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*The Power of Poetry:
How it Works*

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For ages, people have felt that poetry, music, and art have a power to heal. There are many practitioners of poetry therapy, music therapy, dance therapy and so forth, people who believe that this healing power has value and efficacy. Many of us have met people who demonstrate this power in their person. I got to meet a remarkable man in my neighborhood just before he died – a man named Herbert Zipper. He lived in Pacific Palisades, and died about three years ago at the age of 93. He was a composer and conductor from Vienna. In his childhood he was dandled on the knees of Sigmund Freud and was part of the rich and intense Viennese/Jewish cultural life in the early part of the century. He was on track to become, perhaps, one of the major orchestral conductors. Then the Anschluss came and the Germans marched into Vienna. They took the Jews away, and he was thrown into Dachau. When I met him he described to me what it was like, the second or third day there in Dachau. The prisoners were digging ditches, and of course, they were all dealing with the horrible, horrible loss of every-

thing in their lives. While they were digging, Herbert started to recite Goethe. The men that he was around were not particularly literate or educated; they were just guys off the street who'd been pulled into the concentration camp. He found that there was some extraordinary power to poetry, a power that somehow made people better able to bear what they were going through. This gave him an idea. He started a clandestine orchestra in Dachau. There were a lot of musicians there, and he composed pieces which they sang and played on junk instruments made of pieces of wire and wood. Sentries were posted to see if the SS was coming so that the clandestine musicians could disperse quickly. He volunteered for the job that nobody else wanted, which was latrine duty, because that was the only way he could have solitude during the day. He had big pails of shitty water that he kept there so in case of the SS guards came, he would just slop this onto the floor, and there would be a terrible stink and then he'd start mopping it up again and the guy would go away. In that way he bought himself the solitude to compose music in his own mind, and he created these performances. He created some songs that jumped from concentration camp to concentration camp, and created a network of hope for the creative spirit under duress in those places. It was very early in the war, and his father, who was wealthy and happened to have been in London when the Nazis took over Austria, bribed him out of Dachau. He was in Dachau and then Buchenwald – and then was bribed out. He went to Paris and London, and then he was offered a job as conductor of the Manila Symphony. So he moved on to the Philippines – just in time for the Japanese to invade. The same thing happened all over again: he was thrown into a Japanese prison, got out, joined the resistance and worked as a spy. After Manila was liberated he rallied the surviving musicians to come out, retrieved the instruments he had them bury

during the invasion, and conducted a celebrated concert of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* in the bombed-out shell of the Santa Cruz Cathedral. He eventually came to America, where at first he conducted the Brooklyn Philharmonic. There he started the artists-in-the-schools movement in the United States. He eventually moved on to Chicago and finally here to Los Angeles, where he lived for the rest of his life, dedicating himself to bringing music to kids in ghetto areas and impoverished places here and around the world. Throughout his career in America he served as an ombudsman for the power of the arts to change people's lives for the better.

Let us return to that seminal moment when he found himself reciting poetry to his fellow prisoners in the concentration camp, seeing that there is a healing power to poetry, to music, to art. Of course, all of us in this room have experienced such moments, though hopefully in less dramatic and horrific circumstances. Belief in the healing power of the arts goes back to Pythagoras and beyond. Now the question that I woke up with this morning is – *how does it work?* That's what I'd like to think about today. Is this healing power of poetry just a subjective impression we would like to be true, or does it have a basis that we can identify? What's the mechanism? There is a line from Plato that I've always found fascinating, which I think is a key to how it works. In the *Timeas*, Plato is talking about the power of drama. Plato, we know, was more than a little suspicious of artists and poets, and didn't necessarily want them in his Republic. Yet he recognized that there was some great power and significance in artistic expression. He said,

The motions akin to the divine part of us are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. These every man should follow, correcting those circuits in the head that were deranged at birth by learning to know the harmonies

and revolutions of the world. He should assimilate their thinking being to the thought, renewing his original nature.

