

Proceedings from the Document Academy

Volume 9
Issue 2 *Proceedings from the 2022 Annual
Meeting of the Document Academy*

Article 15

2022

Poetry-Making as Healing

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Recommended Citation

Latham, Callan (2022) "Poetry-Making as Healing," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/9/2/15>

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol9/iss2/15>

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Let's talk about poetry.

Many of us are taught to believe that poetry is restricted to a narrower existence than it truly is. Many people don't enjoy poetry, or say they don't understand it—but luckily, poetry, for a while now, is becoming more accessible as an art form.

I like to think about poetry as existing on more than one plane. There is the physical, as it exists in books and anthologies, on the page or on the computer. There is the emotional, where the poem lives inside the mind, or in the heart. There is also the metaphysical, in which poetry takes on the characteristics of a complex abstraction that, to me, takes up physical space in my mind.

Poetry has many purposes, and meanings, and desires. But for the moment I want you to consider especially its ability to heal. Humanity has—and likely always will—exist in a world that cannot escape suffering. We ourselves have been a part of the global population impacted by such recent terror and unsureness. The purpose of my talk today is not to encourage you to hide from suffering, or disease, as it may be. Instead, I would like to show you a way in which this suffering can be transformed, and even, in some ways, healed.

I am a poet. Since I was a young child, I used the art of poetry to make a better world for myself. I made poetry not to hide—but to change my world, to make it my own. For a long time, I have considered the process of poetry-making to be a semi-physical one, as if each poem I make is a little clay house that I've shaped with my hands.

I, too, live in a house. But it's not a normal house, not one that you would really live in, or cook your lunch in, or sleep in. It is a poetry house.

It helps to consider that the word we use to describe a little paragraph in a poem is *stanza*. Stanza, fittingly enough, is the Italian word for *room*. It makes a strange amount of sense, then, that I feel poetry has given me a house to live in. This house is in my mind. As stanzas can build a poem, rooms can build a house.

Today, I would like to give you your own poetry-house. This house is your own. You never have to have any guests over, and you never have to host a dinner party if you don't want to. That is to say—the poetry that you make is all yours. You can choose what to do with it. You can keep it to yourself, you can burn it right after you finish it, you can send it out to magazines to have it published. The point is that the poetry that you make is entirely yours.

Now, if you would like to participate, please draw an image of a house in your notes. It doesn't matter what it looks like, as long as it looks like a house to you. The purpose of this activity is my attempt at communicating the physicality that poetry possesses in my mind. I also wanted to give you an opportunity, if you'd like, to create your very own poetry space.

So, now, I encourage you to write some images, words, and feelings down, outside your house. Whatever you feel, whatever you want to write—just take note of it now. If you'd like to take this one step further, come back to these notes later and organize these words into different rooms in your poetry-house. As a note, I have never attempted to make a poem this way. However, I believe that this process represents somewhat the way I think about poems, and houses, and poetry-houses.

So, now that you have a place to put these words, what do you do with them?

Just one word can draw a poem out of you, and you might not even use the word in the poem itself. If you'd like to write poems in the future, you can come back to this house, where your words will be waiting for you. You don't have to share the words you choose with others—the point of this exercise is to create a safe space for your creative mind to run free.

The healing process can be deeply personal, and at times, terrifying. Poetry both allows you to hide from the truth, and also to confront it head-on. I tell secrets in my poems. I confess things. I say things I would never say aloud. But, because I'm writing a poem, I feel more at ease to share these thoughts. For me, writing a poem means allowing myself to breathe.

This process comes in stages, some of which still elude me. That's okay. Everyone heals and deals at different speeds. You really can hide as much as you want in a poem—the so-called *turning-away*. But I think, too, that it requires bravery to bare yourself like that, as it were. You don't even have to know how to write poetry (if there *is* a certain how). To me, the act of making a poem is much more about personal and emotional expression than it is about doing something *right*. There is no right here. There's just you, and your little house, and the world.

And you can stay inside your little house all day, but you can leave whenever you want to. Think of it less like a life of isolation-defined creativity, and more like freedom. We now know what it is like to be trapped inside our own homes, and that is the last thing I want for you and your new poetry-houses. Instead, I want you to think of this new house as a place of freedom—as a place where you go when you

feel poetry. I say “feel poetry” because I don’t think that poetry-making is strictly confined to writing poems down in a notebook or on a computer.

I encourage you, whenever this world-suffering or self-suffering occurs, or when it gets to be too much to hold inside, to think of poetry. I think there are two starting-points for this. One, simply observe the world around you. Listen closer. Watch carefully. When you watch for poetry, your field of vision shifts.

And two, read works by other poets. They’ve had the drive and the courage to capture the world inside their words—whatever that world looks like to them. One of the best things you can do as a poet is observe. You may feel discouraged by the seemingly intimidating beauty and skill of their work, but that’s not why you’re reading them. You’re reading these books to see that you are not alone. You’re reading for beauty, and for new ways to look at things, and to savor the way certain words flow together. When you’re in your poetry-house, there is no room for jealousy or envy—but there is always room for celebration, and empathy, and curiosity. Today, I wanted to leave you with the start of something. I hope that you can take your poetry-house with you, wherever you go.

Some advice for getting started on poetry-making (from my experience):

- 1) Have an inventory set aside – of images, ideas, feelings, words; return to for inspiration
- 2) Have questions – and chase them down.
- 3) Be brave, and push yourself – poetry blossoms when interrogated, like other processes in life.
- 4) Put together two unlike/contrasting images and investigate them – sometimes poems are born from the simple exploration of words and images.
- 5) Keep your mind open.
- 6) Don’t assign values to your poem (e.g., “good” or “bad”); and don’t be too harsh on yourself; the poetry world is a massive world, so try not to be discouraged if/when you don’t feel satisfied. The good news is that you can always make more poems.
- 7) Have fun, if you can.

More than anything, I hope that you take away a sense of possibility from this. Poetry can be a wonderful source of processing, observation, and healing. The best thing about it is that you never have to share it with anyone, but just know that there is a massive community of poets across the world. Whatever you decide, you will not be alone.