

*Setting Right What Is Wrong:
Mending with Words in a Pediatric
Cancer Ward*

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When the world falls apart, and I feel paralyzed, I need words that heal. I need poetry. The word “poem” comes from the Greek word “to make or do.” That’s why I turn to poems during difficult times. I need words that will help me to imagine a better world, to shore up goodness, to grab onto hope, to build and to make and to do.

So, as the events at Sandy Hook Elementary School unfolded on Friday, December 14, 2012, I didn’t glue myself to the television or to Facebook or to twitter. I went to work. I tuned out the news reports and tuned in to the words of my students.

I’ve worked at Writers in the Schools (WITS) in Houston, Texas, for fifteen years. Writers in the Schools (WITS) sends professional writers into settings such as schools, community centers, homeless shelters, museums, juvenile detention centers, and hospitals to work with children in long-term residencies. WITS immerses children in the beauty and power of words that matter.

Every Friday I go to the Texas Children’s Cancer and Hematology Centers to invite the children there to write. The sessions are open-ended, and the children choose to write about all sorts of topics, from wizards

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and fairies to surgery and chemotherapy.

These young authors understand brokenness and wholeness, heartbreak and joy. These children know what it is like to live with disease. Every morning they wake up in a world where IVs and painkillers exist alongside pancakes and ladybugs.

The children at Texas Children’s have a lot to teach the world about how to grieve deeply and how to mend with words. They scribble their poems in the lobby, at the nurse’s station, in the examination rooms.

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It is true that their words won’t halt the rounds of radiation and blood transfusions, nor will their words stop school massacres and mental illness. Truthfully, their poems may not even save their own lives—cancer is still the leading cause of death by disease for children ages one to fourteen years in the US. But,

as Carol Herron, the director of the Arts in Medicine program at Texas Children’s, often says, “Even when the arts don’t cure, they heal.”

I witness this power of healing every Friday when I walk through the doors of the cancer center. Recently, I ran into Alfredo, a thirteen-year-old who usually shrugs off my invitations to write. He was in the area where chemo treatments are given, with beeping machines and many hospital workers and patients. I asked him to jot down what he thinks about when he’s alone. This is what he wrote:

This Particular Memory

ALFREDO

Where is the boy I used to be?
Is he still in my heart?
Is he living in my memory?
Is he where I used to be?
Is he happy?
Is he playing with friends?
Is he here or is he there?
I think the boy is with me.
I wish he didn't grow up so fast.

When he smiles, he brings out
happiness in everyone.
We must never let anyone take away
this happiness.

Alfredo grapples with memories of what he used to be before he had to grow up “so fast.” The voice at the end of his poem is so strong that it takes away my breath. The Hebrew root of the word happiness means “to set right.” As he guards his happiness, Alfredo is setting right what is wrong. He is teaching us how to be fierce, how to hold on to happiness in a broken world. 🗨️



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