



Poetry Therapy: A Doorway to Understanding and Alleviating Loneliness

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Abstract

After presenting several theories and dimensions of loneliness, this article sets forth specific ways in which the practice of poetry therapy, which involves facilitating expressive writing and sharing of personal responses to select poems, can not only offer relief to those experiencing loneliness, but also foster empathy toward individuals suffering from a sense of isolation. Addressed to professionals engaged in helping individuals in clinical and non-clinical settings, this article draws from the author's experiences as a certified poetry therapist and psychologist working in clinical and community-based educational settings and also from the author's workshop presented at the *2019 Creative Bridges Conference*. Poetic materials, along with creative writing and group discussion prompts, are referenced as apt choices for addressing loneliness arising from life transitions involving loss, lack of belonging due to social discrimination, communication breakdown, and chronic dysfunctional patterns. A final section of this article briefly addresses the way in which poetic expression can enhance appreciation for solitude as a healthful state differing from loneliness.

Keywords: poetry therapy, loneliness alleviation, loneliness theories, situational vs. chronic loneliness, life-enhancing solitude

Introduction: Poetry Therapy in the Service of Loneliness

Loneliness is a multifaceted and pervasive phenomenon that until recent years has not been a widespread topic of conversation or professional inquiry. I was first inspired to look more closely at this subject when I read a comprehensive report titled *A Connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness*, published in the UK (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DDCMS], 2018), which identified various causes and effects of loneliness and set forth plans to address this personal and social issue across all levels of British society. After reading this report and subsequently viewing the results of Cigna's 2018 national survey exploring the impact of loneliness in the US as well as the Kaiser Family Foundation's international study of loneliness in the US, UK, and Japan (DiJulio et al., 2018), I was motivated to learn more about various theories pertaining to loneliness and to reflect upon what I, as a certified poetry therapist, mentor/supervisor, counseling psychologist, and educator could contribute to the understanding and alleviation of loneliness.

This article is designed to introduce poetry therapy techniques and materials to a variety of professionals who wish to grow in their understanding of the loneliness experience and who are engaged in helping individuals experiencing loneliness due to a wide range of factors. These professionals include both those with licenses in mental health fields who work in clinical settings and those—wellness coaches, writing for wellness specialists, spiritual directors, and educators—who work with nonclinical populations in community settings where the goal is enhanced personal development. The dual level of professionals addressed in this article corresponds to the poetry therapist and the applied poetry facilitator levels of certification specified on the website of the International Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy (<https://ifbpt.org/>).

The practice of poetry therapy involves creating expressive writing prompts and selecting poems and at times other literary forms, based on the features and needs of the population served. The second salient feature of poetry therapy practice involves skilled facilitation of personalized reactions to the chosen readings and the written pieces that are generated. While practitioners in this field may work one-on-one with individuals, a group setting is particularly therapeutic, especially for those seeking relief from loneliness. A supportive, nonjudgmental group provides a community in which participants can share their reactions to the readings and voice

what they have written or discovered through their writing. Sharing similar views fosters a sense of belonging while expressing dissimilar responses creates opportunities for new learnings and a sense of give and take.

Over the years, I and my colleagues in this field have repeatedly experienced and witnessed the ways in which images appealing to the senses, metaphorical language, symbols, compelling narrative, and the striking juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary combine to evoke spontaneous, heartfelt responses that foster growth and healing. We have seen how a well-chosen poem is likely to resonate with individuals who identify with its speaker whose moods, feelings, or life situation resemble their own in some obvious or subtle way. This identification process helps alleviate the sense of being alone with what one may view as unusual or peculiar feelings and thoughts. We have also observed how immediate reactions to short lyric poems, when reflected and elaborated upon, lead to new insights regarding oneself and one's relationships.

Three books that are required reading for trainees in the poetry therapy field, one by Arleen Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry, the second by Nicholas Mazza, and the third by Geri Giebel Chavis. All provide information on the criteria to be used in determining which poems are likely to be the most therapeutic for the people being served. It is a major ethical responsibility to select poems that are honest yet leave some room for hope and to also recognize and be ready to skillfully deal with the fact that any poem chosen may elicit unexpected reactions. The same caution is true for the various writing invitations that poetry therapists and applied poetry facilitators introduce into their sessions.

