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The Choir Within You: Cacophony to Harmony

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Abstract

This methodological paper describes the theory and practice of a biblio/poetry therapy workshop prepared and offered at the first European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference in Budapest, on 4-5 October 2024. The authors combined their work in autoethnography, Dialogical Self Theory and Jungian psychology, using poetry to explore the internal monologue and duologue, and autoethnographic prose to explore the multiple voices representing the many different parts of the self. The purpose of this workshop was that those writing might become more intimately acquainted with the concept of inner voice: how to define it, how to tune into it, listen to it, and capture it – or try to keep up with it – on the page. The presentation combined: a narrative introduction to the way inner voice influenced the authors' own development journeys; theoretical frameworks, from which they each facilitate others; and poetry and prose prompts, to initiate participants into attempting their own 'inner voice' writing. The final process included optional sharing of work by reading it aloud, followed by a period of dialogical reflection on what had been shared. This workshop offered specific methods and exercises – grounded in psychological theory and the established principles of biblio/poetry therapy facilitation – to those wishing to guide others in learning about the self through writing.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; biblio/poetry therapy; Jungian psychology; Dialogical Self Theory; writing for wellbeing; writing the self

Introduction

Reinekke Lengelle and Jon Sayers recognized an affinity in their work when they met at The Healing Word conference in Canterbury organized by The Poetry Practice. Reinekke's work, which she calls "writing the self", is a form of therapeutic autoethnography using Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). DST conceptualizes the self as a multiplicity of voices in the landscape of the mind; selves are heard, can speak to one another, contradict one other, and form new coalitions (Lengelle, 2021b). Based in Jungian theory, Jon's work looks at tuning into the directive inner voice of the Self that guides our journey of Individuation and also at dialoguing between two opposing parts of the self. According to Jung's theory of the Tension of Opposites holding these oppositions in psychic utero invites

the Transcendent Function (Jung, 1969) to self-activate from a place of unconscious creativity within us and give birth to something entirely new.

Reinekke and Jon's first collaboration took place when Reinekke invited Jon to co-author a chapter on poetry therapy with American poetry therapist Geri Giebel Chavis (in Den Elzen & Lengelle, 2023). Reinekke and Jon continued to collaborate, embarking on a dialogical editing exercise on Reinekke's chapter, "Professor out of a Suitcase" (Lengelle, 2024).

When the invitation came up to submit a proposal for the first European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference in Budapest, it felt natural for us to offer a collaborative workshop based on the voices within, from the monologue and the duologue to the multiple voices representing the many different parts of ourselves. This would be an opportunity to share with others our interest in the inner voice: how to tune into it, listen to it, and how to capture it – or try to keep up with it – on the page.

The workshop

We began the workshop by asking to hear all the voices in the room, inviting each participant to say their name and how their best friend might describe their speaking voice. We then introduced ourselves and our own relationship to and experience of the theories we'd be using.

Jon then went on to introduce the idea of the "Single Voice" and its relationship to Jung's theory of Individuation, demonstrating different ways to tune into the "still, small voice" within us through the use of poetry and expressive writing. Jon then continued with the "Dialogue and the Divided Self," again using poetry and expressive writing to explore Jung's theories of the Tension of Opposites and the Transcendent Function. Reinekke led the final section of the workshop: "Cacophony: The Many Voices Within," demonstrating Hubert Hermans's Dialogical Self Theory through excerpts from her autoethnographic book *Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss, and Resilience* (Lengelle, 2021a) and inviting workshop participants to write their own dialogues between the multiple voices within.

The Single Voice: tuning into the still small voice within us (Jung's theory of Individuation)

"In simple terms," Jon explained, "Individuation can be defined as the journey to achieve self-actualization through a process of integrating the conscious and the unconscious. It is each individual's unique journey towards wholeness, and, for those who answer the call, it seems to follow a plan that was predetermined for each of us. It is the work of a lifetime, and is never completed."

