Bringing in Green

Rose Flint

SYNOPSIS

Working as a writer in hospitals, Rose Flint looks at different ways in which the use of poetry that includes natural imagery, can be used to enliven patients and assist their well-being. Many patients are excluded from the natural world, sometimes without even a window to look out of, and are both physically and mentally absorbed in their illness. But they often have a rich inner landscape of memory which poetry and story-sharing can re-activate, relieving stress and offering joy.

As a poet and art therapist, I have spent many years working with words in healthcare. I was Lead Writer for the Kingfisher Project, working at Salisbury District Hospital (SDH) (Wiltshire, UK) and in the community for eight years, and I now work on the Young at Heart project, at SDH, in which artists, musicians, storytellers and poets work with the elderly patients on the wards. Over time, I've worked in a very wide variety of places – the Spinal Unit, Burns Unit, Maternity, Isolation, with stroke and head-injury patients, in Oncology, on general wards, children's wards, in waiting rooms and doctor's surgeries. In the community, work has sometimes been with mental health service users, sometimes in women's refuges or with homeless youngsters or social services.

The work is different all the time. Sometimes I run workshops when there are enough people, encouraging writing, bringing in poems for discussion. Or I work one to one, often at bedsides, talking, reading poetry, sometimes scribing someone's words and returning them to the patient later. In my current job at the hospital, I usually see a patient perhaps once or twice; very occasionally, I work with a whole ward and go into performance mode, extra loud for elderly hearing!

My objective is to enhance well-being, to alleviate – however briefly – the stress of the confinement in a ward or unit, or the situation that the patient is in. Or the fretting, destructive aspect of fear and dismay which often companions illness and corrodes much of the good medicine the body is receiving. I don't work with illness specifically, nor do I work as a 'therapist', but I do work with wellness. I am employed as a poet – so I trust poetry and poesies: I engage the mind imaginatively through images and words. I try to find salve for the psyche, and allow the body to rest more deeply, remembering its joy.

It is in our Relationship to the Earth that our Deepest Health Lies

Working with such diversity has led me to search out a commonality as a starting point. I draw more and more on images of the natural world, because I believe that it is in our relationship to the earth that our deepest health lies. And that for those who have become separate from the natural world due to circumstances of ill-health, trauma or emotional and mental dislocation, most benefit from re-relating in various ways to the world where trees grow and children run across beaches, to the world where a buzzard cries through the air like a cat and the frost stings in early morning air. I would love to be in a position where I carried off whole wardfuls of patients to the New Forest or a summer meadow on Salisbury Plain – but failing a physical immersion in flowers and light and weather, I search out ways to allow writing to carry the heart of the land into institutions, dayrooms and wards. So, by 'natural imagery' I mean both the imagery we hold in our own memory and the wealth of poetry written about nature – its seasons and shifts, its mountains and mists, oceans and islands and creatures, its elements of earth, air, fire and water.

Imagination is many things. It is a painter, able to illuminate a moment in glowing colour, it understands the broad-brush strokes of remembered landscape; it can

work on details in fine miniature. Imagination can conjure all the senses, touch, taste, smell, hearing – with which we understand our world and ourselves. Imagination is a magician, working a sleight of hand in which one thing can magically shape-shift into another, or where the same thing viewed from different angles can achieve completely different appearance. The world of our imagination contains everything we have known – and forgotten – and everything we don't know, but might. It can go back into the past, explore the present, and project into the future. It can use metaphor to change the way we feel about something, to bridge the difference between conscious and unconscious.

Working with elderly people, with a small group or a single patient, I'll simply begin by talking about my own world – in deep Somerset, on a dairy farm. I don't mention news and politics, but the look of the hedgerows, the quality of greenness, the morning light, my latest encounter with deer or hare. Salisbury is the centre for most of my work, and here in Wiltshire, a great proportion of the patients either have now, or have had, a rural background – or have left a city because they feel the need to be in the country. Many of these patients have been in hospital for a while and some don't even have a window to look out of. They are fragile, unsure of the future,

often confused or upset. But I have seen their eyes change, come back into focus from some faraway place of distress as they listen to some story about the countryside as it is that day. Sometimes, their faces change visibly in front of me, a relaxing of the skin, a slight warm flush as we begin to exchange words. I ask about their lives, where they were as children, what it was like... and the stories come back to me: of siblings swimming in the river, pale naked boy bodies and giggling girls; of the dusty sweaty happiness of haymaking; of the wildness and freedom to go out into the woods and play all day long. Stories of hard winters and chilblains, faithful dogs and horses – an Appaloosa who was a guardian angel. I find fishermen and farmers, girls who cycled through moonlight to go dancing in the war, gardeners, runaways, pilots, priests. If it feels right, I might read a poem – so many classics, such as 'Daffodils' by Wordsworth, are remembered by our elderly generation. Sometimes, I'll read poems for an hour to one person.

