



One
POETRY



On Starting the Alzheimer's Poetry Project and Sharing Poems with a Loved One

In 1997, seventeen years after my first experience delivering flowers in the nursing home, I desperately wanted to quit working at the flower shop and become a full-time poet. As a way to help incorporate more poetry into my life, I applied for a grant to use poetry at one of three local facilities: two were convalescent homes and one was an adult day care center for people living with Alzheimer's disease.

I was awarded the grant to conduct a poetry workshop at the adult day care center. There was no additional instruction, just simply "use poetry." My initial moment of inspiration was after observing a man with his head down, not participating, and seemingly unaware of his surroundings. I chose to share the Longfellow poem, "The Arrow and the Song." Upon reciting, "I shot an arrow into the air," the man's eyes popped open and he responded, "It fell to earth, I knew not where." Suddenly, he was able to participate. This moment showed me how useful poetry could be in engaging this community. I was and remain inspired to make my life's work serving people who are living with dementia, which led me to found the Alzheimer's Poetry Project (APP).

During that same time, my mother, Frankie, had terminal cancer. Brain tumors and morphine were causing dementia-like behavior. Billy, my father, called to say she was agitated and asking for cherry ice cream. As I arrived at their house and reached into the back seat of the car, sitting next to the bag with the ice cream were all of the poetry books from the workshop. In a flash, I saw myself reading the poems to my mother.

My parents were childhood sweethearts from the young ages of 5 and 6. My mother had teased my dad with, “Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy boy, Billy boy.” We all recited the words. It was strikingly clear to me that poetry could be of use to people with dementia. During the time leading up to her death about a month later, I was able to continue to share poetry with her.

Outside their bedroom window, my father had hung a hummingbird feeder. From her deathbed my mother could watch the birds flutter and sip the red sugar water. Beyond the feeder was their garden. The garden was mostly flowers, yellow cymbidium orchids and orange dahlias with blooms as big as your head. My mother and father loved picking oranges from their orange tree. Perhaps the most magical bit of nature for people having grown up in dust bowl Oklahoma was fresh orange juice from a tree they had planted.

Growing up, their garden always had rows of tomato plants. My toddler brother, Kevin, would sink his teeth into ripe fruit, but leave them hanging on the vine. When you went to pick the tomatoes, each one had little rows of tiny bite marks. Chomp, grin, chomp, grin, chomp, grin, Kevin!

The poem that had the most resonance for me to share with my mother was Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 with its gorgeous opening lines:

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

As my mother was born in May and her hospice was taking place in May, that third line had particular significance. I would quietly read the poem to her and would often repeat the closing lines, among the most famous in the English language:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

These closing lines echoed what I wanted to say to my mother—that in the face of hopefulness, love expressed through poetry can make the love live forever. I often use Sonnet 18 in my work with the APP.

How to Select a Poem

For selecting poems to use with my mother, I had a stack of books with me. It is doubtful you will be lugging around a small library, so as an alternative you can use any Internet search engine (Google, Yahoo, Internet Explorer, etc.) to easily find a poem of almost any theme that might be of interest to your loved one. A trip to the library to browse the poetry stacks can also be fruitful and relaxing. Lastly, feel free to email me at gary@alzpoetry.com and I will be happy to find the perfect poem for your loved one.

Sample poetry themes include the following:

- flowers, gardens, the outdoors
- colors
- seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter)
- children
- weather (sunshine, snow, rain, fog)
- food
- sports (fishing, baseball, football)
- animals

The following websites have built in search engines to find poems by theme or by poet:

Poetry Foundation (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org>)

Academy of American Poets (<http://www.poets.org>)

Recipe

MY MOTHER'S SUMMER POEM

INGREDIENTS:

1 poem
1 mother
1 son

SERVES 2

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Read the poem with humor and playfulness.
2. Read the poem with quiet reflection.
3. Play with repeating lines that have a particular significance.

SONNET 18

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

Basic Principles of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project, with a Sprinkling of Poetry Tips

The principles or techniques of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project may be combined in myriad ways. They are like the basic ingredients to a favorite recipe. How you combine them, the amount of time you allot to each, and the order in which you do them will all be a part of the decision making process you will engage in when working with your loved one or activity participant.



The chapters that follow delve into each of the techniques in more depth, including looking at ways to combine them with dance, exercise, music, storytelling, and visual art. They also include suggestions for working with participants of all ages. (You can also see examples of these techniques at APP's YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/alzpoetry>)

Tips for Building a Poetry Session

The following tips define the structure of a poetry session and offer some common sense methods that I have found particularly useful in working with people living with memory loss. The sessions that APP conducts take place in assisted living, adult day care, and senior centers. You may also use these techniques to perform and create poems one-on-one in a home setting with your loved one.