He went on to quote C.G. Jung:

"Why are you looking around for help? Do you believe that help will come from outside? What is to come is created in you and from you. Hence look into yourself. Do not compare, do not measure. No other way is like yours. All other ways deceive and tempt you. You must fulfil the way that is in you." (C.G. Jung as cited in Jung, Harris, & Woolfson, 2018, 280).

Jon explained that Individuation is not a process of improvement or of getting better, but of becoming more "you." He then asked workshop participants to read aloud three more definitions or illustrations of the process of Individuation, by Jung and others:

"In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not more like Moses?' They will ask me 'Why were you not more like Zusya?' " Rabbi Zusya (Hart, 2014, 278)

"Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience, a still small voice says to us something is out of tune." C.G. Jung (as cited in Schafers, 2024, chapter 2, 1)

"The act of consciousness is central; otherwise we are overrun by the complexes. The hero in each of us is required to answer the call of individuation. We must turn away from the cacophony of the outer world to hear the inner voice. When we can dare to live its promptings, then we achieve personhood. We may become strangers to those who thought they knew us, but at least we are no longer strangers to ourselves." (C.G. Jung as cited in Stein et al., 2019, chapter 11)

Jon highlighted and repeated the mentions of "voice" by Carl Jung and by the eminent Jungian analyst and author James Hollis in the latter two quotations.

We then turned the participants' attention to two poems that were printed in the handout: "Self Reliance" by Ralph Waldo Emerson (2000) and "The Way it Is" by William Stafford (1998). We asked for readers from the floor to read out the poems, so that in this workshop about voice, we could continue to hear the voices of the participants ringing out in the room. We then discussed these metaphors for the voice of the Self directing us from within on our path of Individuation: the voice of God in the bottom of the heart, the little needle that always knows the North, and the little bird remembering his note in Emerson's poem, and the single, sustained metaphor in Stafford's poem: the thread we follow.

We offer some lines from each poem here to honor the intention of fair usage in this academic publication and recommend that readers seek the full versions cited in the reference list.

Self Reliance
by Ralph Waldo Emerson

HENCEFORTH, …The little needle always knows the North,
The little bird remembereth his note,
And this wise Seer within me never errs.
I never taught it what it teaches me;
I only follow, when I act aright.

(*Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2000)

October 9th 1832

The Way It Is
by William Stafford

There is a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread…

(*The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*, Stafford, 1998)

Having read and discussed the poems, Jon set a timed writing exercise: a five-minute sprint, using one of the following quotations as a springboard or sentence stem.

"My little needle always knows the North"

or

"The thread I'm following..."

Honoring participants' right and desire to tune in to their own inner voice, rather than being overly directive, Jon encouraged them to choose any word, line or image from either poem as an alternative to the prompts offered.

After the 5-minute write and an invitation to spend a further two minutes reading and reflecting on what they had written, participants were invited to share their writing and any insights they had attained during their exercise.

Jon then introduced part two of the workshop:

Dialogue: the divided self (Jung's theory of the Tension of Opposites)

Jon began by inviting workshop participants to take turns reading out a series of quotations relating to the duality of language, the way language can operate simultaneously on a conscious and an unconscious level, the way we can hold two opposing thoughts or feelings at the same time, and how this tension creates fertile ground for the intervention of the transcendent function, and the expansion of consciousness and the personal growth that are the marks of the individuation process. Quotations included:

"The language I speak must be ambiguous, must have two meanings in order to do justice to the dual aspect of our psychic nature." C.G. Jung (1909–1961, as cited in Jung, Adler, & Jaffé, 2014, viii)

"The bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious." (Eliot, 1919, 72–73)

"Great energy only comes from a correspondingly great tension of opposites. The greater the contrast, the greater the potential." (Jung, 1953, 130)

