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“LIKE A SPLINTER HAD COME OUT OF HER”: A POETIC INQUIRY OF SHARED READING

Abstract

Poetry offers a valuable resource at this moment of need for language that not only informs but also connects, enacts, and creates. With this paper, I present a selection of findings from the poetic inquiry phase of my doctoral research examining what happens when we bring people together to read aloud and discuss literary works. I create and share three sets of poems: found poems from the transcripts of my interviews with reading group participants, found poems from the work of relevant theorists, and threshold poems that weave in my voice as the poet-researcher. The poems reveal how the cultivated liminal space of shared reading can engender a practice of listening otherwise experienced as a process of relational wellbeing.

Introduction

On a drizzly and dark February afternoon, a small group of people gathers around a table. The group’s facilitator, Claire, reads Elizabeth Jennings’ poem *Comfort* aloud, slowly:

Hand closed upon another, warm.
The other, cold, turned round and met
And found a weather made of calm.
So sadness goes, and so regret.
A touch, a magic in the hand.
Not that the fortune-teller sees
Or thinks that she can understand.
This warm hand binds but also frees.

A brief, comfortable silence falls and then most of the group members take a turn sharing where and how the poem resonates. Elaine repeats the phrase ‘a weather made of calm’ and remarks how rarely that seems to happen now. I talk about how my children used to hold my hand every day and the bittersweetness I feel now that they are older and holding other people’s hands. Freya recalls a time when they were comforted with the gentle presence of another, the dignity offered in sitting side by side.

This vignette offers a small glimpse of how the reading aloud and facilitated discussion of literature can be a site of comfort and connection (Longden et al., 2015). Founders of the shared reading model established reading groups with the conviction that collective engagement

with literary texts can support personal and collective wellbeing (The Reader, n.d.). Herein, I present a selection of findings from the poetic inquiry phase of my doctoral research examining the underlining processes and relational wellbeing potential of shared reading.

Shared Reading

This poetic inquiry examines what happens in shared reading groups modeled after those developed and delivered by the United Kingdom charity The Reader. Poems and short stories are selected and read aloud by a trained facilitator with groups of typically six to ten people in a range of settings (e.g., libraries, healthcare facilities, prisons). The facilitator regularly pauses, allowing for an exploration of participants' personal and collective responses (Billington et al., 2013, 2016).

Poetic Inquiry

Prendergast first proposed the term 'poetic inquiry' in 2009 to comprise the myriad ways in which researchers incorporate poetry in their work. It refers to "the use of poetry as/in/for inquiry" and is both a method and product of investigation (Faulkner, 2017, p. 210). Poet-researchers blend the scientific with the artistic to more authentically communicate the substance and tone of research participants' voices (Prendergast et al., 2009; van Rooyen et al. 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted two interviews each with nine shared reading group members from several sites across Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Our discussions focused on their experiences of participation in shared reading. I listened to the recorded interviews and read the interview transcripts through the lens of the theoretical constructs guiding my work (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011). To stay close to the "essence of the text", I enacted Prendergast et al.'s (2009) notion of vox and created three types of poems: Vox Theoria, using extracts from the works of resonant theorists; Vox Participare, using phrases verbatim from the transcripts of my interviews with research participants; Vox Nexum, to connect and juxtapose the voices of my research participants with those of the theorists and that of my own.

Poetry Clusters

Poems, accompanied by brief narratives, are presented below in clusters, representing two of the theorists/concepts used to frame my study.

Liminality

Poems in this liminality cluster help us unfold the spatial aspects of the processes and practices of shared reading. First used by ethnologist Van Gennep (1960) to describe the middle, transitory stage of a rite of passage, liminality was later developed by Turner to include all temporary, in-between phases through which an individual or community passes, characterized

by a withdrawal from everyday habits, routines, and structures (Turner, 1969, 1986). Evolving interpretations and enduring applications of liminality, across a wide range of fields, consider the “storehouse of possibilities” that can occur with consistent participation in brief, repeated liminal experiences (Atkinson & Robson, 2012, p. 42). I position shared reading as one such brief, repeated liminal experience.