Group Size: The size of the group will vary depending on the needs of the facility. Our groups have ranged in size from one person to up to 85 people. An average size group for APP would be in the 10-to-15-person range. While APP techniques and methods may work with any size group, for larger groups the poetry session becomes more of a performance in order to hold the participants' attention. For at-home programming, the tone is more conversational and normally takes less time than for a group session.

Poem Selection: Select a group of poems. They may be linked by theme (e.g., spring).

Length of Session: The typical length of a poetry session would be an hour. The session can be divided into 30 minutes of performing poems and 30 minutes of creating a new poem. Each session ends with the performance of a new work.

Seating Arrangement: If possible, have everyone sit in a circle.

Getting Started: First, greet everyone. Start by shaking everyone's hand and saying hello. Listen to how each person responds and interacts with you. Can the person hear you? If you say your name, does the person say his or her name? This quick check in will help you work together. It gives you a sense of each participant's ability to respond to social cues. Tell the group that you will be performing and creating poems with them.

- While you may be seated during the session, you may also move closer to the participants and kneel so you are not always standing over them when talking.
- You may also choose to stand and recite a poem to give it emphasis.

Encouraging Participation: Reinforce a participant's comments or responses by repeating them and giving praise for what each person says. Listen for when someone uses humor or creativity and repeat what the person said to be sure the group heard it and can respond. This is especially effective with people living with memory loss, as it gives a second chance to hear a joke or comment.

- Ask permission before asking a question: "May I ask you a question, please?"

Ending the Session: At the end of the session, thank the participants for their creativity and performance.

Main Techniques Used to Build a Poetry Session

Once you have structured the poetry session, use the following techniques to engage the participants.

Engage the Group in Call and Response

Recite a line of high-energy poetry. Have the group echo you. This is an aerobic activity that helps to build and hold attention. Begin by saying a few lines or even just a word. You are getting the group warmed up. After you say a line, let the group respond. Refrain from repeating the line with them; this will help give space for their voices. If you are reciting just a few lines from a longer poem, once you end the call and response ask the group if they want to hear the whole poem and, if so, with feeling recite it for them or a longer section of the poem.

Use Poems as Discussion Starters

Use poems as a flash point for discussions. Build questions based on the subject matter of the poem. Reinforce the responses by reciting lines from the poem using the technique of call and response.

Incorporate Props

Use items the group can smell, feel, and hold. Build a program around the props. Examples of props include leaves and branches for a tree- or nature-themed poem, a bouquet of flowers for a floral-themed poem, and a balloon or beach ball to play catch with for a sports-themed poem.

Create a Group Poem

Use the simple prompt of asking an open-ended question to begin creating a group poem. Choose a classic poem as the model and then base the prompt on the subject matter of the poem (e.g., “Daffodils” by Wordsworth). Ask what spring smells, tastes, sounds, looks, and feels like. Write down the participants’ responses as the lines of the poem.

Call and Response

The core concept of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project is call and response, when the session leader recites a line of poetry and then has the group echo back the words. It is a technique I have used in working with everyone from preschool children to 100-year old elders. I have used it with large groups and one-on-one in the home. A majority of the lessons in this book include an element of call and response.

My interest in multi-voice poetry performance grew from my work in the poetry slam grassroots movement. Marc Smith coined the term *poetry slam* and started the performance competition in Chicago in the late 1980s. In a poetry slam, it is common for the teams to work together and perform what are known as “group poems.”

I think one of the reasons that call and response works so well is that it is embedded in our culture in many ways. You find call and response in music forms, especially gospel, blues, and jazz. Counterpoint in classical music can be a form of call and response. You also see call and response used in yoga classes, with the Kirtan, which was developed in India. *Kirtan* from Sanskrit means “to repeat.” In the Occupy movement of 2011, we saw a creative use of call and response renamed the “human microphone.” Call and response is also found in religious ceremonies throughout the world (e.g., the shouting out of “amen” in Baptist ceremonies; the intoning of catholic litanies). The reciting of wedding vows is perhaps the most famous example of call and response.

Call and response is an effective technique in reaching people living with dementia. Because participants are following along in unison, it allows for a high success rate for many elders, even for those in the late stage of dementia whose language skills are severely reduced.

Call and response uses what is known as “echoic memory” which is “a brief mental echo that is thought to last for upwards of about three or four seconds after an auditory stimulus has been heard” (http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Echoic_memory). Echoic memory is also defined as “the

ability to recapture the exact impression of a sound shortly after the sound has finished” ([http://www.thefreedictionary.com/echoic + memory](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/echoic+memory)).

The time span of four seconds is very close to the length of time it takes to say a line of poetry written in iambic pentameter (a line of verse consisting of five metrical feet). Many of our most loved and well-known poems use this rhythm and are perfectly suited for call and response.