Theories of Loneliness

Clark Moustakas's classic book titled *Loneliness* (1961) focuses chiefly on loneliness as a human experience that fosters creativity, depth, and wisdom; however, he does differentiate between a healthy and a pathological form of loneliness. He refers to 'existential loneliness' as an inevitable feature of 'human experience, in contrast to the loneliness of self-alienation and self-rejection which is not loneliness at all but a vague and disturbing anxiety' (p. 24). According to Moustakas, existential loneliness is an enormously positive vehicle to wholeness and wellbeing. When individuals courageously accept their own 'essential loneliness openly and honestly' (p. 34), they can 'experience a fundamental continuity

with nature' (p. 49), gain a profound knowledge of their own identity and relate 'significantly and openly with others and with the universe' (p. 50).

Unlike the self-actualized individual who can gain from their solitary human state, the 'person suffering from loneliness anxiety', in Moustakas's view, has 'feelings of inferiority' (p. 30), is hurt by 'the slightest criticism' (p. 30), and not only focuses on gaining 'praise and approval' (p. 31) from others, but also 'employs devices and strategies which constantly alienate him from others' (p. 31). Experiencing an 'inner feeling of separation, anxiety, and despair', the person suffering from loneliness anxiety lacks the resilience or inner resources 'to attach himself to new persons and find value in new experiences' (p. 31).

Tony Lake's *Loneliness* (1983) focuses on this phenomenon as 'an illness that attacks the ability of people to communicate and to take part in mutual behaviours' (p. 29) and involves both 'circumstances' and 'personality' as contributing factors (p. 6). Like Moustakas, Lake indicates that this illness is characterized by low self-esteem and self-defeating behaviors that keep others at bay. According to Lake, individuals suffering from it 'find themselves expecting to be rejected' and 'save others the trouble' by 'behav[ing] in such a way' that they 'are bound to . . . lose a potential friend' (p. 4). Lake's suggested cure for this dysfunctional form of loneliness involves 'recogniz[ing]' the 'need to change inside as well as outside'; 'end[ing] self-rejection by getting to understand it and replacing the rejection with acceptance'; and 'relearn[ing] how to communicate, how to give and to receive mutual rewards' (p. 5).

In his study of loneliness, Charles Burke (2004) focuses on how we as humans have a 'deep-seated need for relationship while maintaining our individuality' (p. 8). Like Moustakas, Burke asserts how essential it is for us 'to learn the positive values of loneliness' (p. 8). He points out that '[o]ur strength as individuals can often be measured by how we respond to being alone', and if we find it very challenging to be alone, we may 'fear that inner self we have so skillfully silenced over the years' (p. 48). He also defines loneliness as 'a paradoxical thing that can either force us to withdraw from those around us and turn in upon ourselves, or it can be the stimulus for re-evaluation and greater sharing' (p. 95). Burke extends the range of his study, particularly in a chapter titled 'Lonely and Misunderstood', in which he notes that 'The loneliness that haunts homeless derelicts is beyond the imagination of most of us' (p. 68). Burke essentially functions as a poetry/bibliotherapist by inserting Alan Sillitoe's 'Uncle Earnest' into his book (pp. 72–89) and describing it as a story that 'can bring out a bit more

understanding and compassion in us toward the lonely streetwalkers of our impersonal cities' (p. 68).

The UK strategy report (DDCMS, 2018) mentioned above presents an assortment of 'life events that can make us more likely to feel lonely' (p. 8). These include suffering trauma, such as being bullied, experiencing discrimination, living in an abusive environment, becoming a victim of crime, or being a refugee awaiting asylum. The list also encompasses various challenging life transitions, such as job and location changes, children leaving home, teenage pressures, leaving care, becoming a caregiver, retirement, and moving into care facilities. Loneliness triggers include overt experiences of loss, such as divorce or relationship breakdown, death of a loved one, being fired from a job, entering a period of poor health, or becoming disabled.

