A Poem Is Some Remembering

Charles Christie BCC

Chaplains often use journaling or free form writing as a way to gain insight into their experiences and/or to relieve stress. This article focuses on short form poetry as a vehicle for self-care. After reviewing the creative process, the author explores two specific forms: haiku/senryu and minute poems and provides examples.

It’s morning; there’s lamplight, and the room is still.
All night as we slept, memory flowed
Onto the brain shore. Memories rise and fall
And leave behind a delicate openness to death.

Almost a longing to die. That longing
Is like rain on canyon ground, only droplets.
And the brain is like brown sand, it stretches
On and on, and it absorbs the rain.

What is a poem? “Oh it is some remembering,”
A woman said to me. “Thousands of years ago,
When I stood by a grave, a woman handed
Me a small bone made red with ochre.

“It was a poem about heaven, and I wept so.”
Robert Bly
“A Poem Is Some Remembering”

IN CHAPLAINCY, THE SACRED AND THE ORDINARY OFTEN ARE INTERTWINED.

As we prepared a body in advance of the grieving family’s visit to the morgue, a chaplain intern and I engaged in mundane conversation about hospital protocols. What keeps us coming back to work in which the extreme has become a matter of course? What brings us back for another day of the worst day in people’s lives? Without some perspective, we may either miss entirely or literally be run over by the horror, irony, sublimity, humor or holiness of these moments.

Pastoral care that matters asks chaplains to open themselves to experiences and relationships that risk everything they ever believed or knew. Though the topic is writing, William Stafford’s book, You Must Revise Your Life, rings true for chaplaincy as well.

Revising and reflecting on our experience is a necessary part of self-care and growth as chaplains and persons. Left alone, dramatic experiences may build to fearful internal energies held at bay by stoic denial or dogged belief. Indeed, trauma constitutes an existential threat to one’s internal boundaries and sense of order and place. For the traumatized chaplain, the powerful effect of an experience may lead to isolation and shutting down or to a new, broader, more effective way of engaging reality.

Journaling or free form writing has long been recommended for those who want to gain insight into themselves and relieve stress. The cathartic benefits of writing one’s experience, thoughts and
reactions are obvious and valuable. Taking this form of writing several steps further may enhance one’s self-care, moving from catharsis to reflection to reorganizing or revising one’s world-view.

Writing poetry may serve as a distillation process: taking experience and images from journaling, cooking them down to one image, experience or reaction and putting them into affective language. Ideas, constructs and systematic theologies have little currency within the traumatized psyche. The images, metaphors and experience of poetry are the perfect vehicle for soulful, restorative theological reflection.

Poetry as self-care

Chaplain Roz Shackleton, the editor of Chaplaincy Today, knows a thing or two about writing and has used poetry as self-care most of her adult life. Roz says she “makes writing” in the same way others make music or visual art, adding that writing is “a way to get feelings outside myself, to put them down where I can look at them with a greater level of objectivity and begin to make sense of what has happened to me or to what I have witnessed.”

She offers a series of steps to incorporate poetry into a plan of self-care:

- Debrief: Tell your story to a trusted colleague or friend—more than once, if necessary.
- Journal: Record your impressions, feelings and/or facts. This helps move daily experiences to a “safe” place.
- Reflect: Take time to look at the experience from different angles.
- Compose: Accept new images and reflections as they present themselves.
- Refine: Continue to work with the poem and consider short forms as a way of reducing the experience to its essence.

Some years ago—before being called to chaplaincy—Roz experienced the end of a three-decade marriage and used the first four steps to compose a poem months after the divorce was final.

*Ash Wednesday*

The illness was long and painful.  
When death came at last,  
There was no time for a proper burial.  
Still I could not abandon the body,  
So I carried its ashes  
In a clenched fist of anger  
That nothing could penetrate.  