Incorporating echoic memory sidesteps the need for the participant to access his or her short-term memory by encouraging the person to repeat a phrase just heard. Echoic memory seems to remain intact even in late-stage dementia.

A 2004 study showed that reciting poetry using the technique of call and response had an aerobic benefit and reduced stress indicators (<http://ajpheart.physiology.org/content/287/2/H579>). In the study researchers used call and response in combination with movement to regulate a subject’s breathing: “The subject listened to the text recited by the therapist without lifting the arms (but continued walking) and subsequently repeated it in the therapist’s fashion.”

Anecdotally, when we at APP engage people in call and response, we see their affect brighten; they become more social, alert, and engaged. The artistic focus of using call and response is on participant creativity, inspired by energetic and associative performance.

The approach is simple: the session leader chooses several lines of poetry, either a short poem or an excerpt that can stand alone, and leads the group in reciting it. Lines should be about four seconds long. Sometimes it is helpful to break the line in half, as it gives the group fewer words to repeat back. Rhyming couplets work well, such as the ending of Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare. The line breaks can be changed to read:

So long as men can breathe/
or eyes can see,
So long lives this/
and this gives life to thee./

People respond eagerly to poems that are familiar or humorous, especially when the leader selects the most memorable lines. The following poems are among the ones that have received the strongest responses during APP sessions (a list of recommended poems is also available at www.alzpoetry/book.com):

“Tyger,” by William Blake

“Rattlesnake Meat,” by Ogden Nash

“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” by William Wordsworth

A key to being a successful session leader is the delivery of the lines of poetry. The leader needs to recite them loudly enough to be heard by everyone in the room, and they should be spoken at a speed that is not too fast to follow but that also maintains the poem’s rhythm. It is important to articulate words well; this will be especially helpful for elders with hearing impairment. A smile and a lively energy will likely enliven participants as well.

The call and response technique can be effective with older adults with all levels of physical and cognitive abilities. Even those with late-stage memory impairment can successfully engage. For those who are losing language and are comfortable with touch, the session leader can kneel down before the person and recite the lines while moving the participant’s hand to the rhythm. It is best first to orient the person to what is happening by saying something like, “I’m going to recite the poem and move your hand to the rhythm.” Engaging an elder in this way often receives a positive response from the participant, who may start to move his or her lips, smile, or brighten in the eyes. You need to read the person’s body language to see if he or she is open to being touched.

The technique can be used to perform original content that is created during a session as a way of unifying the group at closing. For example, it can be used to perform a story the group has created or comments the group has made about a piece of art they have observed during the session. Call and response also can be combined with movement or music activities. APP often uses the technique with the chair exercises that are common in assisted living and adult day care centers (chanting along with the movements). Also try using the technique in context with accomplishing daily activities, such as taking a shower or getting in and out of a car.

Be sure to find a partner to practice call and response with.

Using Poetry as a Discussion Starter

Purple Cow Hugs and Warning Bad Pun Up Ahead

John was a retired lieutenant colonel. He had spent 30 years in the army and had an iron grip handshake. At the age of 90 he still crunched down on your hand like a vise. When I read a poem to John that he did not like, such as my rap version of “The Raven,” he gave me the thumbs down. When I read a love poem he found sappy, like “How Do I Love Thee, Let Me Count the Ways,” John played an imaginary violin.

I was reading love poems to a group at Sierra Vista Assisted Living Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on Valentine’s Day, including “The Purple Cow,” by Gelett Burgess:

I’ve never seen a purple cow
I hope I never see one
I can tell you anyhow
I’d rather see than be one.

Strangely, I do consider “The Purple Cow” a love poem. John was sitting with Rosy his wife of 55 years. I said “John, have you ever seen a purple cow?” He said, “No, but I married one.” Now, that was a mean answer. Rosy gave him an elbow to his ribs. I knew then that their 55-year marriage was based on a shared sense of humor. At that moment a man in late-stage dementia had told a joke with perfect timing, and even Rosy had to laugh.

Poetry can be a very effective flash point for discussions. Using “The Purple Cow” as an example, I will ask if the person has ever seen a purple cow. Some common responses are “Only when I drink” or “Purple cow—

isn't that a cocktail?" The interaction builds energy and attention; you use the poem to pique the person's interest.

The idea is to step outside of our normal way of communicating by focusing the person on the lines of poetry and then asking questions about the imagery and themes of the poem. This type of participation may help an individual who is navigating memory loss to be present by drawing the person out and engaging him or her. By shifting back and forth between reciting the poem with the person using call and response and talking about the poem, you are helping him or her to focus. This can be a wonderful diversion from our regular patterns of conversation.

"The Purple Cow" was published in the San Francisco Chronicle. Burgess wrote a second verse:

I've never seen a purple cow
My eyes with tears are full.
I've never seen a purple cow
And I'm a purple bull.

