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This Being Human

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Abstract

This article summarises a keynote talk given at the 1st European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference, held at MagNet Közösségi Ház in Budapest on Saturday 5th October 2024. As this was a talk, the article is written in a conversational rather than academic style. The Introduction outlines the process of devising the talk. The account of the talk itself includes the writing prompts given on the day, and the Conclusion puts the talk into a wider context. The talk used "The Guest House" by Rumi, in a translation by Coleman Barks based on a version by John Moyne (Barks, 1996, 109) as a frame for discussing what it means 'to be human'. Three themes were explored: how biblio/poetry therapy is an example of hospitality, especially in the way the arts offer meaning in a troubled world; questions relating to translation; and the importance of connection. The talk included references to models of biblio/poetry therapy suggested by Mazza (2017) and Alfrey et al. (2022). The Conclusion extends the idea of the 'symbolic' in biblio/poetry therapy.

Keywords: biblio/poetry therapy; expressive writing; poetry; poetry therapy; Rumi; therapeutic writing; translation

Introduction

This article is based on the keynote talk I gave on the morning of Saturday 5th October 2024 at the 1st European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference held at MagNet Közösségi Ház in Budapest. That Saturday was the second day of the conference. Old friendships had been consolidated, new ones made, and delegates had enjoyed generous hospitality at the conference dinner. The atmosphere in the auditorium was relaxed and friendly. So, this talk was given in a specific time, place and cultural milieu, and I have attempted to reflect those elements in this article.

My intention in devising the talk and its content was to invite a 'feeling response' in the audience. Rather than 'talk about' biblio/poetry therapy, I wanted to give members of the audience the experience of being in a poetry therapy group. This intention echoes the much-quoted line attributed to mythologist Joseph Campbell that people 'are not seeking the meaning of life as much as a sense of being alive'.

I submitted the Abstract of the talk some months in advance of October. In order to write the Abstract, I selected the poem which I would be using as a frame well in advance of writing the rest of the talk. There is an under-theorised transpersonal aspect to poetry therapy where synchronicities, hunches and intuitions are as important as more rational approaches (Field, 2020). Thinking ahead from January 2024 to a gathering in October, I had to imagine myself in Budapest, and the likely audience and atmosphere, whilst having no idea of how these would be in reality. As I imagined the forthcoming conference, the notion of hospitality rose to the surface of my

consciousness, among many other possible themes for a talk. In a world that is increasingly commercialised and transactional, one of my values has become what Robin Wall Kimmerer (2024) calls 'a gift economy.' The welcome afforded by a poem, or a poetry therapy group, is analogous to hospitality elsewhere in the world.

I had also been thinking a great deal about poetry in translation. I have been engaged in translation for many years and the process excites and interests me, especially its analogies with biblio/poetry therapy. I question what exactly we are reading when we read a poem in translation from another language (Bukia-Peters & Field, 2016). Even a so-called literal translation, is a different entity from the original. This concern has become more pressing to me as more poems in translation are reproduced without attribution on the internet. As the delegates in Budapest would be speakers of many languages, I chose a poem in translation.

In addition, I wanted to use an accessible poem with a clear metaphor and concrete imagery. Whilst the conference was to be conducted in English, there would be a wide variation in the audience's familiarity with the language. I therefore selected a translated poem that is immediately comprehensible and also has a rich hinterland of metaphorical potential. The most effective poems in biblio/poetry therapy are those which are 'richly ambiguous' (Chavis, 2011, 40).

Finally, none of us, at the conference, nor in our lives elsewhere, can ignore the tragedies of current world events. I wanted to acknowledge the all-pervasive sense of anxiety generated by world news, especially the horrors perpetrated in Gaza, the Middle East generally, Ukraine and other places of conflict, alongside concern about increasingly authoritarian governments in Europe and beyond.

My talk was 'in the moment' and I invited the audience to interact with each other and to reflect on what they had heard both privately and in writing. These directions are given in italics in what follows.

My keynote talk

Being human

Good morning everyone. Here's a slide showing a 'word cloud' of good morning in various languages. *Please turn to someone to whom you haven't yet spoken, and say 'good morning' in your own language or your own languages – and to someone else – and to someone else.*

What a joy to hear the cacophony of voices in the room. And yes, this is indeed a good (goed, iyi, bon, bueno, dobre, kali etc) morning. Let's reflect for a moment on why this morning, in this space, can be considered 'good.' I argue that it is because we are here, together, in person, in our shared humanity.

