

Poetry of the Stress Reduction Program

Compiled by:

William McCracken, LCSW, ICADC, NBCCH

Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you have ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

The photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

Derek Walcott, Collected Poems 1948 – 1984, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux,
1986.

Enough

Enough. These few words are enough.
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.

This opening to the life
we have refused
again and again
until now.

Until now.

David Whyte Where Many Rivers Meet

The Guest-House

This being human is a guest-house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you
Out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.

By Rumi, 13th century Persian Sufi poet

And acceptance is the answer to *all* my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation – some fact of my life – unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.

From "The Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous (page 417)

I am not I

I am not I.

I am this one

walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit,
and whom at other times I forget;
the one who remains silent when I talk,
the one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
the one who takes a walk where I am not,
the one who will remain standing when I die.

Juan Ramon Jimenez

Translated by Robert Bly

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
Are moving across the landscapes,
Over the prairies and the deep trees,
The mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
Are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
The world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
Over and over announcing your place
In the family of things.

Mary Oliver, Dream Work, Grove Atlantic Inc., 1986 & New and Selected Poems,
Beacon Press, 1992.

Lingering in Happiness

After rain after many days without rain,
it stays cool, private and cleansed, under the trees,
and the dampness there, married now to gravity,
falls branch to branch, leaf to leaf, down to the ground
where it will disappear – but not, of course, vanish
except to our eyes. The roots of the oaks will have their share,
and the white threads of the grasses, and the cushion of moss;
a few drops, round as pearls, will enter the mole's tunnel;
and soon so many small stones, buried for a thousand years,
will feel themselves being touched.

Mary Oliver

Oh Friend

Oh friend,

Had I known you are in the breeze
I would have walked more.

Had I known you are in the stillness of now
I would have sat more.

Had I known you are everywhere in everything
I would have lived more.

Had I known you are eternal
I would have died more.

by Amir Hossein Imani

We can try to control the uncontrollable by looking for security and predictability, always hoping to be comfortable and safe. But the truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty and fear. So the central question is not how we avoid uncertainty and fear but how we relate to discomfort.

How do we practice with difficulty, with our emotions, with the unpredictable encounters of an ordinary day? When we doubt that we're up to it, we can ask ourselves this question: "Do I prefer to grow up and relate to life directly, or do I choose to live and die in fear?"

Pema Chodron from The Places That Scare You

Call Me by My True Names

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time
to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea
pirate, and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and
loving.

I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my
hands, and I am the man who has to pay his "debt of blood" to, my
people, dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all
walks of life. My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,

So I can see that my joy and pain are one. Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up
and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hahn, Vietnamese Zen monk, Nobel Prize nominee

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver, Dream Work, Grove Atlantic Inc., 1986 & New and Selected Poems,
Beacon Press, 1992.

Silence

When I speak, it is a demand that others remain silent so I alone may be heard. When I am silent, I hear my true self and reach my soul. When I am silent, I hear with a caring heart. Silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it. If our life is poured out in useless words, we will never hear anything because we have said everything before we had anything to say.

Thomas Merton (from *Thoughts in Solitude*)

The Rabbi's Gift

A famous monastery had fallen on hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks, but now it was all but deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer, and only a handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters serving God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there, from time to time, to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: 'The rabbi walks in the woods.' And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and open his heavy heart to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, as if he had been awaiting the abbot's arrival, his arms outstretched in welcome.

They embraced like long-lost brothers. The two entered the hut where, in the middle of the room, stood a wooden table with the scriptures open on it.

They sat for a moment in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to weep. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their shared pain and tears. But soon the tears ceased and all was quiet.

The rabbi lifted his head. 'You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts,' he said. 'You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can repeat it only once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again.'

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, 'The Messiah is among you.'

For a while, all was silent. The rabbi said, 'Now you must go.' The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back. The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them he had received a teaching from the 'rabbi who walks in the woods' and that

the teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at the group of assembled brothers and said, 'The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah.'

The monks were startled by this saying. 'What could it mean?' they asked themselves. 'Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Brother Matthew or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah? What could all this mean?' They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching, but no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a new and very special reverence. A gentle, warm-hearted, concern began to grow among them which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They began to live with each other as people who had finally found the special something they were looking for, yet they prayed the Scriptures together as people who were always looking for something else.