I have found this passage fascinating because it synthesizes two of the great streams of influence on me and my work – one of them being Buddhism (renewing awareness of one’s original nature); the other being the ideas I inherited from my mentor, Gregory Bateson. Bateson brought an awareness of cybernetics and systems theory into thinking about psychology and about society at large – an awareness of how living beings exist in and through circular chains of causation. Plato tells us that artistic experience brings us into connection with circuitry – with our life processes, with our thought processes, with our feelings as circuits, as chains of circular causation like the ecology of our planet, whereas, we know, everything passes forward chains of causation that return and affect the feedback loop. Consciousness as we ordinarily think it in our society is caught in a model of linear causation, of thinking in straight lines and pairs of opposites – cause-effect, before-after, subject-object. Bateson argued that there is a pathology inherent in all conscious thinking, and that pathology comes from taking a small linear segment of a circle of causation and taking it to be the whole thing. We take certain actions in our lives, which we are think are just directed towards simple goal-seeking of some kind and are then, once again, blindsided when the effects of that ripple through our lives and come back to us in some unexpected way, when they come, in some way, to bite us in the ass. We in our arrogance as a society and in our belief in conscious purpose are able to transform the Earth in various ways and are then completely surprised and blindsided when those transformations come back on us in some possibly toxic form. This habit of taking a small arc of the circle to be the whole thing is related to our illusory

notion of the self – to our view of taking that which we are able to consciously scan, in our own processes, in our thoughts, our own feelings, our own memories, and take that to be the whole.

Some activities bring us back into touch with the entire circuit – poetry, music, religion, dream, meditation, art. Such activities help us to perceive that the self is a provisional, illusory construct that’s useful for certain limited kinds of activity – but it’s not the whole Self. Then we’re able to recover some sense of our own wholeness. We’re able to recover some of those connections to things in our environment of which we were unaware before.

As I came in this morning, someone asked me what I my talk would be about. I said “How it works.” She replied, “Well, that wouldn’t have something to do with integrity, wholeness and total honesty, would it?” Total honesty means being able to act and speak with an awareness of circuitry, an awareness of feedback and its consequences. Except for fully realized Buddhas, very few people are capable of being in that circuit all the time and not cutting off little snips of it in order to just get by in the world. Yet most of us are capable of doing it at least some of the time. We’re all aware of Freud’s famous idea that healing takes place through making the unconscious conscious. Part of what is united by awareness of the entire circuitry of connection of thoughts, feelings, actions, desires, memories, facts, fictions is an interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness. Things of which we were unconscious emerge, and also things of which we have been conscious submerge.

One of the great things that one acquires as an artist is skill, and skill has something to do with making consciously learned activities unconscious so that we’re able to do them naturally. There’s the wonderful

opening of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, where he talks about the naturalness of animals and how we're never able to attain that naturalness, which comes from unconsciousness, comes from the grace of being able to simply flow without analyzing and breaking what you're doing into parts:

*If I cried out, who would hear me up there, among the angelic orders?
And suppose one suddenly took me to his heart, I would shrivel
I couldn't survive next to his greater existence. ...
Oh who can we turn to in this need? Not the angels,
Not people, and the cunning animals realize at once
That we're not especially at home in the undeciphered world.*

As we practice skilled activities like riding a bicycle, driving a car, speaking, or writing, we gradually submerge them from consciousness into unconsciousness through habit formation. We are thus able to do the activity with only the barest attention on the mechanics of performance. In the arts, when our practice pushes technique into unconscious habit, we get a mysterious payoff, in that the artistic performance somehow pushes other material from unconsciousness into conscious awareness. Thus we are able to use our skills to discover ideas, feelings, and images of which we had not been aware. Of course, one of the great powers of poetry is self-expression, but I would say that self-expression really equals self-discovery. When you express yourself as fully and honestly as you can at any moment, there will be pieces of yourself that you discover afresh, even if you were vaguely aware of those pieces before. We connect the dots and our eyes open to a new pattern of self and world.