The findings of the Cigna study (2018), based on a survey of more than 20,000 adults ages 18 and older, correspond to my own discoveries as a clinician with clients suffering from loneliness. These findings highlight loneliness as a communication breakdown issue—a perceived lack of being understood or a paucity of meaningful conversations or interactions with others.

Creative Bridges Conference Workshop **on Poetry Therapy and Loneliness**

The opportunity to link my poetry therapy background to the experience of loneliness came when I prepared and presented a workshop for participants of the *Creative Bridges Conference*, which took place in July, 2019 and was co-sponsored by Lapidus International and the Metanoia Institute. In this workshop, I addressed various factors related to loneliness and focused in my examples primarily on this phenomenon as a temporary state of being due to a significant loss or as an ongoing experience arising from external factors such as being a member of a minority ethnic, racial, or gender identity group. The primary goal of this workshop was to expand awareness of how the two major features of poetry therapy—facilitated, personalized discussion of selected poems and the sharing of spontaneous creative written pieces—function to alleviate loneliness and increase empathy toward those suffering from a demoralizing sense of isolation.

At the beginning of this workshop, I invited each participant to generate a mind map or word tree centered on the term *loneliness*. I encouraged everyone to jot down whatever comes to mind when they hear this word. This warmup not only readied us to focus on the topic but also helped to bring group members together through a shared task. I then asked participants to reflect on what human situations typically cause loneliness and added ones I thought were important, such as moving to a new city, getting divorced, being widowed, experiencing relationship dysfunction, being locked into feelings of shame, living as an immigrant with illegal status, caretaking an ill family member on your own, or feeling different from others because of a disability, major illness, racial identity, religious background, or sexual orientation.

To convey how a sense of community that alleviates loneliness can be fostered by poetry therapy, I next provided a getting acquainted opportunity. After introducing Imelda Maguire's poem 'Origins' (2004, p. 11) as a model, I invited group members to write their own 'Origins' poem, using the following template based on this poem's structure:

Your Own 'Origins' Poem:

I come from a . . . place

I come from a . . . city

From a father who . . .

From a mother who . . .

I come from someplace

Between . . .

And . . .

Somewhere between . . .

And . . .

I come from times that . . .

Because the group was large, I asked each person to share what they had generated with one other individual seated at the same table. If the group had consisted of fewer than ten participants, I would have invited sharing within the group as a whole.

During the next segment of the workshop, I introduced eleven poems, each of which addresses a specific life situation that often causes or intensifies feelings of loneliness. I facilitated a full group discussion of one

of these poems, during which I encouraged an interchange of heartfelt, personalized responses. I then referred to features of the other poems that help to make them powerful catalysts for therapeutic discussions. Each poem was accompanied by a sampling of facilitating questions designed to foster participants' connection with the poem's content or to encourage elaboration of initial responses that would deepen awareness and build upon useful discoveries. I also included some questions designed to encourage group interaction by juxtaposing the similar or differing responses of participants. While most of my questions were meant for individuals seeking relief from loneliness, some questions were geared more specifically to the goal of enhancing empathy towards those struggling with loneliness.

Three poems in the first part of the packet captured feelings of hollowness resulting from the loss of a key relationship: Margaret Hoskins's 'Empty Nest Syndrome' (n. d.) about a mother restless now 'in the spaces/emptied of life'; Ann Wilson's 'Unresolved' (2002, p. 90) about a woman grappling with divorce who drives 'past/ lighted windows/ of other people's houses,/ remembering/ what it was like/ to belong'; and Susan MacDonald's 'Head of Household' (1977, p. 36) depicting 'an old man/ adrift in widowhood/ with a small appetite/ and too many rooms'.