Then the poem was published in newspapers all over the world and became so popular that people would often stop Burgess on the street and ask about it. So he wrote this retraction:

Confession: And a Portrait, Too, Upon a Background that I Rue!

Oh, yes, I wrote "The Purple Cow,"
I'm sorry now I wrote it!
But I can tell you anyhow,
I'll kill you if you quote it.

I was reciting the poem at St. Gabriel's Adult Day Center in Milwaukee, and one of the men said, "We are in a church. Can we do something about that last line?" So now I recite it as such:



Oh, yes, I wrote "The Purple Cow,"
I'm sorry now I wrote it!
But I can tell you anyhow,
I'll hug you if you quote it.

Then I give someone in the group a big hug.

Recipe

GRANDMA'S GENTLY GUIDED GAB FEST

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 poem
- 2 (or more) curious minds

INSTRUCTIONS:

Use the poem as a discussion starter. Ask questions about the poem. For example, when I use "The Tyger," I ask if the group likes tigers. Often they say something like, "I wouldn't want to meet one in a dark alley."

Listen for funny or interesting comments and acknowledge what each person says. Perhaps even repeat what someone says (e.g., "Bob just said he likes tigers, but only in the zoo.")

We talk about if tigers are beautiful. What color are they? Would they be fun to ride? How do they compare to house cats? What are the similarities and the differences between the two?

Say, "I have a tiger by the ____." (Let them finish the sentence.)

"If he hollers, let him ____."

"I have a tiger in my ____."

This can work with any poem. After talking about the poem, reinforce the discussion by reciting the poem with the group using call and response.



Warning: Bad Pun Up Ahead

Often when using “The Purple Cow,” I will lead the discussion into a horrible pun. It goes something like this:

Gary: What color milk do you think a purple cow would have?

Group: No matter what color the cow, the milk is always white. You don’t get chocolate milk from a brown cow do you?

Gary: True, but imagine it was colored. What color might it be?

Group: Purple or lavender.

Gary: Okay, follow me on this, and I am warning you, there is a terrible pun up ahead.

You have a purple cow, it has purple milk: What is a juice or a drink we like that is purple?

Group: Grape juice.

Gary: Yes, now what happens to grape juice when it ages? When it ferments?

Group: It turns to wine.

Gary: Yes, okay, here we go. You have a purple cow, it has purple milk, it tastes like grape juice, it turns to wine. Is it *Cow-bernet*?

Group: AAAUUUUUUGGGGGHHHH!!

Once I was working in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and after engaging a group in this horrible pun a woman looked at me and said, “No, it’s “Moooooooooooo-erlot.”

Props

When I worked in the flower shop, it was easy for me to find props to bring to a poetry session to have the participants hold, smell, touch, or taste. But after my wife and I sold the business and I embarked on my life as a full-time poet, I was at a loss as to what to bring. We had moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and I was preparing for my first session at Sierra Vista Assisted Living Center. I was looking around and outside I saw the answer: snow!

I filled an ice chest full of snow. At the center I made snowballs and passed them around. The participants touched the snow. Many wanted to taste the snow and began to eat it. For some, the snow was too cold. At one point the activities director, Ruth Dennis, whispered, “Throw them at Gary.”

Suddenly it was . . .



WHACK!

Miles to go . . . **SPLAT!**

Before I sleep . . . **PLOP!**

Snowballs are glistening
are you listening?
They are flying at me from every angle,
It's a beautiful sight
We're happy tonight

Fffffffmmmmppp . . . Ouch!

It hit me that working
with this group was going
to be rewarding in ways
I had not expected.

Recipe

MS. JEN THOMPSON'S SPRING RAIN

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 misting spray bottle
- 1 basket of strawberries
- 1 punch bowl of fresh lemonade

INSTRUCTIONS:

Sing "April Showers" and "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" to the group. Lightly spray mist onto the participants' cheeks. Describe the feeling. Eat strawberries and drink lemonade. Talk about the taste, texture, and smell of the fruit and drink. Ask what spring evokes. Write down the responses, as these will become the lines of your poem. Perform the newly created poem.

This recipe was created by Jen Thompson.

Recipe

BREWSTER VILLAGE'S FRIDAY FISH FRY

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 fishing pole with reel (put the hook in a cork)
- 1 tackle box (full of bobbers)
- 1 pair of thigh-high waders (optional)
- 1 creel full of fishing poems

FISHING POEM SUGGESTIONS:

"Fishing," by A. E. Stallings

"Cod," by Cheryl Savageau

"The Fish," by Elizabeth Bishop (Best to use an excerpt, as the poem is long. There are many beautiful passages.)