I think the value of the work lies in three levels of relatedness. In the first, I am assisting the patient to begin relating to themselves in a new way. Not as someone who is ill – but as someone with an inner life in which is held memories of people and places, experiences, emotions, and an imaginative scope that can appreciate, imagine, fantasise. This also can help to restore a sense of self. They are not only their age and illness, they are histories, their stories strengthen them. As I hear and hold their stories, I mirror back to them their value.

Secondly, a patient may begin to relate more fully to their immediate surroundings. They have something to talk about to staff, visitors and other patients. If they are in a group, then there is new community being made. Sometimes, there is a new relationship with the person in the next bed who didn't want to join in, but became curious.

The third level of relatedness is to the bigger world, beyond the hospital. If you look at any list of the nation's favourite poems, the ones that come out at the top have themes relating to the natural world – 'Innisfree', 'Daffodils', 'Oh to be in England now that April's there'... 'Dover Beach', 'Tyger, Tyger'.... However urban we may be, the weather and the changing seasons are a huge part of our life. There are few people who do not notice blue sky and cherry blossom, summer girls in bright dresses, the unbelievable return of snow like white respite in our grey lives, or cold rain driving into our faces. Many of us have gardens or plants, or favourite places to go, ranging from Thailand to Dorset; many of us have, or used to have, pets, or relationships to farm animals or birds; some of us go fishing or camping or riding. Everyone has an awareness of the seasons and the weather, we are part of the environment as it is part of us – there is no separation.

For those people who have to spend extended time in hospital, the world shrinks very quickly to the institution. Rooms or beds do not always have views of anything more than more walls. Windows are shut against the wind and rain, curtains drawn against sunlight. The artificiality of the medicalised environment creates a separation from the normality of life, which in itself invisibly supports us.

I met someone recently who said that her depression had been cured by her change of profession – after years of admin she had become a gardener. I know myself that a walk in the country can make me feel better when I am in any emotional turmoil; I start to recognise my surrounding and lift my gaze away from my troubles. But in hospital there is rarely any access to outside, to the natural world. When we are conscious of the outer world, we remember our belonging to it. We re-personalise ourselves. Become again our specific selves, part of the whole. However wonderful the medical care someone receives, hospitalisation does isolate us. And it may be that isolation works against our healthiness on an inner level, because our ordinary lives are so enmeshed in our

community – whether that is made up of family or friends, work or play, the animals we know, or the places that we call home. Illness itself isolates us. It is an experience of separation, not only physically but imaginatively. It places us in another context, joins us to a theoretical community of others whom we may not even know – for instance, other cancer patients – or want to know, for the centre of that community is the illness itself.

Working with poetry, in groups, language is freed from the ordinary, daily context. I don't usually ask people directly to write about their illness, but it often rises through metaphor and allusion, through emotion expressed in description of place or time. Poetry has a kind grace; it willingly veils or softens harshness, offering back consolation through its very expression. It is creation from what may be experienced as destruction, and if you can create you still have some power at your centre.

Maybe a Skin Graft was More Like a Spoon Dipped in Water

Working in the Burns Unit, the patients I saw were mostly on the way to physical recovery and often in for short-term treatments such as skin grafts. I remember one period in late summer, I met a women who had received bad burns from a bonfire, when she had mistakenly thrown petrol on to the flames. 'Cynthia' had come back for a skin graft. Her wound was mostly down the left side of her neck, her shoulder and arm; although severe, it would heal with some scarring. One area was worse, though, and she needed a graft. When I was talked through Cynthia's case I was told that she was taking a much higher level of pain-killers than the staff would have expected, given the nature of her burn suffered some weeks previously and its subsequent improvement. The staff felt her anxiety level was very high and hoped that a session with me might help a little.