The next set of three poems involved serious medical situations that are often met with silence and lack of understanding from those who have not lived through the same experience. The first of these, Pam Wynn's 'Miscarriage' (2004, pp. 92–93), presented, in a powerfully understated manner, the loss of an unborn child and all the dreams associated with this un-lived life. It depicted a couple entering their empty house without their baby, a house filled with objects that signify what they have lost. In the throes of profound grief, the couple never speak, but we hear words uttered by others that fail to even touch upon the loss involved. While the doctor says, 'one in five ends like this,' the message from friends is: 'You're young. There will be others.' In ironic contrast to these remarks is the final image of the bereaved mother 'plac[ing] the white/ Crocheted blanket, the yellow/ Booties, the tiny knitted sweater/ In a clear plastic bag'.

The second poem in this set, Anita Skeen's 'The Woman Whose Body is Not Her Own' (1989, pp. 115–116) conveyed the main character's inner experience of sorrow over her mastectomy and the resentment and disconnection she feels in relation to the well-wishers who utter glib clichés of reassurance. The last of the three poems, Perie Longo's 'Chores' (2001, p. 75), captured the lonely life of woman caretaking her fatally ill

spouse on a full-time basis. The fatigued and grieving speaker, overwhelmed with her enormous responsibility, asks herself this poignant question, 'How can I hold our lives alone like this?'.

The next grouping of four poems focused on individuals who suffer a profound sense of social isolation. The first poem in this set, Nazand Begikhani's 'Exile' (2006/2008, p. 81), vividly encapsulated the immigrant experience with its attendant loss of home, culture, and identity. After 'a solitary voyage' the displaced person arrives in a place 'where the voices [have] a sharp music/ and colour a different meaning'; experiences a season described as silent and blue; and grieves for 'the self that was left behind/ on a fresh silvery hill'.

The following questions for facilitators provide an example of the discussion prompts that were included for each poem in the workshop packet. The first five questions were designed to encourage immigrants' sharing and exploration of their responses to 'Exile':

1. What parts of this poem reflect your personal experience in some way?
2. What feelings emerge for you in relation to this poem?
3. What has your journey from one homeland to another been like?
4. This poem's speaker repeatedly refers to one's sense of self. What is your reaction to the speaker's mention of a 'false self' or 'real one'? Or a 'self that was left behind'? Or a self that 'no longer belongs to me/ but always breathes inside me'?
5. What do you think the speaker of this poem means when he says in the final lines: 'I was in search of a magic mirror/ That could reflect my whole being'?

For helpers who have little familiarity with the immigrant experience, the next two questions were designed to foster empathy toward immigrants and increase awareness of the profound dislocation and lack of belonging that immigrants face:

6. What words or images in this poem help you better understand the immigrant's experience?
7. In what ways does this poem capture features of your own relocations to new neighborhoods, regions, or countries?

Appropriate for either immigrants or their helpers, this last question can help stimulate sharing of ways to alleviate the kind of loneliness experience conveyed in 'Exile':

8. What do you feel drawn to say to this poem's speaker that might offer some comfort?

The three other poems in this section focused on individuals facing the specter of social stigma. The opening two stanzas of Frank Bidart's 'Queer' (1973) captured the isolating experience of being gay, living a lie, and fearing the familial and societal consequences of coming out. Audre Lorde's 'Hanging Fire' (1997, pp. 96–97) reflected an adolescent's angst over being misunderstood, feeling like a misfit, and coping on her own with a wide range of fears. She speaks of living with skin that has 'betrayed' her and a room that feels 'too small'. Her reference to her skin can be read as either dismay over hormonal changes or over incidents of racial prejudice. The feeling of being alone amidst a sea of troubles is amplified by this poem's thrice-repeated refrain, 'momma's in the bedroom/ with the door closed'.

Cheryl Marie Wade's 'Listen' (1991, p. 179) captured the profoundly isolating silence that covers inner pain, rage, and shame surrounding sexual abuse. Referring to a girl's 'last day of innocence' and the 'father's whisper of love', the poem's speaker tells us that this young person 'learned to hold/ the breath and thunder of syllables/ in her throat'. However, despite her enforced silence, we are left with the assumption that she awaits the day when someone will finally 'listen to the storm in [her] throat'. While this poem is appropriate for fostering empathy within therapists working with incest survivors, I recommend that it be used only in clinical settings with survivors who are ready and able to directly address this past trauma in their life.