INSTRUCTIONS:

Fish out a few fishing poems. Pass around the rod and reel. Open the tackle box and pass around the bobbers. Talk about fishing. Tell a tall tale. Explore fishing through your senses. Expand the discussion to talk about lakes, swimming, or summer. How is fishing calming? Can being patient while fishing be applied to other aspects of life? Write down the participants' responses to form the lines of the poem. Perform the newly created poem.

This recipe was created by Carrie Platt, Megan Burns, and Evan Weiske.

Dr. London and Ocean

Creating a Poem Using Open-Ended Questions

Claudia, a caregiver, had called me on behalf of the wife of the man she was taking care of. The wife, Trudie, had attended a talk I had given the day before at the Napa Valley Alzheimer's Disease Education Conference hosted by the Northern California Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. Trudie was wondering where she and her husband could get a copy of my poetry book. Claudia asked if I thought she could get it from a local bookstore. I told her I did not think that would be possible and asked where she was calling from. She said she was in San Rafael and was taking care of a man named Fred London, who was a retired doctor and who loved poetry. I told her I would be driving through San Rafael and I would love to come and work with her and Dr. London. I would also bring the book Dr. London and his wife were looking for: *Sparkling Memories: The Alzheimer's Poetry Project Anthology*.

When I arrived, I told Dr. London I had heard he loved poetry and that I also loved poetry and wanted to share some poems with him. He was very polite, but said, "I have a tennis lesson today, and any other day would be fine, but not today." Claudia explained to him that they had changed the date of the tennis lesson. We then all sat down in the living room, where Claudia had stacked many of Dr. London's favorite poetry books.

I taught Claudia the technique of call and response. She and I recited "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," by T.S. Elliot; "Sonnet 18," by William Shakespeare; and "Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town," by e.e. cummings. For fun we also recited "Rattlesnake Meat," by Ogden Nash. Dr. London and Claudia enjoyed saying the poems. We all laughed and had a fun time.

Dr. London had walked into the dining room, and I said to Claudia, "It looks like he is finished and we won't get a chance to create a poem together." He then came back into the room and asked if I knew the works of two poets: Allen Cohen and Constance Walker. I told him I did not know their work. (Later when I Googled them, I found that Cohen had founded the *San Fran-*

cisco Oracle, an underground newspaper. Walker is well known for her poem “Pray for Peace,” which has been reprinted in more than twenty-five publications.) Dr. London then said, “If I don’t write it down, it’s shhhhhhh.” I asked him if I could write down what he had just said and if we could try to create a poem together. He seemed pleased to agree and sat back down.

I asked Dr. London a series of questions to explore poetry through his senses, and using his responses we created this *ars poetica*, or “poem on the nature of poetry.” I started by repeating his opening line, which had such a resonance regarding memory loss. That prompted him to look at the window and give a wonderful description of the rolling hills of Northern California.

Next I asked Dr. London what he thought of when he heard the word *poetry*, which led him to talk about Constance Walker and Robert Frost. I then asked him what a poem tasted like. This was, undoubtedly, a strange question, and so I encouraged him to use his imagination, as we do not normally think of poetry as having a taste.

After each question Dr. London would close his eyes, scrunching up his brow in concentration, and then the words would come pouring out so fast it was hard for me to keep up in writing them down. I followed up my taste question by asking him about the smell and sound of poetry, and again he went into a deep concentration before the words flowed out in a torrent. Dr. London also shared with me how he feels people react to poetry.

This was on a Thursday. On Saturday, I got a call from Trudie telling me that her husband had died peacefully that morning. She wanted to know if I would send her the poem Dr. London and I had created. I typed up the poem from my notes to send to her.

I was honored to have spent time with Dr. London at the end of his life. His responses to my questions, which form the lines of the poem that follows, are in the order given, with light editing.



ON POETRY

DR. FRED LONDON

If I don't write it down, it's shhhhhhh.
Notice the color, this gray-brown
that eats up all the land.
When you reach out for it, it sneaks away.

Even though it sounds simple, it isn't simple—
It's like Frost, playing ball with a wasted arm.

A poem tastes sweet and orange flavored.
It grabs the poet by his trousers
and squeezes his crotch.
Stretching to gain more and he's lovable.

When you mention poetry to most people
they panic: smart people, dumb people.
I have no time for that.

Poetry smells like,
famine wolf-dog on a mountain,
running up the hill, biting the sun.

Once you read the poem,
you don't want to put it away.

Once the poem gets going—
you can actually miss tennis.

Poetry sounds like a howling wind,
pushing up the shore.

The Gathering Place

The Gathering Place is one of the best-organized adult day care centers I have worked with. They offer a range of art experiences, including working with concrete, which the men in the group really enjoy. Cindy Musial is the Executive Director. You can really see the spirit and sense of camaraderie she inspires in the participants. She is a true leader in the field. They have a one-to-one ratio of volunteers to people living with memory loss. It is to her credit that she inspires her community to such levels of support and involvement.