"If union is to take place between opposites like spirit and matter, conscious and unconscious, bright and dark and so on, it will happen in a third thing, which represents not a compromise, but something new." (Jung, 2014b, 536)

"Holding an inner or outer conflict quietly instead of attempting to resolve it quickly is a difficult idea to entertain. It is even more challenging to experience. Carl Jung believed, if we held the tension between the two opposing forces, there would emerge a third way, which would unite and transcend the two. Indeed, he believed that this transcendent force was crucial to individuation. Whatever the third way is, it usually comes as a surprise because it has not penetrated our defenses until now. A hasty move to resolve tension can abort the growth of the new. If we can hold conflict in psychic utero long enough we can give birth to something new in ourselves." (Woodman & Mellick, 2001, chapter 20)

Jon then invited participants to explore their own conscious and unconscious feelings about and attitudes towards tension by writing an "AlphaPoem" (acrostic) based on the word TENSION or, alternatively, to write a five-minute sprint on the theme of "Tension and Me."

Writing Exercise

Alphapoem: A journaling exercise in which you write any collection of letters (usually forming a word) or the entire alphabet, A-Z, vertically down the side of a page. Then write a poem in which each successive line begins with the next letter.

TENSION
T……..
E……..
N……..
S……...
I……
O……..
N……..

Alphapoem example

PEACE

P lacidity is what I seek,
E verlasting love,
A mity and
C oncord between
E veryone.

Jon Sayers (cited in Lengelle, Sayers, & Giebel-Chavis, 2023, 38)

Or

Write a five-minute sprint from the following springboard:

"Tension and me"

Once again, participants were invited to reflect on their writing and share what they had written or any insights that came to them during the exercise. Most reported a fairly negative predisposition towards tension, finding it an uncomfortable state of being, while some saw its potential for enabling growth, like "the grit in the oyster" that creates the pearl.

Jon then went on to invite the participants to consider some pairs of opposites, from great cosmic oppositions (a) to more down-to-earth human dilemmas (b):

(a)

earth and heaven
positive and negative
intellectual and emotional
sol and luna
reason and intuition
light and shade
dynamic and static
attraction and repulsion
subjectivity and objectivity

(b)

career v family
money v friends
success v health
fame v kids
love v religion
freedom v conformity

Jon asked the participants to focus now on their own life dilemmas and to note down what is currently causing them tension.

Putting this list aside for the moment, he invited two participants to volunteer to read out the poem "A View of Things" by the former *Makar* (Poet Laureate) of Scotland Edwin Morgan. The two volunteers were then invited to choose between embodying the voice of "love" and embodying the voice of "hate." The participants appeared to show equal relish in adopting their parts as they read the poem, while the rest of the group listened and followed along on their handouts.

A View of Things
by Edwin Morgan

what I love about dormice is their size
what I hate about rain is its sneer
….
what I hate about derelict buildings is their reluctance to disintegrate
what I love about a cloud is its unpredictability
what I hate about you, chum, is your china
what I love about many waters is their inability to quench love

(*New and Selected Poems* by Edwin Morgan, 2012)

Jon now invited participants to write their own version of the poem, choosing one of the current life dilemmas they had written down, but with the additional instruction that they must ensure each consecutive love/hate couplet addressed the *same* object rather than different objects.

Writing Exercise

A(n alternative) View of Things: think back to your current dilemma, or choose another one, and write an Edwin Morgan-style poem, alternating the line openings as he does:

What I *love* about X is……
What I *hate* about X is…….

But ensure that each couplet addresses *the same* object, so the love and hate are attached to the same thing. Add a final line in which love triumphs, e.g.:

"What I love about many waters is their inability to quench love."

Before commencing the writing task, Jon modelled the exercise by sharing an example he had written, so participants could get a clearer and more immediate understanding of what was required.