Now, in the lengthening light,  
I feel warmth seep into my bones.  
My hand opens,  
Finger by finger,  
Like the petals of a flower.  
A fresh breeze scatters  
The remnants of the past  
Till but a fragment clings to my palm.  
I rub my thumb into the residue,  
Mark my forehead with the cross of memory:  
Earth to earth – ashes to ashes – dust to dust.  
I wash my hands with the tears of yesterday  
And hold them up to dry in the sun.

R. Shackleton
While Roz’s poem certainly stands on its own and expresses the sublime experience of loss and healing, refining it into a short form produces ever more poignant reflections. By focusing on the words that seemed to hold the essence of “Ash Wednesday,” Roz made the following list:

- ashes
- clenched fist
- lengthening light
- warmth
- hand opens
- memory
- dry in the sun

She used these words to distill the longer poem into haiku with these results:

Clenched fist opens to
warmth, and memory’s ashes
bring enlightenment.

R. Shackleton

Warmth seeps through fingers—
fist of cold ashes opens
to enlightenment.

R. Shackleton

The case for short poetry

In making a case for short poetry, Robert Bly writes, "a fine, intense poem of seven or eight lines suddenly grows by fifteen, telling us what the emotion means, how it relates to philosophy and what the moral is.”

As chaplains, we all have some preacher in us and often are guilty of taking a perfectly good image or poem and strangling it by the need to explain. As the rational mind takes over and we begin to describe and tell, perhaps even to pontificate, something in the soul switches off. Though informed, both the self and the reader are no longer inspired.

Experimenting with short forms of poetry forces us to continually narrow and refine the focus. Often we are surprised by the result. It is at this point, when we arrive at an unexpected image or insight that our theological reflection begins.

Chaplain Bob Duvall tells of presenting himself for certification in the former College of Chaplains “at age twenty-seven and twenty-two pages.” Although his presenter commented that “this candidate has either lived a full life or is quite wordy,” Bob was certified in spite of himself and his wordiness. Now at age sixty, Bob finds meaning in working with short poetic forms, noting that the process and practice of writing a poem can be a healing re-membering for a chaplain.

In Bly’s lines, we find ourselves standing in the still room at morning. The night’s dreams wash over us. As readers we travel with him to our own rooms of morning lamplight. We lie on our brain shore as the tide comes in and goes out leaving behind delicate debris of sea change.

Even on this shoreline, there are a few rules. We need to stay with the experience and resist the urge to describe or moralize. This is a kind of free association but always with reference to the original experience without being a slave to detail. Working with form and poetic style may become part of the reflection itself as it urges us to find new words, metaphors and images. We also need to pay attention to several general guidelines:

- Sense – Ideally each line will stand on its own.
- Syntax – If the rules are broken, it should be for good reason and not overdone.
- Rhythm – The poem should “sing.” Recall Bly’s words:

“All night as we slept, memory flowed
Onto the brain shore … .”

As chaplains, we encounter many intense moments as we walk with people through life-changing trauma, chronic/terminal illness and sometimes death. Any of these may make or break, empty or
restore, depending on how we integrate them into the fabric of our being. Some moments are at once saturated with spirit and yet common as socks. These are the sighs, offhand comments and uncalculated acts that suddenly open onto a bright valley long hidden behind brush and fallen rock. Putting all of this, the horrific and humble, into a poem of some remembering may yield health and wholeness for the practicing chaplain. Two particular short forms, haiku and senryu, help us to take full-to-the-brim moments and bring them into sharp focus.

The Japanese form of haiku is elegant in its simplicity. The Haiku Society of America defines it as a “poem in which nature is linked to human nature.” Haiku is not only structure but is “about living with intense awareness, about having an openness to the existence around us—a kind of openness that involves seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching.” Senryu, which follows the same form but deals with human nature and human relationships, is often humorous. Both haiku and senryu embody an awareness of the world around us and are touchstones of suggestiveness.

The English form of haiku is composed of three lines with a total of seventeen syllables and is intended to be spoken in a single breath:

Haiku
As hawks soar and kee
a prescribed walk becomes
a pilgrimage.

B. Duvall

Focuses on nature; grew out of walks
prescribed for rehabilitation after
cardiac surgery.