When I visited her, I found a very tense, pale woman. She had of course agreed to see me, and smiled welcomingly. I asked her if she would like to tell me what had happened and she said she thought it would be good to talk. I asked if I could make notes, explaining that I would write it all up for her afterwards. She agreed. She had been making the bonfire in her garden, with her young son present, and her mother. It was a beautiful sunny day. When the fire caught her she ran for the hose and stood in its cascade until she felt safe enough to get to hospital. She lived right out in the country and knew she would have to wait a long time for an ambulance, so she packed up nappies and everything for her son and drove herself and the family to Salisbury, where she collapsed in shock. Cynthia was now experiencing flashbacks of the fire; she could hear its *whoosh* as it hit her.

I asked about her garden. She loved her house in the hills, loved the peace, and she had always felt safe there. She was a keen gardener too and had been tidying up, 'making everything lovely', she said. Now the whole place was stinking with burnt bushes, the black foul mess of the petrol-stoked wood. She was dreading going home again. She also told me that she was terrified of having the skin graft. It seemed yet another violation of her self, another invasive act on an already hurt body. Skin grafts had been explained to me as being rather like a graze, and certainly not a big and painful procedure. But she was very fearful.

As I wrote and talked, I knew that one aspect of my work would be the witnessing of her trauma and the honest feedback of her own words as a testament. When a trauma is spoken, witnessed and recorded, it changes its nature. It no longer has the same power over us, it has been delineated, and in the process loses some of its vast, unedged scope to terrify. But I also knew that with this story there needed to be more, some kind of turning both away from the insistence of the trauma and, at the same time, a turning towards the new. I began to ask about the garden. Cynthia was close to tears every time she thought of it. The burn had not only hurt her, but it had gone into the heart of the place she loved, the home she had made for her family. It had hurt the green life there – and was as scarred as she was.

I asked her if she could get anyone to go into the garden and clear up the mess before she went home. She looked surprised but said yes, there was someone she could ask who would be able to do that, cut out all the burnt wood and clear the area. I asked her what she'd like to do with the garden, and after some discussion, together we came up with a new idea. To make a water feature there. Something permanent. We began to talk about water.

Imagine water.

How brightly it flows, catching the light and sparkling. Think of how the wind creates ripples on the surface of a pool, of how water reflects sky – blue in summer, silver in moonlight. Think of lilies, of goldfish, think of its cool depths. Remember how you used to love putting your arms into water, feeling all that cool caressing silkiness – think of drinking icy water on a burning hot day....

I asked Cynthia to imagine a cascade of water flowing over her, cool and refreshing, washing, energising. We imagined beautiful waterfalls in green woods, sunlight glinting, birds singing, the lovely melody of falling water.

I remembered that skin has an extraordinary renewal property – the way it seals itself over so quickly... and I thought that maybe a skin graft was more like a spoon dipped into water, how water would heal itself over afterwards....

When I wrote up my notes, I made a poem which contained the fire in the first part, and in the second part, contained this positive use of water, as a meditative rebalancing of the trauma. She had, of course, experienced the healing power of a cascade of water already – in the hose which she had turned on herself. Later, I was told that Cynthia used that water meditation when she went for her skin graft surgery, and that her painkiller consumption was markedly decreased, well below what the staff had expected. In this particular case, the elemental use of water provided a healing of itself. It calmed, cleansed, soothed, cooled, re-energised – not only the patient but her environment too. Working with the imagery of water helped her re-connect to her strong inner self, which had been damaged. She felt she had failed her child and her home, as much as she had hurt herself. The idea of bringing water into the garden was a way of being both in the present – making the arrangements for clearance, and then engaging with design – and in the future. The garden itself and all the green life there now had a future, as she did, as her son did. None of them would be forever maimed by the fire because it had been creatively contained. It would always be part of their lives, but would not be allowed to dominate. This is an extract from the poem we wrote together:

> Sometimes I still hear the flames coming –
> but water quenches fire and I will work with water,
> the waterfall will cascade over me
> cold and refreshing, washing out all that I don't need
> to carry, healing me both within and without.
> as the peaceful song of water soothes me
> and bright sparkles from the sun gleam in reflections
> that energise my whole life with light.

Freewheeling into the World of Time, Space and Senses

I worked several times with a large group of Speech and Language Therapy patients in a day centre. This patient group mostly contained people who were experiencing varying degrees of speech and memory loss, due to stroke or accident or illness. The average age tends to be older, and there is often a ratio of more men than women. The first group I met consisted of about ten people, who were all now out of hospital and in the community; they met on a regular basis, organised by the Speech and Language Therapists.