The "circuits of the head" link conscious and unconscious, but also link other states like subjective and objective. If we express ourselves artistically, subjectively, from who we are, then some aspect of who we

are is now out there objectively for us to look at. When we can look at an object as the product of our own minds and feelings, we're able to see patterns and see relationships of which we had not been aware. So, in many ways, artistic expression in any medium reaches toward many of the same goals as psychotherapy. When I engage in such expression I find myself starting to move things around so that they're not blocked, bringing unconscious material forward, taking skills that are clumsy because they are too conscious and too thought-out, and bringing them into and back out of the unconscious so that they attain a kind of grace.

In Zen they speak of "turning words" – words (often poetry or paradox) that hit us in such a way that we somehow turn around on our central axis, so that conscious and unconscious, self and world, switch places and reveal their connection, our connection, to a vaster wholeness. Through such turning words, Self with a big S expands its scope, and we experience an awakening.

Are there any questions?

Q: I'd like you to talk about the word "practice," and the reason, specifically, is because throughout my work life as a psychiatrist and a therapist, we call it the "practice" of medicine and the "practice" of psychotherapy. And that means that we actually have to do it. And I was interested in hearing what you had to say about that.

My friend Rachel Rosenthal, a wonderful theater and performance artist, teaches workshops that she calls DBD – Do By Doing. You can really only learn by doing, which, at root, is related to that great epistemological invention, the scientific method. One of the great inventions of Western culture (and Eastern culture) is the notion that you

can actually only know things by trying them out; you can't know things by being told, by memorizing them and believing what the authority says – you know the world by actually doing experiments and trying things out. I'm a Buddhist. In my 20s, I'd been intellectually interested in Buddhism, Taoism and other Eastern traditions. I'd read a lot about them and the ideas resonated with me, but the knowledge didn't actually connect until one day I was at a talk given by a Zen teacher who referred – and I'd heard the word used many times before, but this time it hit me between the eyes – when he talked about *zazen* as *practice*. People come together and just sit on cushions, silent and still – and that is practice. This word turned me around because I'm a violinist – that's my primary art form – and, of course, as a violinist, I know what practice is. That word suddenly connected the dots for me. *Practice* connected the dots for me in a very interesting way, because you can only know something through participating it, through doing it. At the same time, the Buddhist notion of practice and my notion of practice as an improvising violinist rather than as a traditional performing-a-score type of violinist, is that you don't practice in order to perfect something so that now it's good enough to be out there in front of people where practice in a sense is not quite real or is preparation or is in some a box, but the practice is the actual doing, and that there's no difference between the practice and the doing, and, of course, being out there in front of people and doing something also does function as practice in the Western sense because we do get better and better at doing something when we see people's reactions and understand the effects of things and understand what works and what does not work. One of the very important ideas for me in improvisation is that very often when you say the word "improvisation" to people in our culture, they think, "Oh, well, that means you can play anything you want."

The notion that improvisation is just anything is not true. There is such a thing as good and bad music. There is such a thing as good and bad poetry. There is such a thing as good and bad prose. Whether the poetry is canted to you improvisationally, directly from someone's heart, or has been written down and edited beforehand, there still is that sense of quality, and the quality has to do with connectedness, wholeness, pieces fitting together, pieces having meaning that fits them together with things out there in the world. Practice is making your activity of creation better, and at the same time, practice is recognizing that your activity of creation is completely whole and completely itself of its own nature, of its own moment, and could not have possibly been any different.

Q: Could you contrast in your experience the difference between Eastern and Western poetry. I find that really I'm drawn to the Eastern forms of poetry because of just the things that you're saying – the whole Buddhist approach to life is simplify, simplify. Could you speak a little of your experience?