On a field trip to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, I used the poem “Ocean” and the technique of asking open-ended questions to create a poem around the senses with the “poets” of The Gathering Place (see Ocean recipe that follows).

Recipe

DOCTOR LONDON'S LOVABLE LANGUAGE AU LAIT

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 bushel of poems (3 or more)
- 1 quiet room
- 1 comfortable place to sit
- 1 blank paper
- 1 writing utensil
- 2 people

INSTRUCTIONS:

Choose a bushel of poems with subject matter grouped around a theme. Perform the poems using call and response. You may gauge the participants' interest level. As they are still engaged in reciting the poems, gently shift from performing them to creating a poem together by asking opened-ended questions. Below is a typical progression of questions that you can use. Pick a theme and explore it through the participants' senses.

Would you like to create a poem together?

I am going to ask you questions about spring and write down your answers.

Your words will form the lines of the poem.

Shall we start?

continued

May I ask you a question, please?

We are going to create a poem about spring.

This is kind of a creative way to think.

What does spring taste like?

Imagine you are outside on a spring day.

What are the foods that make you think of spring?

What does spring smell like?

What does spring feel like?

What does spring sound like?

What does spring look like?

Continue to remind the participants that you are creating a poem together based on spring, that you all are using your imagination and creativity to talk about how spring tastes, looks, feels, sounds and smells. I recommend you emphasize to the group that their responses may be playful, silly, or even crazy!

After the poem has been created, you may perform it together to end the session. Thank everyone for their creativity.

Recipe

OCEAN

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 life-size sculpture of a whale (or any artwork)
- 1 bucket of questions about oceans and whales
- 1 bushel of open minds and open ears
- 1 sack full of playful attitude with a pinch of sass
- 1 handful of being in the moment
- 1 gallon of open to where the poem takes you

INSTRUCTIONS:

I asked open-ended questions around the theme of whales and the ocean. As part of our field trip to the arts center, we were inspired by Tristin Lowe's sculpture *Mocha Dick*. The colossal sculpture is a 52-foot-long re-creation of the real-life albino sperm whale that terrorized early 19th-century whaling vessels near Mocha Island in the South Pacific. Mocha Dick, described in appearance as "white as wool," engaged in battle with numerous whaling expeditions and inspired Herman Melville's epic *Moby Dick*.

The open-ended questions I used included:

What do you think of when you hear the word *ocean*?

Does anyone like to go fishing?

What does the ocean sound like?

What does the ocean feel like?

What would you do if you saw a whale?

What would you say if you could speak to a whale?

continued

Here is a link to a performance of the poem we created: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4vFly6NuGQ>

In the video of the performance you will see there was quite of bit of improvisation that influenced the structure and final text of the poem. When you are performing a poem with a group, be sure to also listen and allow space for spontaneous comments to become part of the poem. In the video, you will hear Nancy respond to the seagull sounds we are making with the lovely line, “And that’s when the birds come.” And at the end you will hear Olie finish the poem by playing off the rhyme “Pale whale ale” with the brilliant play on words “From a pail.” Such moments are a large part of what makes the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project thrive and garner robust responses.

Ocean Poem

The lake is fresh
The ocean is salt



It’s so cold
When you’re ice fishing
The fish don’t smell
And that’s why we ice fish

Ice fish
Ice fish
Nice fish

The ocean has quite a sound—
splashing, waves, and wind.

It can roar.

ROAR!

continued

Shhhhhhhh

Caw . . . caw . . . caw . . .

And that's when the birds come.

The ocean feels like foam—all the bubbles.

If a whale came along, I'd be scared.

If I could swim fast enough,
I'd get myself out of the water.

The whale is a something—BIG!

I wouldn't talk to a whale, unless I was formally introduced.

I would say to the whale, "Whale, do you have a problem?"

You know what I would say?

What would you say?

Shultz is my name!

What do you have to say to that, you big ole whale?

I'm not afraid of you.

With your blubber

And your tail

And your eating of . . . Kale.

And drinking of ale.

Whale ale!

Whale ale!

Pale whale ale!

From a pail!

On Chanting Poetry

Twenty thousand people are cheering, waves of shouts and applause are washing over us. The young poets are chanting:

Tyger, tyger burning bright!

The crowd is chanting along. This is the Precision Poetry Drill Team. The teenage poets are leaping up and down as if on pogo sticks. As their poetry coach, I spin and pump my fist, leaping about. For as far as we can see, the huge crowd of people, the length of three football fields, are cheering. This is a poetry dream come true. Performing at the Zozobra festival in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for this huge crowd of people has been one of the highlights of my life as a poet.