There are many ways in which we are different from each other. There are at least twenty different nationalities at this conference. We are of different genders, ages, social class, ethnicities, educational experiences, sexual orientations, religion or faith traditions. We are variously married, divorced, single, home owners or renters, parents or child-free. We may have large extended families, or few relatives. We may seek them out or avoid them. We may love animals and keep pets, enjoy gardening and being outside, or we may lead a mostly urban existence.

We may be employed, working freelance, unemployed, or retired. We may have had major illnesses, surgeries or treatments. We may have disabilities, visible or hidden. We are probably all suffering from the simple effects of getting older. We may be financially comfortable or struggling to make ends meet. All of us will have experienced losses including bereavements, disappointments, or loss of a sense of self. Most of us will have found at least a little joy in life. Some of us might lie awake at night burdened by secrets, regrets, or worries. Others may sleep soundly. All of us have a dream life that is ours alone, yet mysteriously connected to a larger consciousness.

This is being human. We bring that full humanity into the work of biblio/poetry therapy, as participants and as practitioners. The complex web of our different personal and demographic characteristics can seem difficult to disentangle. One visual representation, the so-called 'Rainbow Model' devised by Dahlgren and Whitehead in 1993 offers a way of conceptualising the impact of different elements on our wellbeing in the world.

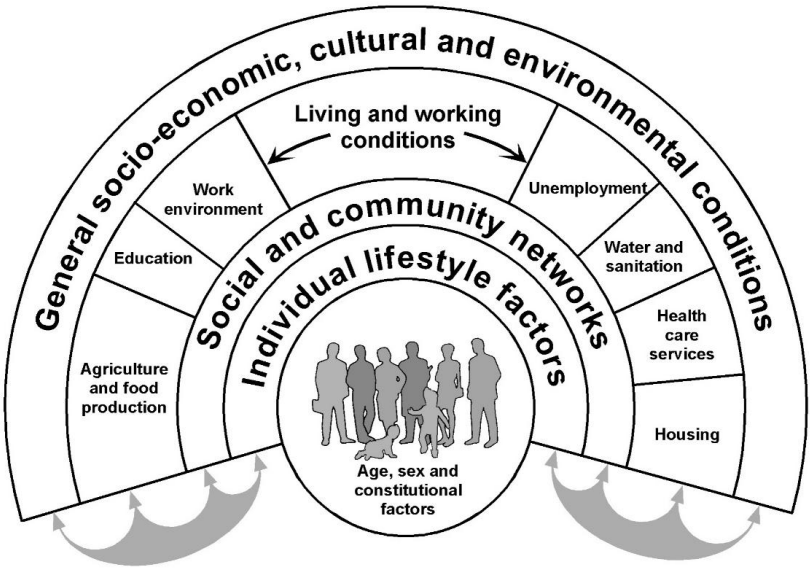

Figure 1. The Main Determinants of Health (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 1993)

It was first developed by Dahlgren and Whitehead (1993) in their work on health inequalities and shows how individual health is determined not just by our personal characteristics, but by where we fit into our communities and cultures.

At the centre of this diagram are people as individuals. That is us, you and me, with our constitutions, our personalities and our individual lifestyles. Rippling out from our individual selves are our human identities as social beings, in relationship to our families, communities and neighbourhoods. Then, come the conditions of our lives such as work, education and housing, our economic and social position. Finally, all of us are influenced by the wider culture of our countries, world affairs, the physical environment and the age we live in. All of us have different versions of this diagram, overlapping with those of others to a greater or lesser extent.

Dahlgren and Whitehead (2021) reflect on why this model has been so widely adopted and conclude that it is because it is holistic, relatively simple and intuitively correct. It also focuses on determinants of *health* rather than of disease (my italics). It offers 'interconnected layers of

influence' (Dahlgren & Whitehead, 2021) which in turn can suggest action to improve health outcomes. Thinking of our own lives, we may be aware of which of our own 'layers of influence' promote our health and wellbeing and where we might be lacking.

So, we are unique in our humanity but something brings us together here. All of us, I assume, believe that poetry, literature, reading and expressive writing are forces for good, that connect us at a human level, beyond demographic details. A poem is a way of framing the paradox that our common humanity exists alongside our human uniqueness.