Well, I don't know if it's entirely simplify, simplify. There are really two streams in Eastern mystical poetry. Among the books that I brought this morning are some quite fat and extravagant volumes of Eastern poetry – I brought the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* and the three volumes of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Here is one of the three volumes of a continuous prose poem of the most extraordinary florid kind of language imaginable. I'll just randomly pick a paragraph to read: (vol. 2 p. 107):

Enlightening beings in this stage, by the power of their own vows, cause great clouds of compassion to arise, manifesting the thunder of the great Teaching, flashing the lightning of mystic knowledge, science, and exper-

tise, whipping up a great wind of radiance, covering all with a dense cloud of virtue and knowledge, showing a dense swirl of various bodies, uttering the proclamation of the great Teaching, routing the horde of demons; and, in one instant, throughout as many quadrillions of worlds as atoms in the worlds in the ten directions mentioned above, and throughout yet more worlds, incalculable hundreds of quadrillions of worlds, they show great rains of goodness-bearing elixir of immortality and settle and extinguish all the dust and flames of afflictions of beings produced by ignorance. Hence this stage is called Cloud of Teaching.

It goes on like this without a letup of intensity for tens of thousands of lines, three fat volumes. You might say that Rumi and some of the great Sufi poets worked in the same realm, creating this gushing outpouring of unlimited, boundless flow of words, images and music that emerges from the unconscious and washes everything before it. Then, on the other hand, you have the Zen tradition where Bashô, for example, says,

*An old pond.
A frog jumps in.
Plop.*

Within that *plop* resides everything that's in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, so that the extremely sparse and the extremely florid fit together and meet inside that plop. So, there are really two streams in Eastern poetry. William Blake speaks of every atom containing universes of knowledge – universes and universes within that atom.

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour ...*

*Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years.
For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the Great
Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a Period*

Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery.

*For every Space larger than a red Globule of Mans blood.
Is visionary: and is created by the Hammer of Los
And every Space smaller than a Globule of Mans blood. opens
Into Eternity of which this vegetable Earth is but a shadow.*

This week on the news there was yet another astrophysicist talking about some wonderful bubble theory of the universe, that this universe is just a little bubble in a whole froth of infinitely many universes that are all frothing and bubbling and busting through infinite space and time, amazingly like the imaginative perspective of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. But I think one of the great places that that kind of work takes us to, whether it be the “plop” kind or the very florid, infinitely bursting bubbles of multiple universes of enlightenment, bliss and joy, is the sense of the power of poetry. In the West, we tend to – at least literary critics tend to like poetry that is “about” something. They like prose, novels that are about something, that have a fixed place in time in the universe and that draw beautifully figured pictures of some aspect of life or of a certain place in time. That kind of literature is great and beautiful in its own way – but it leads us to a sense of the limitation of what we can do. George Bush is about to be elected president, the Supreme Court is about to turn over, the global ecology is going to hell in a hand basket very fast, there are horrible things happening in the Middle East and in Africa and elsewhere in the world, there’s so much brutality and cruelty, and such huge forces, and what can I do? So I think, well, I can write my little poem in my little corner of the universe, and maybe if I can make one person feel better, that’s important. That’s true enough, but from the Buddhist point of view, you can write your little poem in your corner of the universe and make one person feel better, and at the same time, you can bring infinite bliss to infinitely many be-

ings throughout infinite space and time. Buddhists entertain the notion of reincarnation. As a live human being in this place and time who has not remembered any previous lives and does not know what's going to happen to me after I die, I cannot be sure whether reincarnation is "true" or not. However, to act as though it was true, to act as though we have been born and will be reborn infinitely many times in infinitely many shapes and knowing infinitely many people, re-relating to the people that we already know in infinitely many ways – I find this to be an extraordinarily invigorating idea as a heuristic to use in this lifetime. What we say and do can have an impact throughout the entire universe, just as does the "plop" of Bashô's frog.

Q: When we think about the power of words, there's real difference between written words and spoken words. I read a book by Lawrence Shlain called The Alphabet Versus the Goddess. He talked about how the birth of the alphabet led to linear thinking and promotes all of these bad things in the world that you're talking about.

