make us think about these diseases in different ways

Unlike scientific language, in which one word means one thing, poetry is open to multiple meanings and interpretations – it doesn't always say what it means. Instead, it encourages the reader to use their imagination to develop new meanings and understandings.

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

Finally, there is a healing dimension to poetic language that does not exist in technical language. Reading or writing a poem can result in stress reduction and an improved sense of wellbeing. After reading a poem, although nothing objectively in our circumstances has changed, we sometimes feel a little 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?**
- 5. What did you learn that might help you as a future physician or health professional? If the narrator were your patient, what would you want to ask her? What would you want to say to her?**

SLIDE 9: TRANSFORMATION OF WATER

I wrote this poem fairly early in my diagnosis with a rare uterine sarcoma. At the time, I had a great fear of death, and I was looking for some sort of miracle through the use of words (maybe my words, maybe my doctor's words) that could change my situation, or at least help me accept my potentially imminent mortality.

SLIDE 10: NEIGHBORS

This poem was written several years later, when I'd had a chance to live with my diagnosis for a while and also to hope that I was not going to die immediately. I began to rethink my fear of death and to speculate about whether it might not be possible to cultivate a more neighborly relationship with death – not necessarily the kind of a relationship you have with a

neighbor you like, but at least the kind of relationship you have with a neighbor you've learned to live with!

SLIDE 12: ETIQUETTE

This is a pretty angry poem, and it includes profanity, so I hope you're okay with that and can accept this strong emotion. You know, there is research suggesting that physicians prefer patients who are intelligent (but not ask too many questions), pleasant, cooperative, adherent to medical regimen, optimistic. This poem expresses my resentment that sometimes doctors and nurses, as well as sometimes family and friends, expected me to behave in certain ways and have certain feelings. I experienced these expectations as an added burden on top of having to deal with a life-threatening disease.

SLIDE 15: TOO SOON

This poem was written immediately after I'd had hip replacement surgery and was given all sorts of precautions by my doctor, like how to move, how to get into a car, how to sit, how to walk. . When you are a patient, doctors are constantly telling you what to do. This advice is always meant for your own good, but it can feel as though you've lost control of your own body; that your body, indeed your self, has been colonized by the medical establishment This poem describes a small – and very pleasurable - act of defiance, an assertion of individual will over doctor's orders. My husband was a willing co-conspirator!

SLIDE 16: SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

10 minutes of small group conversation about the poems. Anna will break you into 4 groups, with each group focusing on a particular poem. Please remember the questions I posed earlier (on this slide as a reminder). This will give you a chance to share your thoughts with your classmates and be each other's teachers.

Please have someone from your group act as a spokesperson who can share one or two important points that you discussed when we reconvene in the large group. Of course, after we hear from each group, if we have time, anyone who likes is encouraged to make a comment or ask a question, so the small groups discussion are just to get the larger discussion going.