The poem

So let's go to the poem I have chosen as the frame for this talk.

Everyone in the audience had a paper copy of "The Guest House" by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne (Barks et al., 1996, 109). The poem is widely reproduced on the internet.

I will read it first. As I read, think about these questions which I often use in biblio/poetry therapy sessions.

Pay attention to where in your body you feel the poem? Can you name those sensations? Are you different after the poem than from before?

I read aloud "The Guest House" (Barks et al., 1996, 109). Now let's read aloud all together, chorally.

We all read "The Guest House".

When I introduced the poem, I used the word 'frame', a metaphor. A poem can also be a window, a ladder, a friend, and many other things.

Take a minute to write down what poems can be for you. What are your metaphors for a poem? Your answers to that question will inform your way of working with biblio/poetry therapy.

There are many themes in "The Guest House". For today, I'll take just three and hope that they may act as doors and windows opening into your own ideas.

Hospitality

First, both a guest house and biblio/poetry therapy work with the idea of hospitality. That is certainly true of a long-running community group in my local library in Canterbury, Kent, where anyone can walk through the door.

The picture below shows a writing for wellbeing group themed on geology. Here you can see a variety of people absorbed in writing about earth processes. Some know something about geology and/or poetry, many don't. There are different ages and social backgrounds in the group. It is in a space that is wheelchair accessible in a public library. It is in many ways, hospitable, a guest house for exploration and interest.

Figure 2. A geology-themed writing for wellbeing group held in Canterbury Public Library at the Beaney in October 2023. Photo by Victoria Field.

Figures 3. and 4. below show participants in a poetry and film project called 'A Few Words About Me', aimed at people with a diagnosis of dementia. Not everyone was able to write independently. So, in order to make biblio/poetry therapy more hospitable, we worked collaboratively with volunteers 'scribing' poems and editing them in partnership with the poems' authors. In another group, Zest, also for people living with dementia, we worked with poems orally, and included other art forms such as singing and painting.

Figures 3. and 4. Participants in 'A Few Words About Me', a project based on poetry and film for people with a diagnosis of dementia, 2017-2018. Photos by Victoria Field

A poem can be hospitable like a guest house, and we can also organise our biblio/poetry therapy groups to be as hospitable as possible.

So far, so upbeat. Poetry therapy contributes to the common good, it's a good thing. But let's look again at the factors that impinge on our health and wellbeing in Dahlgren and Whitehead's (1993) Rainbow Model. I would like to draw attention to the outer arc of the rainbow, that is, the general conditions. We are mostly powerless to, or can only indirectly, influence the political and environmental circumstances of our times. In many countries of the world, there is unspeakable suffering through the violence of war and armed conflict. Even at a distance, these circumstances impinge on us individually causing private trauma and distress.

British Somali poet Warsan Shire (born 1988), ends her poem "What They Did Yesterday Afternoon" (Shire, 2020) as follows:

> later that night
> i held an atlas in my lap
> ran my fingers across the whole world
> and whispered
> where does it hurt?
>
> it answered
> everywhere
> everywhere
> everywhere.

Put your hand on your heart. Where does it hurt?

Suffering is not new. To that word 'everywhere', we can add the word 'always'. Always, always … In the Rumi poem we have just read, there is the image of a 'crowd of sorrows' who violently sweep our houses empty of its furniture. Rumi lived and wrote in the thirteenth century and the challenge to remain hospitable in the face of sorrow is perennial.

My late stepfather, who was in the Indian Army, was taken as a Prisoner of War when Singapore fell to the Japanese in 1942. He spent the rest of the war working on the Siam-Burma Railway, the so-called Death Railway, experiencing beatings, and near starvation. He would sometimes wake to the corpses of his friends, fellow soldiers, lying either side of him. Liberation came in late 1945 with the final defeat of the Japanese when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, unleashing more horror. No one wins a war. One of his friends and fellow POW was the artist Ronald Searle (1920–2011) who made drawings of their experience. Examples of these can be widely found online.

Like poems, like writing, visual art bears witness to experience. In the camp, Harry and his fellow prisoners performed plays, wrote revues, and decorated menu cards for their Christmas dinner of many courses. They ate rice, followed by rice, followed by rice. These documents and drawings are now part of the collection at the Imperial War Museum. Bearing witness and transforming experience into art or humour is part of being human.