Yes and no. It all depends on how you use your words, whether written or spoken, whether digital or analog. Jacques Prévert wrote, "The road to hell is paved with good inventions." Think about ordinary mechanical inventions: every each can think of can be used for good or evil, depending on how it is used, depending on *intent*. The same is true of intellectual inventions, writing, iconography. Intent is everything. There's a Jewish story about the alphabet: a rabbi somewhere in the Eastern Europe is reputed to produce the most devout and beautiful, the most tuneful and soulful prayers anyone has every heard. Everybody comes to him on the High Holy Days just to hear him pray because it's so extraordinary. Just as he's finishing his service, an angel

lands on his shoulder and says, “You pray pretty good, but there’s a guy named so-and-so over in such-and-such a village who prays better than you do.” This rabbi is willing to learn, and he sets out for such-and-such village, and asks for Mr. So-and-So, and is directed to a hut. Before him stands a shoemaker who doesn’t have any books in the house and can’t read and write. The rabbi asks, “Oh, have I gotten to the wrong house? Is there somebody else named so-and-so,” and the guy answers, “No, I’m the only person of that name.” The rabbi asks, “What were you doing that last High Holy Day?” The shoemaker answered, “I was standing there in anguish because I can’t read or write, and there are all these people davening around me, who know all this great literature. All I know are the first ten letters of the alphabet. So I recited the first ten letters of the alphabet and said, ‘God, accept these letters and combine them so they smell good to you.’”

Q: Somehow that reminds me of one of my favorite Zen sayings: “The moment you speak about a thing, you miss the mark.”

And yet, that’s the amazing paradox of poetry and other forms of self-expression because, yes, by bringing that statement into the room through speech, you have said it. You say that the moment you speak about a thing, you miss the mark – but you actually *have* hit the mark by saying so. And *that* is the whole paradoxical wonder of poetry – that is How it Works. One of the reasons I was drawn to being a musician is that I can use fifteen words that are extremely important to me to express something that I think is really connected and heartfelt, and those words will be understood in completely different ways by other people, because of their associations with those words. My entire verbal message, including this one, can be garbled, misunderstood or misused. I

felt that maybe it's better to speak in a tone language that doesn't have cognitive associations. But at the same time, we have the whole vast mass of the world's literature, which is written in alphabetic language, which does elevate people and bring them to a greater feeling of completion. We regularly use language to say what language cannot say. The whole Zen tradition is full of paradoxes where language knocks down language, and yet somehow we manage to say things that are subtle, true, and important.

Q: The early poetry was all spoken. It was not written.

Yes it was. And when we get to the question of reading poetry, of taking something that is on a page and trying to recreate it, it would be in a way sad if all the printed words disappeared and we didn't know through them the words of all the past masters, but it's also true that the improvised line is the most authentic because it arises directly from the heart, directly from the moment and directly from context. Time, then, necessitates is a whole other set of art forms of recreation and interpretation. How do you recreate Shakespeare? How do you recreate Bashô? How do you read those things in such a way that they actually come alive? The great interpreters are people who put a great deal of themselves into the material and are not simply reading what is there. There is, I think, this unfortunate tradition in American poetry of poets giving readings in a monotone, not raising or lowering the pitch of their voice but just raising or lowering the volume. You know what I mean – you've all heard these readings. Very often – I think poets should get actors to read their work because they just shouldn't read their own work, but there is this tradition which I hope we'll work our way out of to a more expressive way of reading stuff. But, again, I think

in all of these questions, you have to talk about both sides of the necessary paradox about wanting to preserve all those oral traditions that we know of. In Western culture and in Eastern culture things started to get written down because they were passed from mouth to ear to mouth, and somebody wanted to preserve them because they felt there was some great value in not losing this. At the same time, you have to be aware of the loss of freshness. This is true in religious traditions, also, for example, the Second Commandment about not making graven images. What the Second Commandment is really about is the same thing as the first verse of the *Tao Te Ching*, where it says the Tao that you can talk about is not the real Tao. The Tao that can be expressed is not the real Tao, and the Tao can only be comprehended personally and directly. The Second Commandment, which is about not making graven images, is really about the fact that God is not in the statue, and God, furthermore, is not in the Holy Book and is not in any representation of God. However, it got changed (diminished) into “Thou shall not be sculptors,” and so things tend to. Because of the reliance on text, ideas tend to degrade or devolve over periods of time, and I think that this is true of all forms of textual expression. There’s a wonderful science fiction novel by Sherry Tepper called *Raising the Stones*. One of the planets in this story is ruled by a very strict religion called the High Baidee, which originated 2,000 years prior to the opening of the story. There was a time-traveler who was actually a New Age lady from contemporary Earth who managed to get into a time-and-space travel machine and found herself jumping between star systems and centuries. She landed on this planet and her machine made a great blaze of glory and lightning, and she resided on this planet for a while, during which time she gave the people basic good homespun advice about how to live your life. Then she went off on her machine to some other place. The