My original intention was to encourage everyone to write a little. I was assured that everyone *could* write, there were no really major reasons – physical or mental – for them not to do so. So I had thought that I would present them with a theme and encourage everyone to write a little bit about it, making their own short poems or prose pieces. So after we had agreed the rules, I suggested a warm-up exercise to get us going. Something simple – 'September Is....'. I asked them to supply just one word each to describe the season – beautifully illustrated by the bright garden beyond the picture window at the back of our room.

There was silence. I made some suggestions. There was quite a lot of 'I can't think...', a lot of shaking heads. People could not think of anything at all at first – it was difficult and would have been very limited without the four therapists' input. They were wonderful. They did not just support, or keep themselves in the role of therapist, they always joined in whole-heartedly, giving freely of their own memories and experiences, something that was essential to the well-being of the group. There was never any sense of 'us and them'. Slowly, words started to come to the surface and I wrote everything down, and later I took the notes and made a poem which I read to the group at the next session. Here is an extract:

> September is golden,
> falling leaves, changing colours
> yellows and browns
> horse chestnuts and beeches.
> September is the taste of walnuts and scrumpie
> of damsons and apples, plum crumbles,
> September is the feel of drizzle on faces
> sun warm on our skin, fog's clamminess;
> bombardment by conkers. My grandson
> Tom who touches me for a fiver.
>
> September is the sound of a calling pheasant,
> crows cawing, brittle leaves crunching
> and rustling, thunder coming over the hilltops,
> distant tractors, the crackling of gunfire,
> wind in the trees, the sound of bliss,
> echoes in silence.

It had taken a long time, but everyone had come up with a memory, however fractured. It may not be a great poem – but it is a poem, and its process was poetic, an example

of poetic thinking. So what is happening in this process when the imagination leads thought? What is happening when we – in a group – discuss the natural world, and place something of our own knowledge of it in that discussion?

One by one, everyone had gone deep into themselves to find a word that would surface and become part of the collective experience that we were building together. Everyone has lived in a September. As the word hoard grew, every individual understanding of September coalesced, creating – as if both in our own minds and at the same time *in the space between us* as we sat round the table – an imagined Autumn which was both real and not real.

In this group-poem making, and in subsequent groups that became more and more word-filled every week, the mind and memory were allowed an unusual freedom. The participants were not being asked to answer questions in a logical way; rather, they were being asked to free-wheel into the world of time, space and senses. As we went through each round I would ask if they could give me a sound or taste for September, as well as a sight. The result was that each of us – in some inner corner of ourselves – had access to the natural world. We made a connection to it.

I do not know exactly what those woods or fields or orchards were really like in those collected memories, only that memory was established – in broad-brush strokes. What I do know is that there was complete engagement round the table, and slowly a lessening of tension, an anticipation of what the next, hard-won word might bring. A forgetting of the isolation of illness and its daily living.

In three ways, each patient had formed or strengthened relationships that mattered to them. There was confidence to be gained from their relationship to their inner world of memory and imagination. To provide a word such as 'damson' could have taken a long time, and brought with it many shared memories, a major achievement in itself. One man, after a few weeks, told me that he had thought he did not remember anything – now he realised he remembered a lot! Again and again he went back to the farm were he was brought up – one delightful memory was of a cow that had a duck as a friend, which used to sit on the cow's back when she lay down....

Within the imagination are whole days of sunlight, the achievements of childhood and youth – a boat taken out on the lake in the early dawn, a horse ridden across a snowfield – and they are a richness beyond price. So too the re-creation of happiness on a foreign holiday beach. These are treasures, and may often be brought out. To work with them creatively is to polish them, bring them back into lustre.

The group also found relationships with each other. In the images of nature they had a common ground, they could all *be inside the other's imagining*... it gave them a place to be together, there were responses that could be made from that place, and further connections. Barriers of gender and class can be broken down by shared re-creation. A group of people walking through a wood all experience the wood differently. Someone sees the blur of the light, someone else is watching their dog race, a third may be shuffling leaves, but over-archingly the wood is a common ground, giving its scents and sounds to them all.

