

Poetry as a Healing Path

*Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg * Kansas Authors Club*

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Ground Rules

1. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, and most of all, making sense.
2. Write what you know as well as what you don't know.
3. Follow your writing, not necessarily the suggested exercise, the facilitator or what you think you should write. Write what wakes you up the most.
4. Feel free to experiment with poems, stories, dialogues, essays, letters, and whatever other form the writing wants to be.
5. Practice trust. Trust yourself to write what you need to write, how you need to write it.
6. Remember that all revealed in this workshop is confidential.
7. Treat all newborn writing with great respect and tenderness so that it can grow.
8. Reading your writing aloud is always optional.
9. No self-deprecating remarks allowed (especially when preparing to read your work).
10. Strive, as much as possible, not to compare your writing with the writing of others, and not to critique, interpret or analyze away what your writing is trying to show you.
11. Witness others. Listen carefully with your full attention. It will enhance your ability to listen to your own words.
12. Please share your responses to one another's work—what moves you, what stands out for you – but please refrain from critiquing or analyzing the work.
13. Treat all you do as a delicious and invigorating experiment. Play. Take chances. See what way leads to way, and what words lead to words.

Prompts

1. Write of a moment that you truly opened your eyes, and/or fell in love with solid ground.

The Opening of Eyes

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.

It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.
~ David Whyte

2. Write your own initiation song for something you are to begin. Be lavish and specific.

Initiation Song from the Finder's Lodge

Please bring strange things.
Please come bringing new things.
Let very old things come into your hands.
Let what you do not know come into your eyes.
Let desert sand harden your feet.
Let the arch of your feet be the mountains.
Let the paths of your fingertips be your maps
and the ways you go be the lines on your palms.
Let there be deep snow in your inbreathing
and your outbreath be the shining of ice.
May your mouth contain the shapes of strange words.
May you smell food cooking you have not eaten.
May the spring of a foreign river be your navel.
May your soul be at home where there are no houses.
Walk carefully, well loved one,
walk mindfully, well loved one,
walk fearlessly, well loved one.
Return with us, return to us,
be always coming home.
~ Ursula LeGuin

3. Kadya Molodowsky, 1894-1975, originally wrote this prose prayer in Yiddish. She lived the first half of her life in Poland, the second half in New York. After reading this poem, write your own prayer asking for what you want and need to cultivate most in your life.

Prayers: I

Don't let me fall
As a stone falls upon the hard ground.
And don't let my hands become dry

As the twigs of a tree
When the wind beats down the last leaves.
And when the storm raises dust from the earth
With anger and howling,
Don't let me become the last fly
Trembling terrified on a windowpane.
Don't let me fall.
I have asked for so much,
But as a blade of your grass in a distant wild field
Let's drop a seed in the lap of the earth
And dies away,
Sow in me your living breath,
As you sow a seed in the earth.
~ Kadya Molodowsky (tr. by Kathryn Hellerstein)

4. Write about what you can give thanks for despite (and perhaps because) of the darkness in our world.

Thanks

Listen
with the night falling we are saying thank you
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings
we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you
we are standing by the water thanking it
smiling by the windows looking out
in our directions

back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging
after funerals we are saying thank you
after the news of the dead
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators
remembering wars and the police at the door
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you
in the banks we are saying thank you
in the faces of the officials and the rich
and of all who will never change
we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us
our lost feelings we are saying thank you
with the forests falling faster than the minutes
of our lives we are saying thank you

with the words going out like cells of a brain
with the cities growing over us
we are saying thank you faster and faster
with nobody listening we are saying thank you
we are saying thank you and waving
dark though it is
~ W.S. Merwin

5. Write your own prayer, or write about what you learn from “animal being”?

To Learn From Animal Being

Nearer to the earth's heart,
Deeper within its silence:
Animals know this world
In a way we never will.

We who are ever
Distanced and distracted
By the parade of bright
Windows thought opens:
Their seamless presence
Is not fractured thus.

Stranded between time
Gone and time emerging,
We manage seldom
To be where we are:
Whereas they are always
Looking out from
The here and now.

May we learn to return
And rest in the beauty
Of animal being,
Learn to lean low,
Leave our locked minds,
And with freed senses
Feel the earth
Breathing with us.

May we enter
Into lightness of spirit,
And slip frequently into
The feel of the wild.

Let the clear silence

Of our animal being
Cleanse our hearts
Of corrosive words.