When visitors came to the monastery they found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Word spread, and before long people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and to experience the loving reverence in which they held each other. Soon, other young men were asking, once again, to become a part of the community, and the community grew and prospered.

Author Unknown

Once again the children and I are fighting a battle using spring grasses.
Now advancing, now retreating, each time with more refinement.
Twilight – everyone has returned home;
The bright, round moon helps me to endure the loneliness.

The Autumn nights have lengthened
And the cold has begun to penetrate my mattress.
My sixtieth year is near,
Yet there is no one to take pity on this weak old body.
The rain has finally sopped; now just a thin stream trickles from the roof.
All night the incessant cry of insects:
Wide awake, unable to sleep,
Leaning on my pillow, I watch the pure bright rays of
sunrise.

O, that my priest's robe were wide enough to gather
up all the suffering people
In this floating world.

Poetry by Ryokan, a wandering Zen monk from the 18th century.

Hakusai Says

Hokusai says look carefully.
He says pay attention, notice.
He says keep looking, stay curious.
He says there is no end to seeing

He says look forward to getting old.
He says keep changing,
you just get more who you really are.
He says get stuck, accept it, repeat
yourself as long as it is interesting.

He says keep doing what you love.

He says keep praying.

He says every one of us is a child,
every one of us is ancient
every one of us has a body.
He says every one of us is frightened.
He says every one of us has to find
a way to live with fear.

He says everything is alive --
shells, buildings, people, fish,
mountains, trees, wood is alive.
Water is alive.

Everything has its own life.

Everything lives inside us.

He says live with the world inside you.

He says it doesn't matter if you draw,
or write books. It doesn't matter
if you saw wood, or catch fish.
It doesn't matter if you sit at home
and stare at the ants on your veranda
or the shadows of the trees
and grasses in your garden.
It matters that you care.

It matters that you feel.

It matters that you notice.

It matters that life lives through you.

Contentment is life living through you.
Joy is life living through you.
Satisfaction and strength
is life living through you.

He says don't be afraid.
Don't be afraid.

Love, feel, let life take you by the hand.

Let life live through you.

- Roger Keyes

Kindness

~ Naomi Shihab Nye ~

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE CHAPTERS

One. I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost...I am hopeless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Two. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I'm in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Three. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Four. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Five. I walk down another street.

Portia Nelson

Dropping the Banana

All I have to do
Is let go –
Like a falcon
Releasing a rabbit;
Like an athlete
Relinquishing a golden dream;
Like a hungry child
Tossing a ripe mango
Into the sun.

All I have to do
I dread.
What happens
If I can't let go?
What happens if I can?

Surely it is safer
Not to experiment –
For – see here –
I am not alone!
I recognize you, fellow monkeys,
Clinging to the thresholds
Of normality.
Rattling imprisoned limbs,
You dare me to desert.

All I have to do,
I do.
Finger by finger
I loosen my grip.
I let go.

There was no banana.
Only a fist
Contorted by fear,
Choking the innocent air.

Anne Merewood

Lovingkindness Meditation

Finding your breath and dwelling with it in the present moment, you may find insight by stating softly, in your mind's voice, these four intentions. Take time to stay with each intention for each of the seven people to whom they can be directed, lingering and noticing what feelings and thoughts may be aroused.

May _____ enjoy happiness and the root of happiness.

May _____ be free from suffering and the root of suffering.

May _____ experience happiness and joy.

May _____ live in great equanimity free from hatred, ignorance, and greed.

For Yourself.

For a dearly loved one.

For a friend.

For someone neutral to you.

For someone you find difficult.

For all of the five beings above.

For ALL beings.

“I am grateful for what I am & have. My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite – only a sense of existence. Well anything for variety. I am ready to try this for the next 1000 years, & exhaust it. How sweet to think of! My extremities well charred, and my intellectual part too, so that there is no danger of worm or rot for a long while. My breath is sweet to me. O how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches. No run on my bank can drain it – for my wealth is not possession but enjoyment.”