The two concluding poems presented in the *Creative Bridges* workshop illustrated ways to help individuals address their loneliness. The first of these, Judith Viorst's 'All Alone Inside My Very Own Skin' (2016, p. 4), is a child's rhyming poem, yet it invites individuals of all ages, to generate specific ideas on how to reach out to others while also better understanding what may be keeping them from doing so. Here are the facilitating questions that accompanied this poem:

1. How do you reach out to someone when you are feeling lonely?
2. What might, at times, prevent you from inviting someone to keep you company?

3. How would you like to reach out to others when you feel lonely?

The final poem, Miroslav Holub's 'Door' (1967/2015, pp. 132–133), with its theme of openness to new experiences, was introduced in conjunction with an energetic activity designed foster camaraderie. Small groups of three to five individuals cooperated to discover ways to enact or physicalize the poem's images and theme. Each small group was then invited to perform their enactment for the rest of us, while one person from that group slowly read the poem aloud.

For the workshop's closing activity, we created a collaborative list poem, using a sentence completion prompt that incorporates Holub's central door image. All participants were invited to contribute a word or phrase to follow the sentence stem, *Today, I open my door to . . .* I chose this prompt because it conveys an implicit invitation to cultivate new behaviors and relationships that can alleviate loneliness. As participants contributed their words, I performed the role of scribe, and when we agreed that our poetic creation was finished, I read it aloud and promised to send everyone this remembrance of our cooperative effort.

Poetic Interventions in the Clinical Treatment of Loneliness

As a follow-up to the *Creative Bridges* workshop, I expanded my exploration to include poetic interventions for the clinical treatment of loneliness as a chronic mental health issue, described by Moustaskas (1961, pp. 30–31) as 'loneliness anxiety' and by Lake (1983, pp. 4, 29) as an 'illness' characterized by damaged self-esteem and self-defeating actions. When I have counselled clients whose longstanding cognitive and behavioral patterns have diminished their ability to sustain trusting and satisfying relationships, I have introduced the following five poems: Linda Pastan's 'Marks', Derek Walcott's 'Love After Love', Susan Coolidge's 'New Every Morning', Clarissa Scott Delany's 'The Mask', and Natasha Josefowitz's 'Not Halloween'. I also include in this list Paul Simon's lyrics to the famous song 'I Am a Rock'.

As its title suggests, Pastan's 'Marks' (1978/1982, p. 69) uses a grading metaphor, as its speaker recounts how her family members issue various grades for her activities as mother and wife. After releasing her exasperation over being constantly judged, she ends with a surprising and freeing line, 'Wait 'til I tell them I am dropping out'. While this poem normalizes the universal experience of being graded by others, it also

functions as a vehicle to a cathartic and fruitful discussion for individuals whose extreme sensitivity to others' criticisms makes them defensive, fearful, and perhaps overly judgmental in their relationships. During a discussion of 'Marks', it is also particularly useful to explore how one might drop out of 'graded' situations and how this newfound freedom can generate healthier ways to interact with others.

Walcott's 'Love After Love' (1976/1986, p. 328) extends an invitation to experience deep caring and even reverence for one's self, and I can still recall how it powerfully affected a client who had consistently discounted her own needs and had sought therapy to better understand her failure to sustain meaningful love relationships. The lines that evoked an immediate visceral response from this client and made her acutely aware of how much she had neglected herself were: 'You will love again the stranger who was your self./ . . . the stranger who has loved you/ all your life, whom you ignored/ for another'.

The speaker of Coolidge's 'New Every Morning' (2015, p. 145) gently invites herself to 'take heart' and begin anew, and what makes this seven-line poem relevant to individuals whose fears and past behaviors have kept them isolated is the encouragement to move forward 'in spite of old sorrows/And older sinning' and the 'troubles' that are so readily 'forecasted'. With its straightforward language, this poem acts as a catalyst for exploring entrenched negative messages that diminish self-esteem and create emotional barriers against connecting with others.