Senryu
His last words: “Poisoned,
boa constrictor sperm.”
Tox report pending.

B. Duvall

Focuses on human nature/
relationships. When asked, “Do you
feel safe to return home?” the patient
replied, “No, my daughter is trying to
poison me with boa constrictor sperm.”

While not as ancient and elegant as haiku, minute poems are another form of short poetry the chaplain might use for reflection. Created in the 1960s by Verna Lee Hinegardner, a minute poem has a total of sixty syllables in three stanzas, each of which follows an 8/4/4/4 form. This allows the writer to capture a slice of life and turn it into a story. Minute poems are capitalized and punctuated like prose. Like all poetry, they are intended to “shine a light on a moment of intensity.”

Minute Poems
The ER nurse remembers all
the countless dead
in twenty years—
all but one thing.

“I never look at their faces.”
Man, woman, child,
how, when, where, but
never a face.

One stolen glance, now they’re faceless
just like that boy
with a gun who
blew his face off.

C. Christie

No shrinking Florence Nightingale—
white clad, padding
halls, dispensing
consolation.

Nurse Sarah’s patients called her Sarge,
there was no room
for sentiment
in medicine.

When medicine failed, she still held
feelings suspect,
but Sarah’s friends
couldn’t help it.

C. Christie
Poetry as self-care

Last March, we (Roz Shackleton, Bob Duvall and I) put our collective notion of writing short poems as self-care and reflection to the test. In a workshop at the 2011 APC Annual Conference, we presented our ideas and then invited the attendees to see if the proof was in the writing.

Following an overview of these poetic forms, we invited Chaplain Dorothy Shelly to share a story from the long-term care facility she serves. We “journaled” together as a group to sort out the details and feelings of an interaction between a mother suffering from Alzheimer’s and her daughter, who shares dinner with her once a week.

We invited participants to work individually or in small groups to compose a haiku or minute poem. The shared results of the individual and group sorting and poetic imagination were amazing. Each group or individual seemed to divine deeper and deeper insights from the story, all expressed in the language of the soul. This one example of a mother/daughter relationship produced a dozen or more beautiful poems, each capturing another facet of the human experience as the story of one woman became the story of us all.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes says this poetic sorting, “is the kind which occurs when we face a dilemma or question, but not much is forthcoming to help us solve it. But leave it alone and come back to it later, and there may be a good answer waiting … where there was nothing before.” The poetic imagination is like the “phenomenon that a question asked before bedtime, with practice, elicits an answer upon awakening.”

We ended the workshop by inviting participants to compose from their own experiences. Here are a few lines from their “brain shores”:

**Written from the workshop experience**

*Daughter and mother*

*Whose mind has forsaken her*

*Dinner bewildered*

Skye Murray BCC
Pediatric Intensive Care Chaplain
Kosair Children’s Hospital, Louisville, KY

**Written from personal experience**

**Her Vacant Eyes**

*Your childhood stolen; a secondary victim,*

*my theology*

Kristin Moore
APC affiliate member
Staff Chaplain I
Cincinnati (OH) Children’s Hospital Medical Center
Dedicated to my colleagues in residential psychiatry at CCHMC where approximately 90 percent of the youth we serve have a history of trauma and/or abuse.

**Red**

*Balls, balloons and shoes,*

*Baby boy’s burned head and face,*

*Red, red angry red.*

Tammy Holland Sullivan
APC affiliate member
Chaplain
Compassionate Care Hospice, Athens, GA
In “How to be a Poet,” Wendell Berry advises the aspiring writer to “make a place to sit down …. Be quiet …. and finally, “accept what comes from silence.”¹⁰ This is how the three of us had experienced writing, a solitary experience like meditation or prayer. The delight of the workshop was that like prayer, writing also may be a corporate experience. Our experience was equal parts poetry reading, prayer and theological reflection. We all benefited from the variety of reflections and insights from a room full of chaplains seeking the sublime in human experience.

⁴ Bly, *Morning Poems*.
⁶ Ibid., xi-xii.
⁷ Ibid., xi.