May we learn to walk
Upon the earth
With all their confidence
And clear-eyed stillness
So that our minds
Might be baptized
In the name of the wind
And light and the rain.
~ John O'Donohue

6. What do you hear, feel, perceive in the breath inside the breath?

Are you looking for me?
I am in the next seat.
My shoulder is against yours.
You will not find me in the stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,
nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals;
not in masses, nor kirtans,
not in legs winding around your own neck,
nor in eating nothing but vegetables.

When you really look for me, you will see me instantly —
you will find me in the tiniest house of time.
Student, tell me, what is God?
He is the breath inside the breath.
~ Kabir

7. Write about the new story of your life.

The New Story of Your Life

Say you finally invented a new story
of your life. It is not a story of your defeat
or of your importance and powerlessness
before the large forces of wind and accident.
It is not the sad story of your mother's death
or of your abandoned childhood. It is not
even a story that will win you the deep
initial sympathies of the benevolent gods
or the care of the generous, but it is a story
that requires of you a large thrust
into the difficult life, a sense of plenitude
entirely your own. Whatever the story is,

it goes as it goes, and there are vicissitudes
in it, gardens that need to be planted,
skills sown, the long hard labors
of prose and enduring love. Deep down
in some long-encumbered self,
it is the story you have been writing
all of your life, where no Calypso holds you
against your own willfulness,
where you can rise
from the bleak island of your old story
and tread your way home.

~ Michael Blumenthal

8. This next poem by Rumi invites us to “kneel and kiss the ground.” Write about one of the hundreds of ways you do this in any way.

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
and frightened. Don't open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

~ Rumi

9. Write about a moment you felt lost and then how you found your way.

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or bush does is lost to you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

~ David Wagoner

10. Write a poem or prose piece in praise of one part of the body.

Taking the Hands

Taking the hands of someone you love,

You see they are delicate cages...
Tiny birds are singing
In the secluded prairies
And in the deep valleys of the hand.
~ Robert Bly

11. Write a letter to grief or any other emotion.

Talking to Grief

Ah, grief, I should not treat you
like a homeless dog
who comes to the back door
for a crust, for a meatless bone.
I should trust you.

I should coax you
into the house and give you
your own corner,
a worn mat to lie on,
your own water dish.

You think I don't know you've been living
under my porch.
You long for your real place to be readied
before winter comes. You need
your name,
your collar and tag. You need
the right to warn off intruders,
to consider my house your own
and me your person
and yourself
my own dog.
~ Denise Levertov

12. What holds up, or has held up, "all this falling" in your life? Or write about a moment of surrender in your life.

Autumn

The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,
as if orchards were dying high in space.
Each leaf falls as if it were motioning, "no."

And tonight the heavy earth is falling
away from all other stars in the loneliness.

We're all falling. This hand here is falling
And look at the other one....It's in them all.

And yet there is Someone, whose hands
infinitely calm, hold up all this falling.
~ Rainer Maria Rilke

Upcoming Offerings

The Power of Words Conference: Sept. 26-29, Unity Village: Join a bunch of us (Maggie, Lou, John, Kimberly, Kim, and Michelle) who are presenting a workshop and reading on our Turning Point writing, plus experience a life-changing and soul-lifting conference on writing, storytelling, music, and more! It's in our own backyard, and ample scholarship support for the conference fee is available. See the details at TLANetwork.org (click on the conference page, and from there, you can access all the details, [or go directly here](#)).

Caryn's classes: CarynMirriamGoldberg.com/events

- **[Writing as Divination](#):** Online class Sept. 9 – Oct. 27 – focused on writing into new ways of seeing our past, present, and futures. Most of the class is on a online interactive site where you can share your writing and make new friends, plus we have some Zoom sessions.
- **[Long Night's Journey into Day: Writing Poetry Through and About Serious Illness](#):** Aug. 28 – Oct. 8. This Zoom-based class also includes an interactive website with lots of inspiration and resources.
- **[The Art of Facilitation Class](#):** Online training Oct. 3 – Nov. 12 – Lead Life-Changing workshops, retreats, meetings, and more. Come to this comprehensive training with Joy Roulier Sawyer and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg.
- **[The Big Picture Retreat](#):** In-person retreat Nov. 1-3 at Unity Village in Kansas City, MO. Dream on and plan out the work of your heart, whether it's art, service, livelihood, or purpose with Kathryn Lorenzen and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg.

[The Write Where You Are Companion](#): Become a Patron of Caryn's and receive weekly emails full of inspiration, prompts, wisdom, and fun, plus a writing guide just for you, cool perks, and discounts on upcoming events. [Sign up here](#).