My second example of remaining hospitable to all experience comes from the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966). During the time of Stalin's Great Purge, she queued daily to deliver food to her son, a political prisoner. This led to a sequence of poems called 'Requiem' on which she worked for three decades. The poems first appeared in Munich, without her knowledge, in 1963, and in the Soviet Union not until 1987 (Thomas, 2006, 246). The work includes the following "Instead of a Preface":

> In the fearful years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day, somebody "identified" me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, had never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): "Can you describe this?" And I answered "Yes, I can". And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face. April 1, 1957, Leningrad (Akhmatova, 2006, trans. Thomas, D., 183)

Whatever the horror, can we describe it? It will never be easy but using the model of biblio/poetry therapy, we can at least open up the possibility. We can read the poets of war, conflict and trauma, and in doing so, find a human response with our own writing.

What might we say to the woman with blue lips standing in the prison queue?

My step-dad Harry was always cheerful and had a zest for life. When I asked him about that, given his early experiences, he would reply, 'Because I'm here, darling, because I'm here'. This is the miracle of being human. Whatever we have been through, we are here. And, in terms of deep time, here not even for the blink of an eye. The task of this being human in our biblio/poetry therapy groups, is to look, really look, at that question of what it means 'to be here'.

What are we allowing into our personal guest house? And what do we keep out?

I would never say of Harry's experience, nor Anna Akhmatova's, nor that of anyone who has been through the depths of suffering, that a crowd of sorrows might be clearing a space for a new delight. Delight may or may not materialise. Nevertheless, one of the paradoxes of this being human, is the way sorrow and joy can coexist in the direst of circumstances.

Translation

Let's move to the second aspect of "The Guest House" I wish to talk about today: the fact that it is a translation.

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, or simply Rumi, was a thirteenth-century poet, writing in Persian. He was born in Balkh in present-day Afghanistan, and died in Konya, in present-day Turkey (Barks, 1996, xi). In translation, he is one of the best-selling poets in the United States (Gooch, 2017).

The translation we have read is by Coleman Barks. Barks (1996, 290–291) has written movingly of the many synchronicities that led to him working on Rumi. These included meeting a Sri Lankan saint who had previously appeared in a dream, and being nicknamed Cappadocia as a boy. He says he cannot explain these phenomena but nor can he deny them. Part of the success of Rumi's poetry in Coleman Barks' translation is that they are in the tradition of American free verse, not the dense, musical metre of the Persian originals. For me, this exemplifies the way a poem can proliferate through new translations and interpretations. Translation keeps a text alive, allowing it to shapeshift into new languages and cultures. Shakespeare or Chekhov are recreated afresh every time they are translated into languages other than English or Russian. It is important to remember, that whatever the memes say on social media, that the words we are reading are those of twentieth-century US poet, Coleman Barks, not Rumi himself. In her provocatively titled book, 'Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability', Emily Apter (2013) questions many of the assumptions underlying the revival of World Literature in institutional settings. She writes (Apter, 2013, 3) that she has 'been left uneasy in the face of the entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources' and invokes the idea of 'untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavours' (sic). I would argue that the Persian of several centuries ago is both translatable *and* untranslatable, and the result in English is a co-creation, and provisional and that this must always be acknowledged. Coleman Barks (1996, 291) himself, referring to Rumi, asserts that "a poet of such astonishing range and depth needs many translators and interpreters. Mystical poetry tries to reveal the apple orchard *within* the mist of language (Rumi's image). I hope these translations do not thicken that fog; I hope they burn it off!"

So what is the relevance of translation to biblio/poetry therapy? It can be argued that reading is always a kind of translation. Bibliotherapists work with the way a text is recreated anew by each reader, and by the same reader at different times. I am regularly surprised in my groups when participants offer a new response to poems with which I am familiar. We are back to the rich ambiguity of literary texts (Chavis, 2011, 40). To return to Coleman Barks' metaphor, responding to a poem and discussing these responses in a therapeutic group can be seen as analogous to revealing the apple orchards of our psyches within the mist of language.

Think about what kind of apple orchard is hidden by the mist of language in your own world. Take a second to close your eyes, visualise, smell and listen to it. Perhaps a poem will emerge from that mistiness. Make a note.

We heard yesterday from Juhani Ihanus about Nick Mazza's RES, Receptive, Expressive, Symbolic model (Mazza, 2017). Another, complementary, model was developed by Abigail Alfrey (Alfrey et al., 2022) after close analysis of interactions in poetry therapy groups in the UK in Canterbury and London. She identified the following kinds of activity as being intrinsic to the biblio/poetry therapeutic process, operating iteratively throughout the session.