The concept of chanting a poem shifts the expectation of how poetry may be presented. It taps poetry at its roots as an oral art form. Chanting poetry opens up the performance of a poem to include cheerleading calls and military marching cadences.

I honed the technique of call and response during my work with the Precision Poetry Drill Team, working with middle and high school students as their poetry coach at Desert Academy in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We were featured on National Public Radio (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4615966>).



Recipe

DELICIOUS TYGER PUNCH

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 poem (or select lines of poetry)
- 1 mouth (leader)
- 1 to 20,000 mouths (group)
- 1 smile

INSTRUCTIONS:

Below are the opening lines to William Blake's "The Tyger," which is quite fun to use. Shall we give it a go?

Tyger, tyger burning bright
In the forest of the night

say it softly.

Tyger, tyger burning bright
In the forest of the night

Say it loud.

Tyger, tyger burning bright
In the forest of the night

Say it in your natural speaking voice.

Tyger, tyger burning bright
In the forest of the night

Pep Talk

Repeat the opening lines with the group as necessary, to get the rhythm cooking: "Feel the sound shift in your head, throat, and body as you shift the volume. Now, try clapping along. If you are feeling playful, you can growl like a tiger at the end. Don't be afraid to be silly!"

continued

Below is the full poem for you to experiment with.

The Tyger

WILLIAM BLAKE

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Zozobra

Performing at the Zozobra festival was a thrill. Zozobra had its start in 1924 when a group of Santa Fe artists led by Will Shuster decided to create an effigy called “Old Man Gloom” and set him on fire in a ritual burning. They timed the burn to coincide with the “Fiestas de Santa Fe,” an event that dates back to 1712 and marks the Spanish resettlement of the city from Native Americans in 1692.

Zozobra means *anxiety* in Spanish. As part of the festival, people are encouraged to write their “glooms” on a piece of paper that they then stuff into the 50-foot-tall effigy, so that their worries go up in smoke when the Old Man Gloom is burned.

The organizers had invited the Precision Poetry Drill Team to perform early in the event, and if they liked what we did they would invite us back to perform just before the burning of the effigy for the full audience.

The stage was on top of a hill at the end of a string of playing fields. We got to the concert early and performed for a few thousand people milling around and setting up blankets to settle in for the night. The organizers loved our performance and asked us to return at 9 p.m. to perform for the larger crowd.

My experience with the Precision Poetry Drill Team shows that using chanting when performing poetry has the potential to reach much larger audiences than a typical poetry reading.

Chanting Power

My first experience with the power of chanting was with junior high basketball and the cheerleaders calling out:

Gary, Gary, he’s our man. If he can’t do it, no one can. GO, GARY!

When I say those words using that school sports chant, the basketball court filled with fans shouting and pumping their fists in the air all comes back. The chant is powerful.

You can find inspiration for how to recite poetry from three very different groups—soldiers, cheerleaders, and monks.

Am I really suggesting you recite poetry while jumping around in a short skirt, waving pom-poms, and doing flips and cartwheels? Well, yes and no. I am really just encouraging you to think about the energy cheerleaders bring to leading the crowd. Is there anything there to inspire you in the way

you say a poem? Consider military marching cadences. Not that you would recite a poem with such gusto, but the precision and power with which they chant the cadences might inspire you in how you say a poem. Regarding monks, I am thinking in particular of Gregorian chants. Many religions use chants in the pursuit of spiritual development, including Buddhism (chanting to prepare the mind for meditation), Judaism (cantillation), and Roman Catholicism (chanting of psalms).

This is a challenge to you, to expand the sound of the voice you think of when you think of a poem being recited.



THE LIGHT OF THE ELDERS

BY LISA MARIE BRODSKY (AUTER)

Elder! Elder! burning bright
In what dimly-lit forest
do you roam at night?

Your symmetry wavers;
you steady yourself on
tables as I help you to your seat.

I pour upon each of you
gemstones of poetry,
those little ditties you
memorized as young 'uns
the swooning Shakespeare sonnets
your sweetheart sang to you.

Your eyes flicker with knowing
and your smile gives away
the glowing that's been hidden;
everyone claps their hands to Blake.

Our senses now awake, we turn to Words-
worth as sweet daffodils waft through the air
and though some only stare
I know they are here

And you are here
And I am here

And for an hour of my day
You gift me with
your lighthouse-intent focus,
toothy smiles and eyes that twinkle a light
that shines brighter than
any star in any sky.

Elder! Elder! burning bright
Your legacy is a light
It's immortal, our lives
run parallel for just a bit
Beautiful symmetry,
lives now knit.

