



WRITING THROUGH TRAUMA

On the Page Where Anything is Possible: Writing with Children in Hospice

JOHN RYBICKI

I work with a hospice program in Michigan, teaching poetry writing in schools to children who have been through a trauma or loss. Holy work. The first day many of the children froth into class brimming over with vibrant energy. You don't see them dragging colossal shadows across the earth. Pass them in the hallway and they look like any other child, but the body is an extravagant hiding place. These children have had the glaciers of human suffering move through their interior. The page, though, is a safe place for them to unburden.

I believe the best poetry is summoned from the extreme weather of the human heart. Gordon Lish writes, "Your grief is your fortune as a writer." My own wife, months before her death after a sixteen-year battle with cancer, whispered to me, "Dude, at least you got some good poems out of this."

I do not teach poetry writing to these exquisite children: I teach them to dare. I dare them to take common words like "I" and "out" and "want" and "all" and use them to say what it is their heart is burning to say. When my hospice kids strike out against a blank canvas, they turn ordinary words into live embers on

the page. AC, an eighth-grader, writes, "I want a heart that when it pumps/ all the bullets fly out of all the guns/ and turn to dust."

Those common words have now become charged and altered. Moreover, the young seer who writes this, a boy ravaged by the death of a loved one, is all but impotent when it comes to eradicating gun violence in the world. But on the page where anything is possible,

he has become a spiritual guide for all of us. He trumps human limitation and heals the wounds of the world with language.

Does writing a poem born out of suffering eradicate the wounds inside any young writer so

there is no scar tissue left? No. Does it help heal and empower any brave writer who faces suffering and turns it into poetry? Yes.

Take this poem from a middle school girl I taught last week:

SM, 7th grade

I want to go to my mother's
grave and just sit there

and when I touch it
rainbows and butterflies

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John Rybicki's latest book of poems, When All the World is Old, is available on Lookout Books. In addition to his work with hospice, he is Associate Professor of English at Alma College. He also works with the InsideOut Literary Arts Project, teaching poetry writing to high school children in Detroit, Michigan.

fly out and they help
the sun bring her up

to be with me so we can
hang together on the world

like a picture frame.

I left that school feeling like I had a church inside
my chest.

The first day of class at another school, one girl broke
down crying before we even began. That rarely happens.
Later that morning we wrote poems about the emotional
geography of the interior and hers went like this:

Inside of Me
AS, 8th grade

There's a river full of stars.
Sometimes they make their way

to my eyes and I am elated.

Sometimes they flow down

to the bottoms of my feet.
The river cuts through

a black hole in me
trying to pull those stars back up,

to reverse the current.
Usually it works

but sometimes those stars stay
at the bottom of that river

for a long long time.

Sometimes children break down and cry right into
the poem they are writing. I swoop around and read
their work and it baptizes me, and I turn right back and
baptize them with praise. A fine poem reminds us we're
all members of one human family, or as Dickens once
wrote, "Fellow passengers to the grave." 🙏



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