To Be Reminded of the World Beyond the Wall is to Bring Green into the Soul

One lady who worked one to one with me had some considerable memory- and concentration-loss, and was also unable to read. Every session we would find a place to connect – a walk in France, a garden in Salisbury, and slowly, painfully, she would begin to describe it. But she still wasn't reading or writing. One day we began to discuss *The Wind in the Willows*. I said it still remained my favourite book, only for the passage where the young otter is found safely asleep, with the Piper at the Gates of Dawn. My patient stared at me transfixed. She remembered reading the book to herself and to her daughter, and said that it was her favourite passage too. Suddenly a whole flood of memories poured back. That night, she went home, found the old illustrated copy and read it from cover to cover. She had not only made a strong link to her inner world but she could also talk to her daughter and her husband about it, restoring herself in the process.

When we work with natural imagery we are connecting to Earth herself. For patients who are isolated in side rooms without windows, or stuck long term in wards, or at home, cut off from friends and society by pain or distress or immobility – the world can shrink down to the smallness of their own hurt. To be reminded of the world beyond the wall is to bring green in to the soul.

I believe that to be dis-connected from Earth is a major source of our dis-ease as a society. Throughout time, many peoples have understood their symbiosis with land – not in terms of land use, and usefulness, but of us being of the same stuff and interacting at a deep-memoried, cellular level. The Inuit whale hunters have a ceremony traceable back at least a thousand years, in which landscape, the physicality of human bodies, the intent of the hunt and the understanding of the being of the whale, are all enshrined

in a poetry which layers the mythic with the real. To hunt whales, there must be a series of complex inter-reactions, part of which is seen in the action of women, who must sit still in the igloo, drawing the whale into the hunt's grasp and into their own bodies. The inner world and the outer must reflect each other for the hunt to succeed.

Barry Lopez in 'Landscape and narrative',1 speaking of the Beauty Way healing ceremony of the Navajo says this:

> In the Navajo view, the elements of one's interior life – one's psychological make-up and moral bearing – are subject to a persistent principle of disarray. The Beauty Way Ceremony is, in part, a spiritual invocation of the order of the exterior universe, that irreducible, holy complexity that manifests itself as all things changing through time. The purpose of this invocation is to re-create in the individual who is the subject of the Beauty Way ceremony that same order, to make the individual again a reflection of the myriad enduring relationships of the landscape.

Using natural images, then, is a way of restoring the interior wellness. Beauty itself as medicine. But I believe, too, that at this point in time, we must also reverse the process. If our isolation from the natural world has of itself created dis-ease within us, what has our isolation, our lack of connection, done to the natural world? We live in a society that is increasingly isolated – without the specific drama of ill-health or accident. We are isolated from the natural world in a million ways. Armchair voyeurs, we can watch wildlife from the comfort of our overheated rooms, as good as any other show with live contestants, perhaps better. We can carry on relationships without ever meeting people, and we can spend all but a brief holiday period contained within street and building. We shop till we drop and call it pleasure, we consume more and more of anything that makes us feel good for half an hour, and we consume the world itself faster and faster. We have forgotten who we are and what we are.

To know we are connected to the world makes the whole earth part of what is precious to us, if we value ourselves. When we look back at the most valued of our memories and see again a summer oak tree entwined by honeysuckle, a frosty morning with icicles on the eaves, or a cathedral of stars – we are connecting into the whole web of life. If we remember who we are and what we love – we know again that what is important is the earth itself. As we heal ourselves – how can we not take on some care for our world that gives us so much?

No individual can heal the world on their own. But we can all do small practical things... and I have always believed that poetry can change the world. In writing we make creation from that which was destructive, we make healing from that which was causing sickness. Every poem we read, write, even think in our poetic minds, remembering, imaging – has power. The natural world is us, is our deepest selves and our health. And we are the natural world, we are the environment, not separate, but connected. The more we connect, the more hope there is of healing.

FIRST SUN AND DAFFODILS

Always such a promise, a yes to life:
Sun's clear face open with warmth,
her hands bringing gold out
of black ground to kindle the shadows
left lying around under thin hedges
when Old Night stalked away.

A guinea morning.
Warm coin in cold pockets
and daffodils worth their weight
for all the singing gold they do,
taking up their places in hearts and borders
like blackbirds perched on twigs,
yellow mouths trumpeting the sun;

a sudden lightening of the spirit,
an old coat slipping to the floor.

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Note

1 Lopez, B.H. (1988) 'Landscape and narrative', in B H. Lopez (ed.), *Crossing Open Ground* (pp. 61–71), New York: Charles Scribner's Sons