Example, written by Jon:

A View of S

what I love about S is his competence
what I hate about S is his superiority
what I love about the situation is it sets me free
what I hate about the situation is that it upends my values
what I love about the sadness is it means I'm growing
what I hate about the sadness is its pain
what I love about the anger is it makes me feel alive
what I hate about the anger is its hunger
what I love about the future is I won't be answerable
what I hate about the future is I've lost my audience
what I love about the whole sorry mess is that love can't die.

The intention behind the exercise was to give participants a direct experience of holding the tension of the opposites, while allowing their unconscious thoughts and feelings to emerge to create the conditions for the Transcendent Function to manifest in the final line of their poem.

As a further encouragement to the unconscious minds of participants to express themselves freely and playfully, Jon also shared this quotation from C.G. Jung: "The pendulum of the mind oscillates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong." C.G. Jung (2014, as cited in Stein, 83).

Having invited participants to share their work or any insights that had come to them through their writing and reflection, Jon went on to explore the concept of the Transcendent Function with the group.

Once again, he used quotations to help set out theory, this time all from the pen of Jung himself.

Jon invited three volunteers from the group to each read one of the following:

"The transcendent function is not something one does oneself; it comes rather from experiencing the conflict of opposites." C.G. Jung (1906–1950, as cited in Jung, Adler, & Jaffé, 2015, 269)

"The cooperation of conscious reasoning with the data of the unconscious is called the 'transcendent function…. This function progressively unites the opposites. Psychotherapy makes use of it to heal neurotic dissociations, but this function had already served as the basis of Hermetic philosophy for seventeen centuries." (Jung, 2014b, para 780)

"By bearing the opposites we can expose ourselves to life in our humanity... We have to realize the evil is in us; we have to risk life to get into life, then it takes on colour, otherwise we might as well read a book.... The opus consists of three parts: insight, endurance, and action. It is conflicts of duty that make endurance and action so difficult. The one must exist and so must the other. There is no resolution, only patient endurance of the opposites, which ultimately spring from your own nature. …We are crucified between the opposites and delivered up to the torture until the reconciling third takes shape." (C.G. Jung from a letter to Olga Frobe-Kapteyn as cited in Dunne, 2015, 114).

Jon shared a further, non-poetry exercise with the group. He proposed that dialogue writing can be an effective alternative means of helping people explore their own dilemmas and create the conditions for the transcendent function to manifest. He demonstrated this with a journal dialogue he had written himself, when facing the dilemma of whether to bring a new dog into his life while he was still feeling attached to his former pet, who had died at a very young age.

Alternative dialogue approach: Projecting the Self

Example: Dialogue with Misha (by Jon)

J: Hey Mishmash, how are you?
M: You know, same, same.
J: Is that good?

M: Equability is always good.

J: I guess so. I wish I had a bit more of that sometimes.

M: You'll get it some day, but…

J: Don't tell me – I might have to die first.

M: You said it!

J: There's something I've been thinking about.

M: Fire away.

J: Well, Mishmash, the thing is, I've been thinking about getting another dog.

M: … and…?

J: Well, I've been wondering how you might feel about that…

M: How I feel about it is immaterial – after all, I am—

J&M: (*Together*) Immaterial.

J: Yes, I know.

M: If I may say so, it's more how you feel about it than how I feel about it that's important. Tell me, what's on your mind?

J: Well, I thought I was ready. But now, when I see the roads we used to walk down and all the little parks and the steps down to the river, you come back to me so strongly, and I just think I would miss you and it would make me sad and instead of looking at my new dog, I'd be seeing you.

M: What's wrong with that?

J: Huh?

M: Take both of us for a walk together. Remember how much I enjoyed our walks and see how much the new kid enjoys them, too. It's a win-win. Double the pleasure. Don't see him as a replacement. See him as an addition. I'll always be there with you, too, anyway. And I'm always here and always will be – any time you want to talk.

J: Thanks, Mishmash. You are a genius, as I always knew.

M: *De nada, hombre*.

J: Big hug with Daddy?