- Engaging
- Feeling
- Exploring
- Connecting
- Transferring

For me, these modalities are at work in translation and in biblio/poetry therapy.

Reading poetry from other languages and cultures, and consciously 'Engaging, Feeling, Exploring, Connecting, and Transferring' adds depth and breadth to the experience of being human.

Poet Sarah Maguire (1957–2017) founded the Poetry Translation Centre as a way of democratizing translation and bringing poets from other languages into English to encourage a wider readership. In a lecture given in 2008 (Poetry Translation Centre) on Poetry and Conflict, she argues that translating poetry is the opposite of war. I would add that every biblio/poetry therapy group is a forum for enabling us to be human in the face of difference.

Connection

Biblio/poetry therapy, literature, and the arts in general are predicated on making connections. Whilst the medical tradition tends to atomise by isolating causes of disease and treating specific ailments or body parts, biblio/poetry therapy works to connect us into a more consciously whole person, connected to others and the world. In their survey of art, healing and public health, Stuckey and Nobel (2010, 261) assert that the 'Use of the arts in healing does not contradict the medical view in bringing emotional, somatic, artistic and spiritual dimensions to learning. Rather, it complements the biomedical view by focusing on not only sickness and symptoms but the holistic nature of the person.'

This being human is a guest house, and Rumi invites us to welcome and entertain all comers. We might consider ourselves to be a space or a guest house for making new connections. I am showing you an arresting image of a human form by British sculptor Antony Gormley (2012) called 'Transport' which, along with the artist's statement, can be accessed at https://artandchristianity.org/ecclesiart-listings/anthony-gormley-transport. The piece hangs in the medieval crypt of Canterbury Cathedral and is constructed of hand-made iron nails retrieved during the repair of a nineteenth century roof. Gormley's (2012) artist statement echoes Rumi's Guest House.

> The body is less a thing than a place. A location where things happen. Thought, feeling, memory and anticipation filter through it, sometimes sticking but mostly passing on like us in this great cathedral with its centuries of building, adaptation, extension and all the thoughts, feelings and prayers that people have had and transmitted here … We are all the temporary inhabitants of our body. It is our house, instrument and medium. Through it all come

> impressions of a wider world and all the other bodies in space, palpable, perceivable and imaginable.

We are 'temporary inhabitants' in many ways. Specifically, we've been welcomed as guests to this conference, our temporary house for two days, in this beautiful city, where many of us are staying in literal guest houses. I want to thank Dr Judit Béres and her team for this warm hospitality.

I now invite you to think of the homes, houses and institutions that we can now enter as guests and indeed, our own biblio/poetry therapy homes and whom we might invite in.

I particularly want to highlight Lapidus International (Lapidus International, 2024), which was established in the late 1990s and is going from strength to strength. Much of its hospitality is online so accessible to people all over the world including its biannual conference, taking place in September 2025. It's a guest house that I've always found comfortable and inclusive, so please do knock on the door. Mel Perry, co-chair is here at this conference.

So as we leave Rumi for the rest of the conference, let's reflect on who or what we wish to welcome into our personal guest houses.

Conclusion

Mazza (2017) has long proposed a Reflective-Expressive-Symbolic model of poetry therapy. These descriptive terms refer to reading the work of others (reflective), writing in response (expressive), and then doing something with the emergent writing (symbolic).

In my own thinking about the mechanisms of poetry therapy, I extend the notion of 'symbolic' to include the context of any piece of work or practice. Context, with its roots in the Latin, *texere* to weave, is a holistic notion in which no one strand can act independently.

At a talk at a conference, or in a group poetry therapy session, the room, the nomenclature, the style of address, the arrangement of chairs, the technology, the preceding sessions, the weather, all combine with the particular mood, demographic and experiences of the audience to create a holistic experience. Everything, every single detail is 'symbolic' of something, and this 'something' will vary between individuals.

Here in Budapest, the Danube, the castle, the cathedrals and synagogues, the many bridges, the mansions along this street, our hotels, the wine, the opera house, the wars and historical upheavals, the joy of human contact after Covid, the bullet holes, all feed into our experiences of biblio/poetry therapy at this rich, immersive conference.

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