Vox Theoria

I crafted the Vox Theoria poems below from various pieces of Taylor’s seminal writing.

Between and between
Positions arrayed by law
Neither here nor there
Momentarily free
Free from the norms
 the values
 the roles
 the status
the responsibilities
Brought by gender, social class, other structural niches
Momentarily free (Turner, 1982, p. 48)

In a liminal space, typical rules and relations are dissolved, creating a disorienting process that engenders the possibility of transformation or something new.

the doffing of masks
the stripping of statuses
the renunciation of roles
the demolishing of structures
making possible the deconstruction of the uninteresting (Turner, 1986. p. 107)

Within liminal spaces, ‘communitas’ can emerge in which people, absorbed in a shared event, can genuinely connect with one another in a process based on equality and trust (Turner, 1969).

A realm of pure possibility
Whence novel configurations of ideas may arise
Whence novel configurations of relations may arise
Communion of equal, synchronized trust (Turner, 1986, p. 42)

Vox Participare

The poems created from research participants’ interview transcripts, suggest that inherent to shared reading are the characteristic elements of liminality: removal from everyday norms,

roles, and routines, creative engagement in a facilitated activity, and building ‘communitas.’ Participants Janice and Sue evoke a sense of relief in escape from normal obligations and the possibilities inherent to being lifted from the mundane.

We sit for an hour and half with tea
Not having to think
The shops, the milk, the eggs
Oh yes! The eggs!
I’ve got to do this
I’ve got to do that
We shut the door to the life that’s outside (Janice)

It's not just a cup of tea or jar of lollies on the table.
It takes you out of a space that is mundane, ordinary
And sometimes incredibly lonely
It opens up opportunities to being heard
Which is very interesting
Not only is the author or poet being heard
But the people themselves,
Us ourselves
In company where we are respected
Where we connect
Huh
Where we belong (Sue)

To Catherine, shared reading offered respite, a space in which she could have a “rich social connection with minimal obligation, if you know what I mean.”

This is a nice safe space where, you know, you’re
You’re friendly, connected but
But you’re not overly involved in these people’s lives
Lives of struggle
Lives I don’t have to fix or step in
And make them feel better

Juliane also touched on this idea of being a part of the group, but at a certain remove.

Layers that slowly come off
Slowly peeled away
Slowly edit your understanding of who a person is
You're not friends
And yet again
I'm an outsider in the group

And yet again

We are not paying enough attention

To the importance of feeling connected without being friends

It's a kind of being in moving water

But at eye level with the others

It's a companion practise

In opening up, slower to judge

In watching, attending

The genuine invitation to share with no 'right answer' was welcomed, as evidenced in Kimberley's poem below.

whether it's you know

little miseries or big miseries

it's that one hour break

where they can turn that off

just enjoy being with other people

and reading and benefiting in that way

for that brief time

talk or not,

share or not,

smile or not

low stakes

no agenda

no need to come prepared

invited to share, no judgement

valued (Kimberley)

Participants in the group were bound together, not by any pre-established relationships or conventional roles, but through their engagement with the text at hand, as emphasized in Sue's poem.

Pull up the chair, kettle's on

The literature itself is the host

Opens up this being able to express stuff

Stuff otherwise would never have come to light

Triggers a vast collection of other stories

Punctuated by knowing looks, occasional frowns

Jennine suggested the reading aloud and immediacy of the literary event played a role in flattening a potential hierarchy.

People come to it fresh in the same moment

That immediacy
A democratizing factor
People are thrown off their game
They're all at net zero when they come in
It's where the conversations happen
It's where the connections happen
Rising above the choppy tides of our everyday life
Knitting the first seeds of a community

Vox Nexum

I wrote this Vox Nexum poem to braid together my own evolving understandings, questions, and insights with those of Turner and those of my research participants.