M: Always. Any time. :-)

(Sayers, 2019, August)

The group was invited to attempt this exercise in their own time using a dilemma of their own.

Jon concluded this second section of the workshop with a summary of the ways in which poems, in particular, can help us hold the tension of the opposites and grow on our path of individuation.

Repeating these words of Jung, "The opus consists of three parts; insight, endurance and action," Jon proposed that poems can help us:

- Recognize and accept that a problem or conflict exists (Insight)
- Welcome that conflict as an opportunity for growth, explore it and bear it with patience (Endurance)

- Discover intuitively what active steps we need to take to resolve the tension and grow; inspire us and give us courage to take those steps. (Action)

What makes poetry (and writing in response to it) so well suited to helping us individuate?

Jon paraphrased the words of James Hollis: what we have to do is turn inward, to hear the inner voice, and that means turning away from the cacophony of the outer world (Hollis, 1993). And went on to propose the following points for the group's consideration:

- Poetry is the inner voice of the poet talking to our own inner voice
- A poem is often a portal to the collective unconscious, for both the writer and the reader.
- A poem is a liminal space – a space of change and transition.
- Poetry brings the language of the conscious and the unconscious together.
- Poetry is dreamlike; it communicates through imagery.
- It works on us indirectly through symbols, metaphor, mystery, and music.
- A poem, particularly when spoken aloud, can act as a tuning fork to invoke our own inner voice.

To end, he asked the group to consider these two quotations from Ted Hughes, Poet Laureate of England from 1984 until his death in 1998:

"Poetry is the voice of spirit and imagination and all that is potential, as well as of the healing benevolence that used to be the privilege of the gods." Ted Hughes (as cited in O'Driscoll, 2006, 214).

"The inmost spirit of poetry… is at bottom, in every recorded case, the voice of pain – and the physical body, so to speak, of poetry, is the treatment by which the poet tries to reconcile that pain with the world." (Ted Hughes as cited in Callil et al., 2011, 27)

Reinekke now took over the reins to introduce the final section of the workshop, which looked at working with multiple inner voices as described in Hubert Hermans's Dialogical Self Theory (Herman & Gieser, 2012).

She began her section by linking back to the beginning of the workshop as a platform to introduce her own dialogical work:

The poet's internal "still, small voice" is traditionally heard in solo, acting as a *warm inner compass* that directs poet and reader towards perception, growth and wholeness. Emerson's "little needle always knows the North." William Stafford counsels "don't ever let go of the thread." This part of us also allows us to hear and witness the other voices within us that can dialogue with one another in creative ways, shaping or reshaping our narrative in times of difficulty, loss or transition.

Reinekke then went on to set out the basis of Hubert Hermans's Dialogical Self Theory: "…the self as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind with differing voices that can speak to each other, interact creatively, and represent an extended self…"

(Hermans & Konopka, as cited in Lengelle, 2021b; for a full description, see Lengelle, 2021b).

She then demonstrated Dialogical Self Theory in action, reading from her book on bereavement (Lengelle, 2021a). She told the group the story of her own grief journey following the loss of her husband Frans to cancer as both sorrowful and complex: "I loved Frans and missed him, but I also had unfulfilled wishes and unresolved conflict that I felt compelled to work out. My dialogue with him continued on the page."

She supported her instinct to explore her ambivalence with this quotation:

"The bereaved discover that negative aspects of the relationship can be as productive as the positive, because these aspects have contributed to the tapestry of who they have become …. Ironically, ambivalence can be a powerful healer and enable the bereaved to grow into a new life*."* (Miller & Loring, 2016, 166)

Reinekke then shared extracts from her book, where she describes her unfinished business with Frans as a "pile of shit" and begins with the self she calls, "Rein who wants to be heard (RWH)." She shared from her book *Writing the Self in Bereavement* (20021a) to demonstrate what written dialogue can do for our wellbeing:

