

TRANSCRIPT FOR PODCAST EPISODE 128-READ SOME POETRY

I'm Jill Baughan, and you're listening to the podcast called Find Joy...No Matter What.

This is Episode 128.

If you're in a tough place right now, your joy may seem like it's hiding--or gone.

I understand. But it's still there, I promise, just waiting to be resurrected. And this podcast is designed to help you do just that...no matter what else is going on in your life.

For just a few minutes each week, I'll tell you a story. --one that just might inspire a way to uncover a piece of joy you might be looking for.

Then we'll consider how it might speak to your life, because even though you'll hear quite a few of my stories during our time together, I believe you'll find your own in every one of mine.

Then I'll offer a benediction to send you into your day--or into your night.

So. If you're up for doing joy shots with a friend today...have a listen.

Tell me the truth: how do you feel about poetry?

For the record, I have a consistent habit of being unable to see the deeper meaning in just about every heavily symbolic poem I've ever read. I took a couple poetry classes in college, and my MO, especially in one class, was to find out what the professor thought and spit it back to her in my paper. I got an A in the class, but her final comments to me included an admonition to "think for yourself." But why would I do that when (a) She never taught us how to explicate a poem for ourselves and (b) Why think for myself when she could think for me and give her own thoughts an A?

Messed up, right?

I so wish that lady had taught me what I now know to be true: the poetry can actually be good for your mental health! I'll bet you know this, even if you think you don't know this, even if you think you're not a "poetry person," even if you think it's a lot of woo-woo designed for English teachers and not regular people.

Oh nay nay, my friend. It's designed for you.

Creativity coach Joanna Pieters says that poetry *calms your brain chemistry, develops your cognitive flexibility and deepens your ability to focus. Poetry existed way before novels, before newspapers and before written language evolved. In fact, MRI scanning tells us that our brains*

react to it in a profoundly emotional way. Yet so many of us are unaware of the benefits of making poetry part of our lives. Here are a few:

1. Poetry teaches us the value of using fewer words to make a powerful impact.

Surely you know someone who says in many, many words what could have been communicated in a lot less time. It's unnerving, and if you're like me, makes you want to shout, "What in this world are you trying to say? Bottom line! What's the bottom line?" Well, Joanna Pieters says that even the *tightest boundaries can allow the greatest freedom of thought.*

Consider the limited structure of a form of poetry called haiku: 3 lines, the first with 5 syllables, the second with 7 and the third with 5. That's some serious limitation right there.

When I was in grad school, I was very stressed, feeling a lot of imposter syndrome, like I didn't belong there with all those intellectuals who could outthink me on their worst days. In one class, one of our assignments was to write a haiku. I did not consider myself a poet, and I was totally intimidated. I wanted to communicate joy, even way back then, and it was such an expansive topic, I didn't know where to start until...well, until I decided just to start where I was, with exactly who I was and forget about impressing anyone at all, and find just a few words that might lift a spirit. And the poem I created did just that using just a few words to make people smile...and partly because of its brevity, it lives on in my heart today. It said this:

Terrified but glad--
Trapped in a giant Twinkie,
Eating my way out.

So there.

2. Poetry teaches us to think in a new way.

When you read poetry, your mind unconsciously knows that it has to work differently than it does to read prose or fiction. It has to search for and evaluate the multiple meanings, observe the links between lines or words, and ideas hidden within the text and to bring them out...Reading poetry teaches us to hold lightly many different possibilities, and to be comfortable with tensions between them.

Think about Mary Oliver's poem, The Uses of Sorrow:

*Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.*

So counterintuitive. Darkness is not our first choice for life experience. Yet--if we each really thought about it--how long could we all talk about the unexpected gifts we've experienced in the midst of loss, after loss, because of loss?

3. Poetry unlocks our emotions.

In the same way that we choose sad songs when going through grief, says Pieters, poetry that expresses difficult emotions helps us to process our experiences. Poetry allows us to discover emotions that we bury and ignore: the loss or anger, love or longing, excitement or questions...This isn't just a therapeutic, nice-to-have. Connecting with our emotions in this way starts to activate the parts of our brain that help us to deal with them... and that in turn takes away their power to derail us.