I am in a liminal space here, where I write
A blue cabin, accessible only by the lake which today
Is painfully just as you might imagine, lapping, loon-licked
Away from our kids, home, campus
Is being here why this idea of liminality resonates?
No matter. The poets, the participants, have uttered it themselves.
Not uttered liminal directly, but in-between world words like
Loose, porous, blooming, slowing down, no agenda, curious, peeled away, creative, fluid,
immediacy, democratizing, equals, difference, present, attending, attention, attend
What these words *do* generates openness – to self, to text, to other, to world
Refracting and reflecting experiences
Through the eyes of Chekov's head gardener
Through they eyes of glamorous Dorothea who turned 90 last month and thinks
That story is a load of rubbish
One experience of liminality cocooned within another
Stepping into the pages, having stepped into the reading circle
What happens when we play here awhile, play with who we are and could be?
And what happens when we get up from the table?
Have we limbered up for a different way to be?
Can new recognition leak out once we step back from the pages
Once we step back from the circle?
Or maybe it is enough to just return to the table

The liminality afforded by participation in shared reading renders it a creative and supportive space of openness and possibility. Group members temporarily leave their everyday lives and enter the space to engage with unknown (at least initially) others. The group's facilitator purposefully cultivates a nonjudgmental atmosphere of quiet boldness, emphasizing that all responses are valid and valued. Entering the world of the text crosses a second threshold

where participants are given access to new landscapes and to the inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences of characters and the other readers. In the liminal shared reading space, group members are neither who they were nor who they will be; they need not exhaust themselves concealing their true emotions, struggles, or ideas. With the usual social norms and behaviour dissolved, permission is granted to take risks, play, try out emerging aspects of identity, evolve understanding of and relations with self and other.

Listening Otherwise

Poems in this listening otherwise cluster prompt us to consider what is made possible when we turn toward, rather than away. Communication scholar and philosopher Lipari argues that “listening brings humans into being” (Lipari, 2015, p. 2). Listening otherwise is an invitational approach, an effort to suspend self-interest and foreknowledge, to attune to sounds of difference, and to receive the vulnerability of others in all their complexity (Lipari, 2009). Drawing from Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus, how our experiences create preconceptions and convictions that affect how we interpret the world, Lipari contends that our individual habitus shapes what we listen to and how we listen. To listen otherwise, to truly attend to the ideas of others, we need to acknowledge our habitus and be willing to move beyond it (Lipari, 2015).

Vox Theoria

Lipari’s scholarship on listening otherwise was used to create the Vox Theoria found poems below.

hearing: perception, receiving from others

listening: attention, giving to others (Lipari, 2015, p. 187)

I come to the conversation empty
not empty of my experience or history
but empty of the belief that my experience or history
defines the limits of possible meaning and experience (Lipari, 2015, p. 35)

Through listening otherwise, we connect with others in an openness to their perspectives, and insights regardless of how we understand them or whether they reflect our own. In this process, we submit to discomfort.

I don’t have to “feel” what you feel
I don’t have to “know” what it feels like to be you
I do need to stand in proximity to your pain.
I do need to stand with you, right next to you,
I do need to belong to you
I do need to let go of my ideas about who you are, who I am, what “should” be (Lipari, 2009, pp. 350–351)

listening otherwise
arises from welcoming the other
as a guest
as a not-me

doesn't insist on understanding or shared feelings
does insist on listening with an awareness that makes space
space for the unthinkable, the unimaginable (Lipari, 2015, p. 186)

Vox Participare

These Vox Participare poems suggest that shared reading can be “a kind of dwelling place from where we offer our hospitality to others and the world” (Lipari, 2009, p. 102). From this dwelling place, the listener does not have to fully understand (much less agree with) what the speaker (a character in a book, another shared reading member) is describing; it is enough to sit alongside, in openness to receiving.

Melinda feels shared reading might help to hone listening skills and the willingness to consider the views of others.

In shared reading we're given permission
To hold difference
Gaze at it, attend to it
To try to understand when someone says something
Something very different to our own perspective on life
Multiperspectivity - what a mouthful of a word!
But you know what I mean
That is gold

Kimberley feels that shared reading prompts a kind of listening that is rarely found elsewhere.