- Henry David Thoreau; “Letters to a Spiritual Seeker”

“The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home. From the earliest times there have always been some who perished along the road. Still I have always been drawn by windblown clouds into dreams of a lifetime of wandering. Coming home from a year's walking tour of the coast last autumn, I swept the cobwebs from my hut on the banks of the Sumida just in time for New Year, but by the time spring mists began to rise from the fields, I longed to cross the Shirakawa Barrier into the Northern Interior. Drawn by the wanderer-spirit Dosojin, I couldn't concentrate on things. Mending my cotton pants, sewing a new strap on my bamboo hat, I daydreamed. Rubbing moxa into my legs to strengthen them, I dreamed a bright moon rising over Matsushima. So I placed my house in another's hands and moved to my patron Mr. Sampu's summer house in preparation for my journey. And I left a verse by my door:

Even this grass hut
May be transformed
Into a doll's house."

Matsuo Basho; 17th Century Japanese poet; from "Narrow Road to the Interior"

"But when I said that nothing had been done I erred in one important matter. We had definitely committed ourselves and were halfway out of our ruts. We had put down our passage money – booked a sailing to Bombay. This may sound too simple, but is great in consequence. Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way. I learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets:

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!"

W. H. Murray in The Scottish Himalaya Expedition, 1951.

Carefully watch your THOUGHTS,
for they become your WORDS.
Manage and watch your WORDS,
for they will become your ACTIONS.
Consider and judge your ACTIONS,
for they have become your HABITS.
Acknowledge and watch your HABITS,
for they shall become your VALUES.
Understand and embrace your VALUES,
for they become YOUR DESTINY.

Mohandis (Mahatma) Gandhi

The Hindi word "Mahatma" means "Great Soul."

Anyway

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, People may Accuse you of Selfish, Ulterior motives;

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;

Be Honest and Frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have,

and it may never be enough;

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis,

it is between you and God;

It was never between you and them anyway.

- Mother Theresa of Calcutta

Snow Geese

Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!
What a task
to ask
of anything, or anyone,
yet it is ours,
and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.
One fall day I heard
above me, and above the sting of the wind, a sound
I did not know, and my look shot upward; it was
a flock of snow geese, winging it
faster than the ones we usually see,
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun
so they were, in part at least, golden. I
held my breath
as we do
sometimes
to stop time
when something wonderful
has touched us
as with a match,
which is lit, and bright,
but does not hurt
in the common way,
but delightfully,
as if delight
were the most serious thing
you ever felt.
The geese
flew on,
I have never seen them again.
Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.
Maybe I won't.
It doesn't matter.
What matters
is that, when I saw them,
I saw them
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.
~ Mary Oliver ~
(*Why I Wake Early*)

“Every moment and every event of every man’s life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.” (Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, page 14)

“What is serious to men is often very trivial in the sight of God. What in God might appear to us as “play” is perhaps what He Himself takes most seriously. At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash - at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the “newness,” the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it eats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.

Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.” (Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, pages 296 - 297)

We rush through our days in such stress and intensity, as if we were here to stay and the serious project of the world depended on us. We worry and grow anxious; we magnify trivia until they become important enough to control our lives. Yet all the time we have forgotten that we are but temporary sojourners on the surface of a strange planet spinning slowly in the infinite night of the cosmos.

~~ John O'Donohue (*Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*)

A Final Word...

Remember, in life all kinds of things will happen. Some you will label “good,” some you will label “bad.” But these are your labels, and to another these same events may be seen quite differently.

Nothing is permanent. When something that you decide is “bad” has happened, know that it will pass. And when something “good” is going on, don’t become too attached to it! It too will pass. Even your innermost thoughts and feelings will pass in time, along with your self and all that you love and cherish.

And never forget: “It’s not about you, anyway.” You get to decide what your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are about. It’s not up to you to decide the meanings of others’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which are about them, not you. Get to know each thinker, feeler, and doer, starting with your self. And then you can respond to life’s events with skill.

Or Two...

Accept life as it is; like Rumi, embrace each and every occurrence! Bring wisdom and compassion to all of life’s moments. And don’t forget to practice every day!

James Walsh

In this life we need only be true to our true nature, who we truly are as human beings. When we can put to rest the mind that believes that we are unworthy and that life is unsatisfactory, then we can see that each moment contains our entire life and the life of the entire universe. When we wake up to the reality that we are not separate from each other and not separate from all that is, then our direction of our lives is very clear. Our direction is to continuously live mindfully moment to moment so that we can show up for our life and be present for all of those that share in this life. With this we can bring healing not only to ourselves but to the entire universe. It is no small matter.

William McCracken