One of my favorites is Maya Angelou's poem, *Still I Rise*, where she expresses hope and confidence, even when she's experienced disrespect and disdain for her confidence and hope. She says in part

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.*

*Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.*

*Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.*

Or how about children's songwriter, Barry Louis Polisar, who gets inside children's hearts and validates their feelings when he sings:

*I'm standing naked on the kitchen table
With ketchup smeared in my hair
Wondering if you'll notice me
And see me standing there...
I do whatever I can think
But you just sit and read
Attention isn't what I want
With me it is a need.*

Funny. And not so much.

And then there's Bethany Howard's poem, *Scared to Fly*, when she writes about a kite, still wrapped up on a shelf because the narrator is afraid to fly it:

*...And so the vibrant colors
stay hidden in the closet.
The kite
is full of purpose
but no one really
knows it is there.
It's not meant to
sit
on
a
shelf.
Neither am I.
Neither are you.
We are meant to fly;
we are to
be boisterous with our
passion, purpose and possibilities.
We are to be color and joy
and we are to feel the tension
as we let the wind drive us
where we are supposed to go
while we are held,
tethered to the one
who created us to fly...*

4. Poetry wakes up our brains with its rhythm.

Pieters says that *our brains seem to be hard-wired to appreciate poetry. Maybe that's part of our heritage of the millennia when stories were passed down verbally in songs and rhymes...Or maybe we turned to the structure of poetry because we understood that patterns and rhythm had a more profound effect on us than pure prose.*

Children's books are particularly good at this, and it's part of the reason we remember their lines so well. Consider one of my favorites, *Pajama Time*:

*The moon is up
It's getting late,
So let's get ready to celebrate.
It's pajama time!
Pajammy to the left
Pajammy to the right*

*Jama, jama jama, P! J!
Now all around the room in one big line
Wearing our pajamas and lookin' so fine
It's pajama time!*

Come on now, that's irresistible.

6. Likewise and finally, poetry can be simply fun.

Like so much of Shel Silverstein's poetry for children, this one makes me smile every time:

*There's too many kids in this tub.
There's too many elbows to scrub.
I just washed a behind
That I'm sure wasn't mine.
There's too many kids in this tub.*

So--if you're not so much into poetry but are willing to dip your toe in, Andrew Limbong, writing for NPR, has a couple suggestions to get you started.

He says not to approach poetry like it's school. *Stanzas, meter, form--all that stuff is well and good if you're already bought in, but it doesn't mean anything if you only have a passing interest in poetry. Rest easy. There's no quiz at the end!*

He also says, *Don't worry about 'getting it.' Even when there's no formal graded quiz, people still put pressure on themselves to crack a poem, to unlock its meaning or to answer some unanswerable question about what the poet was trying to say. Don't do it!*

Instead, just ask yourself some broader questions: What overall impression do you get? What ideas float around in your mind? What do you feel?

Again, he says, there's no test, there's no wrong answer. Just look around in your own brain as you read the poem, and take in what's there.

Also, he suggests that you read it out loud several times. And then...*read a bunch of poetry. The experts we talked to say their poetry curriculum in schools was mostly centered around the classical canon--your Shakespeares and your Frosts. But everyone stressed that the world of poetry is a LOT bigger than that (not to mention less white, less male, less old). So if poems about walking in the woods when it's snowing aren't your jam, then keep looking--there's something out there for you.*

And I personally think you may find your poetry jam in unexpected places...like I did years ago when I heard the quintessential poem, that has it all: the emotion, the rhythm, conciseness, the fun and the power to make you think in a new way. It was written by my

father-in-law in an effort to encourage a relative who was in the hospital for hemorrhoid surgery. And it goes like this:

*Pains in the butt
You can expect 'em
When they operate
On your rectum.*

And so, my friend,
May you consider expanding your repertoire of encouraging activities to include a little poetry,

And may you even find a kind of holy longing and reassurance in poems like this Psalm:

*Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help.*

*You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and
clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises
and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise you forever...*

*Weeping may last for the night,
But a shout of joy comes in the morning.
Psalm 30:5, 10-12*

Thanks so much for joining me.

If you know someone who just might enjoy dipping into a little verse, I invite you to share this podcast with them, and subscribe yourself on iTunes, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Or you can go to my website at jillbaughan.com, click on a podcast episode and sign up to receive episodes in your inbox. Just don't miss an episode, because I so look forward to being with you again soon.

Go read a poem, friend. And always, always remember, if you go looking for joy, you'll most likely find it.

Till next time...

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