At first the men were like, ugh
I do not wanna be here this is stupid
You know when you're listening to someone
You're you're getting your rebuttal ready
But then as we started talking the walls
The walls came down even they were surprised
How connected it was and how engaging
To talk about a poem
What the poem led to talking about
Not necessarily the poem itself, right
They connected they listened differently

Sue evokes Lipari's call to be open and present to the vulnerability of both self and other, without the attendant need to fully understand or resolve a situation.

One of them, I think it might have been another Sue
She said I love hearing you read
You've got a beautiful voice
Sometimes I don't even follow
I just listen to you
And it really matters to her
You realise the vulnerability
Vulnerability of people
I think I've always felt a need to be responsible
To respond
To respond to other people

Melinda shows the powerful effect of being listened to.

The story took us to that place
She revealed the dark, what is true
We listened, we accepted
It was like a splinter had come out of her

Vox Nexum

I wrote the Vox Nexum poem below with the intention of bringing my voice into conversation with Lipari's voice and those of my research participants to create something new.

Sitting on the log with Owen, listening
Slap of a beaver tail
Tremolo of a loon
Chatter of two squirrels up the birch tree
Shaking down the impossibly yellow leaves
Around the dinner table with Owen later that evening
Sure, there is a bit of whinging about kale
Mostly, though, he is listening, wide-open
Turning around the ideas he is hearing
Presenting them back to us, unvarnished
"That's how the bath water gets hot?"
"This song makes you sad? I think it's zippy. That's okay."
"I want to feel strong arms swimming to the island, too."
Owen is four
He is a magnificent listener

Perhaps, being four, he has fewer objections, fewer assumptions, fewer convictions
But those who know four-year-olds know this isn't likely true
His roots are still tendrils, just below the surface
Not as frayed with complicated cuts and bruises
Not as knotted and bound up with long-held loves and loyalties
Glancing around I see what happens when we are not magnificent listeners
What happens when we fail to listen to the other, for the other
Families smiling (painfully), but unknown to one another
Communities shouting past one another
Fires set, walls set up, cellos set down
Owen comes to the conversation on the log, at the table, empty
Not empty of his (still limited) experience or (still short) history
But empty of the belief that his experience or history
Defines the limits of possible meaning and experience
We can do that too
I see it happen around the not-empty table in shared reading
Comprehension and consensus not prerequisites for compassion
Softened boundaries
Listening matters
Being listened to matters

Conceptualizing shared reading as a space for cultivating a practice of listening otherwise, extends our understanding of listening as an ethical practice. I propose that listening otherwise comprises three components within shared reading: pace, emphasis on affect, and lack of prescribed goal. Many group members' everyday worlds are cacophonous and hurried. Slowed down, group members are better able to feel and acknowledge their relations to self, other, and their environment. Space is created for participants to make connections to the text, and through the text, to one another. Instead of literary criticism, the facilitator draws out participants' affective responses to a shared, live experience. The text is not separate from the group, it is constitutive of the group and holds open the door to new thinking, new relating. Finally, shared reading has no prescribed outcome; group members are not required to listen with a certain agenda, to acquire certain information, or to prepare the right response. Encouraging collective meaning-making establishes an environment in which participants feel they can speak without fear of judgment and listen with genuine curiosity. This can enable a more generous listening orientation and disrupt complacent thinking and relating.

Concluding Thoughts

While poetry can play a role in realizing the wellbeing potential of shared reading, so too can it support the relational wellbeing potential of research. For me, the process of meaning production is as important as the meaning produced. Coming to know about research participants

and their lives is coming to care about research participants and their lives. In conducting a poetic inquiry, I, as the researcher, became part of, and accountable for, circles of interconnected relations – to the topic, to participants, the craft, and to the public. The resultant poems reveal the wellbeing often experienced in shared reading is established in part through a cultivated liminal space that engenders a practice of listening otherwise, fostering resonant relations between the reader, literary text, facilitator, and group members.

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