> RWH: It looks the same, but I see there is fresh manure piled on top each time, and some of it has ended up in the field.
>
> COUNSELLOR: What happened to the shit you did manage to clean up or use as fertilizer?
>
> RWH (I LOOK TO MY LEFT AND HAVE TO CRY IMMEDIATELY): Oh, my. I see that there are huge fields of golden crops! Gorgeous fields! Our books, our thoughts, our love! It's very stunning. Very stunning what we've created out of that pile of shit and the ground that was there waiting already. (Crying, tender, grateful.)
>
> FRANS: See, my love, it was never the same old shit, different day!! (He's standing right next to me, beaming.)
>
> COUNSELLOR (TO RWH): How is this for you?
>
> RWH: I am feeling his compassion and love. My mind is trying to barge in and judge me for not having the "growth mindset" in this area, but most of me is just grateful to see this. (To Frans): It doesn't mean I liked the way you shouted or got ugly about things we argued about! (To the counsellor): I note a holding on to something—a kind of grudge.
>
> (Lengelle, 2021a, 45–46)

> COUNSELLOR: How do you feel now?
>
> RWH: I am deeply sad. And filled with love, too. I feel heard. I feel his good intentions as well (deep sigh).
>
> GOOP (LARGE PIECES OF THE SHIT AND MESS ARE FALLING ON THE FLOOR BESIDE THE CHAIR; THE WHOLE PILE IS SHIFTING AND BECOMING A BIT LESS OF A MESS)*:* I'm shaking loose here, don't mind me! There, I feel less heavy now. Ahh . . .yes. Wonderful, more air! New things will grow!
>
> COUNSELLOR: How are you doing over there, Grudge? (Using a very compassionate voice): How are you? What do you need?

> GRUDGE: The acknowledgment helps. I would like to give up my job, if you don't mind. I'd rather go hang in the garden on those trees. This was not an easy role and I'm tired and a bit threadbare. You can call me Mr. Curmudgeon now, it's a much nicer name. You can call me at any time you really need me, of course. Consider me your safety net.
>
> (Lengelle, 2021a, 48)

Reinekke then invited the group to write their own multiple-voiced dialogues in the context of loss or transition.

The exercise: from dissonance to harmony

Let's try the exercise of writing about:

Part 1 (choose one)

(a) someone we are estranged from,
(b) someone we have lost to death (it can be a pet), or
(c) an aspect of 'self' we feel we have lost, or even needed to lose (e.g. the able one; the adventurous one; the one who was supposed to be…. fill in the blank).

Begin with these prompting questions and inspiration from colleagues who use DST in bereavement work (Neimeyer & Konopka, 2019):

Part 2

1. What is the special quality of the loved one or aspect of self? (e.g. jovial, supportive)
2. What is their unique role in relationship to me? (e.g. my partner, in life and in work, part of my beloved self, your younger self, my depressed self)
3. How did I experience myself in relationship to them? (e.g. loving, argumentative, wistful)
4. What are my dominant feelings in the wake of their disappearance, estrangement, death or absence from my life? (e.g. tensions like love and lack of resolve) (Neimeyer & Konopka, 2019, 111).

Part 3

1. Besides the "loved one", what inner voices ("I-positions") want to be heard now? Put the names of aspects that want to be heard down on the paper (2 or 3 of them).
2. Let each of them speak in your writing: let each of them tell you what they most want you to hear. "What I want you to hear is…"
3. What name would you give the voice of wisdom and compassion in your life? I call it the "warm inner compass" or "the cosmos" (e.g. counsellor, cosmos, sage, grandmother, guide, God, the soul).
4. Allow the voices to dialogue with each other and let the voice of wisdom and compassion guide the process. See that voice as the conductor of the choir, that helps to harmonize and bring order to the parts of us that are in conversation about the pain and chaos without trying to "resolve" the issue.

Reinekke and Jon concluded the session by taking some questions from the floor.

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