Recipe

FRESH HOT APPLE PIE, SMALL TOWN SCHOOL SPIRIT YELL

INGREDIENTS:

1 passel of cheerleaders
1 impressionable boy
1 sweaty school gym
35 years

INSTRUCTIONS:

This is your moment. You see the cheerleaders gathered by the bleachers. They are laughing and giggling. Their pom-poms are fluttering. They are chanting your name. Yes, here it comes: "Gary, Gary, he's our man. If he can't do it, no one can. Go, go, go, Gary!" You step to the free-throw line. You bounce the ball once. They chant your chant again. You steady the ball and keep your eyes on the rim of the basket. One more chant and you let fly the ball, your hand and arm following through with the arc of the ball, as if it were on a string and you could guide its flight. Then, swish. The ball goes perfectly through the hoop and net. The crowd explodes, and you hear them cheer.

Does the Monkey Want a Peanut?

At one session in Georgia, I was reciting “The Tyger.” I reached out my hand to a woman in the group to see if she would take it, and instead she looked at me and said, “Does the monkey want a peanut?” I’m reciting a 200-year-old poem—I do want a peanut! The woman spoke louder and louder, finally shouting, “Somebody get this MONKEY a peanut!” The nurses started laughing. I laughed as well and thought to myself that maybe the poetry program should be called the Alzheimer’s Heckler Project.

Hammar, Götell, and Engström (2011) offer ways to handle situations such as the one during the session in Georgia. In their research paper “Singing While Caring for Persons with Dementia,” they discuss how negatively expressed emotions and resistance may be decreased and positively expressed emotions increased when caregivers sing to a person with dementia. They describe in particular singing during morning care situations, such as dressing, brushing teeth or hair, and bathing or showering.

The caregivers were not trained singers. The idea in using singing is that anyone can try the technique. This was a single case study that included two women with severe dementia. Their resistance behavior during morning care situations included screaming or yelling and pulling away. When the caregivers engaged the women in singing, the negative behavior was reduced. This was a single case study with only a few people participating. With this in mind I want to expand our recipe repertoire.

One of the blessings in disguise in being a caregiver is you get to try new ideas. So pioneer, let’s try this! I imagine you opening your mouth like an opera singer and belting out a resounding yeeeeesssss!

Recipe

MONKEY WITH PEANUT SAUCE

INGREDIENTS:

1 poet dancing
1 woman yelling

INSTRUCTIONS:

Stir until thoroughly embarrassed

Recipe

SPLISH, SPLASH

INGREDIENTS:

1 person 1 caregiver
1 song 1 bath

INSTRUCTIONS:

It is time for a bath or shower. You have the soap, towels, washcloth, and everything else you need ready. Pick one of the person's favorite songs. As you say to her gently, "Your bath is ready," begin to sing for her. See how she responds; does she sing along or just listen? Alternate singing with gentle instructions as you guide her to the bath or shower.

Is this approach working for you? For the person you are caring for? Is the morning ritual more joyful? This technique can be a way of reframing your attitude about a care task. It is common sense that if you are more relaxed, then the person you are caring for will be more relaxed. If you are smiling, it is more likely she or he also will be smiling.

Recipe

BRUSH MY HAIR

INGREDIENTS:

2 people

1 head of messy bed-head hair

1 brush

1 rhythmic poem

INSTRUCTIONS:

It is time to wake up and smell the coffee, but first her hair could use a good brushing. Pick any poem, hopefully one with a strong rhythm. For this example, I suggest Robert Burns' "A Red, Red Rose."

As you say to her, "You have such lovely hair. May I please brush it for you?," begin to say the lines of the poem:

O my love is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June:

Ask her if she would like to say the poem as well and, if so, have her repeat the words after you using the technique of call and response. Move the brush to the rhythm and speed you are using to brushing her hair. Say the next lines of the poem:

O my love is like a melody
That's sweetly played in tune!

You will need to practice saying the lines of the poem a few times until you can say them without looking at the written poem. You may, of course, have a copy of the poem with you. You do not want to be working without a net!

Recipe

GIVE DANCE A CHANCE

INGREDIENTS:

2 people
2 shoes

INSTRUCTIONS:

The person you are caring for is bathed and her hair is brushed. She is ready to put her best foot forward and meet the day. In this exercise, you are going to make a game out of slipping the person's shoes on. I suggest you have her sit and then say, "Look, your shoes are dancing." You can playfully move the shoes in an imaginary dance. You can ask if she wants to see the shoes do a waltz or polka or for the shoes to do the twist.

Once you have set the tone that you are both having fun, sit across from or next to her so that she can see your feet and ask if she would also like to dance. Move your feet in a simple rhythm, perhaps just alternating left and right in a four-beat pattern, counting out, "One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four." Or perhaps you can hum a waltz and move your feet left and right, "One, two, three, one, two, three."

This exercise does not have to take much time, and shorter is probably better. Again, the goal is to reframe the care situation.