last thing that she said before she left was, “Don’t let anybody fool with your heads.” So 2,000 years later, the religion that was based on the study of her transcribed sayings had taken over the entire planet, and two things that were forbidden were haircutting and psychiatry.

Q: As you were talking about circuitry and then also the reference to the illiterate man, I noticed something about the resonance of poetry. People hearing poetry, they feel better, sometimes because it’s maybe the way at least it’s hit by the receptor sites in the brain as well within the spirit. But sometimes in a group – a group home or a prison, there are people who share their poetry who are not very literate. But what they say, it’s very wonderful and eloquent. When you look at what they wrote, it may be very illiterate, so there is something about saying it out loud that may not be captured on paper.

Yes! And also to partly reverse what I said before about quality. Poetry has many functions, of course, which are all interrelated but they’re also somewhat different – and the line of poetry that may allow you to express and liberate yourself may not be a very good line of poetry to a critic or a publisher, but it may be extraordinarily effective in the setting from which it arises. Everyone here who has worked with creative arts therapy knows that what we’re looking for in some ways is work that’s effective, expressive and cathartic and brings forth some kind of deeper honesty. The question of whether it’s something that’s to be kept for the ages is an entirely different question. And conversely, there is a lot of stuff that’s been kept for the ages that is not all that great, frankly. I remember the first time I went to Paris when I was twenty-something, and of course I tootled right over to the Louvre. I was absolutely shocked by how much really horrible art there is there. Miles and miles of paintings of generals on horses, pots and pans and

all this kind of stuff that may have been done with some skill but is really very dated and says very little to anyone today. Then I would turn the corner and come upon some masterpiece that just had me immobile with wonder for hours. So there are many issues in considering art, what is good, what is kept, what is expressive, what is expensive, what works for a person to help change their lives – these are all separate questions that intersect each other in different ways.

I love the metaphor of receptor cells, that cells have like little notches that fit certain molecules. In the realm of art, everyone has different receptor cells, and this is one of the great things about living on a planet that has lots of different people on it, because what resonates to you may not resonate exactly with me, and to have this enormous variety of voices, all of which are somewhat different but all of which at the deepest level have some connection to each other, is really extraordinary, and I think that's one of the secrets of art is to tap both into the difference and into the sameness and to bridge that.

Q: It seemed to me for some time, one of the powers of poetry is that of all the arts, it most combines both the right and left brain thinking. Have a little crossover, the images from the right brain, the verbalization from the left brain, and I can't help but think that has to be very powerful for us to combine those parts of our brain in terms of, illumination, self-awareness.

Yes, and one important element of illumination is combining those parts in such a way that you supplement that which is lacking. I find it very interesting when I talk to New Age people who like the heart and don't like the head, who like the right brain and don't like the left brain. I find it sad and, unfortunately, in our modern American marketing culture, there's a huge place for that because it's beneficial to the

corporate powers for people not to be able to think too much or too clearly. Thinking is a marvelous gift and should not be undermined because of illusory separations between head and heart. Some of the authors who gave rise to the New Age recognized very correctly that since the Scientific Revolution that came after the Renaissance, the ship of culture keeled far over to the side of excess rationality and materialism and concern with mundane things. There was need to right that, but then some of these people are now keeling over to the other side where all their world is feeling, love and light, dreams and myths, and thought has vanished. What we need to do is to be able to sail straight down the middle. We need to make friends with both sides of the mind. We need to complete the circuit of mind and become whole, and poetry is a path to such completion.

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