Delany's 'The Mask' (1926) tells the story of a person who hides 'the secret life within her soul' behind a 'cool and detached' demeanor and masks her 'tears and sighs' by appearing to 'look upon the world/ With cold ironic eyes'. This powerful poem is useful for beginning a therapeutic discussion of the way in which covering up our anguish in order to protect ourselves can keep others at a distance, thus leaving us feeling very much alone. People with a broad range of backgrounds are likely to identify with this poem if their unapproachable behavior is exacerbating their isolation. However, when this poem is read with the knowledge that its author is African American, the mask of the main character is likely to be viewed as a survival strategy necessitated by external dangers in settings where systemic racism abounds.

Akin to 'The Mask,' Josefowitz's 'Not Halloween' (1992, p. 71) also employs a mask image while adding a shell image to explore the ways in which we all hide and protect our 'hopes, fears, and hang-ups' as well as

our 'prides and prejudices, irrationalities and cry buttons'. By universalizing the experience of creating roadblocks that separate us from others, 'Not Halloween' encourages non-defensive responses and more honest elaboration upon chronic dysfunctional behaviors that perpetuate loneliness and unsatisfying relationships. This poem's final stanza also prompts discussion of what can be done to establish more meaningful connections with others: 'So I will take off my mask/ if you come out of your shell./ The question is / Who goes first?'

Simon's evocative song 'I Am a Rock' (1965) captures the life of a lonely person who has built up strong 'walls' and even 'a fortress' against being hurt by relationships and any form of human touch. Even though Simon's speaker seems to be convincing himself that he is now safe in his identity as 'a rock' and 'an island', the reader senses that beneath the surface of his self-imposed 'armor' is a silent yet palpable craving for the connection, 'laughter' and 'loving' that has been so systematically 'disdain[ed]'. This work provides an excellent springboard for exploration of the various ways in which protecting yourself from others and hiding from the world can result in a debilitating state of extreme isolation.

Poetry for Exploring Loneliness Resulting from Communication Breakdown

As a poetry therapist addressing the prevailing lack of deeply meaningful and authentic communication with others that was identified in the Cigna study, I recommend introducing poems that present vivid examples of communication breakdown or suggest the possibility of carving out more time in our lives for savoring relationships that enhance our wellbeing. Since miscommunication and communication gaps can occur within the lives of individuals functioning at various levels of mental distress or wellbeing, these poems can be useful for practitioners who work with both clinical and nonclinical populations.

'People Time' (1994, p. 36) by Lowell Bolstad is an apt choice because it vividly conveys how overly busy schedules and controlling behaviors can keep us from cultivating and enjoying fulfilling experiences with others. From 'Clock time' that 'become[s] a taskmaster,' this poem's speaker moves on to 'People time' that 'now determines [his] cadence'. Given these new priorities, 'Conversations flow/with their/own rhythms' and life has gone from a 'march' to a 'dance'. This poem's contrasting images provide a gateway into fruitful discussion of what heartfelt, unhurried conversations look like when we take time to truly relish another person's

companionship rather than charging full speed ahead, consumed with daily tasks and projects.

Stephen Dunn's 'The Unsaid' (2004/2006, p. 185) presents a vignette centered on a wife and husband who crave basically the same assurance of being understood by their partner, yet never utter the words that provide what they both need. In this relationship, the unspoken crowds out the possibility of caring conversation, leaving both spouses in limbo. With its poignant negative role model of what could make a viable union, this poem is quite useful for couples who feel a disconnection within their marriage as they struggle to recognize what enhances rather than detracts from intimacy.

Like 'The Unsaid,' Patricia Quinn Franchi's 'Bridge' (1978, p. 88) conveys the pain of unsatisfying communication patterns within a relationship. In this poem, the speaker wants to 'show the reality of [her] true being' but expects her 'actions' to be judged with 'cold rigidity'. However, the speaker does conclude with the hope that somehow the couple's 'heart thoughts' will bridge the gap. There is fertile material here for a substantive discussion on the causes and effects of flawed communication patterns that result in feelings of isolation.

Natasha Josefowitz's poem 'One Moment' (1992, p. 121) is particularly useful for facilitating a discussion on the various levels of communication that a couple experiences as they go from being 'two strangers' to engaging in small talk and ultimately to sharing of confidences that 'touch/ the other's life'.

Lowell Bolstad's 'Authenticity' (1994, p. 35) provides a model of what genuine, mutually satisfying communication can look like between two people. Celebrating a 'soul friendship' in his life, this poem's speaker refers to a pattern of 'give and receive' and paints a picture of two individuals who listen to one another carefully and are truly heard. Not only do these friends feel safe to self-disclose, but they also can challenge one another and feel affirmed.

Loneliness, Healing Poetry, and the Pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic descended upon us in early 2020, the topic of loneliness in relation to distress and wellbeing moved even further to the forefront of people's attention. At that time, I gathered a sizable set of poems with writing prompts designed to help people cope with their increasingly isolated lifestyle but also to affirm a new form of solitude that

allowed for previously unrealized possibilities. Imelda Maguire's poem, 'Lost and Found' (2004, p. 13) with its accompanying creative writing prompt has elicited many positive responses from the friends and colleagues that received my *Poetry as Healer in the Time of Pandemic* packet. Maguire's list of items lost and found provides a straightforward two-stanza framework for others to use in their own personal creations:

I lost . . .

And found . . .

This writing activity not only encourages us to express the disappointments and stark absences in our present lives, but also prompts us to recognize our own resourcefulness by declaring the discoveries and surprising gifts that have emerged during this challenging time.

Pat Schneider's 'The Patience of Ordinary Things' (2003/2005, p. 111) has also been like a welcoming companion to so many during times of restriction and lockdown. It invites us to deeply sense simple objects in our households such as cups that hold our tea, the soap and towels in our bathroom, the chairs we sit in, the floor we firmly feel beneath our feet, the staircases we climb, and the windows that let in the outer world. Its last line, 'And what is more generous than a window?' provides a particularly evocative question that inspires us to write our own 'window' poems of gratitude and devotional attention.

Poetic Expression and Life-Enhancing Solitude

Creating the pandemic poetry packet and registering others' reactions to it have led me to reflect more broadly upon the power of poetry to enhance explorations of solitude as the edifying and rejuvenating human experience that Moustakas (1961) describes. An abundance of soothing, inspirational poems written throughout the centuries has invited readers to experience the harmony and transcendence of solitary communion with Nature. Striking poems that come to mind are William Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' (1804/1992) along with Mary Oliver's 'Wild Geese' (1986/1992) and 'When I Am Among the Trees' (2006); Anne Wilson's 'Seeking Silence' (1999); and Wendell Berry's 'The Peace of Wild Things' (1968). In addition to providing mental pictures we can savor, these poems are effective for stimulating our own creative rendering of moments when and places where we were awakened, in our solitary state, to the wonder of nature's beauty and emerged with renewed energy to engage in the communities we need for our wellbeing.

Conclusion

Poetry therapy has broad applications in the alleviation of loneliness. Sharing personal responses to poems and creating heartfelt written pieces in a supportive atmosphere can help a broad range of individuals address and experience relief from debilitating chronic or temporary loneliness. It can also stimulate readers to explore the distinction between painful isolation and enriching solitude. However, as helpers, we need to recognize that this creative arts modality is not for everyone. There are those who simply do not connect with figurative language of any kind or whose prejudices or fears regarding literary materials or writing are deeply entrenched. We need to be particularly attuned to poetic works that have the potential to trigger past traumatic experiences and choose the works we introduce with great care.

Given the pervasiveness of loneliness and the multitude of factors pertinent to loneliness, this is clearly a subject begging for further research studies of many types such as descriptive, ethnographic, empirical, and longitudinal. While there is an abundance of case study articles that attest to the benefit of poems and creative writing for individuals from varying age groups and backgrounds within diverse clinical, educational, and medical settings, we still need an assortment of viable measurements that assess the short-term and long-term effects of poetic interventions on individuals' emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing, relational satisfaction, and sense of communal belonging.

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