

Poets in Palliative Care*

More than ever before, there are things in the world that would like to be said.
Elias Canetti (1)

But at times like these only the small things are ever said. The big things lurk unsaid inside.
Arundhati Roy (2)

The thesis of this editorial is that we need poets in palliative care to say for us, or to teach us how to say, those things that at special times of loss are crying out to be said. We need poets because they are masters of saying the small things within which lurk the big things that so often come across as flat and banal when we try to speak about them directly. Certain things never get said unless they find the unique form the message needs. The poets are creators of such forms – compositions of word, image and music that evoke rather than define the deep fears, questions, and quests of the human spirit. This, I think, is what Osip Mandelshtam meant when he said:

The people need poetry that will be their own secret to keep them awake forever...(3)

This, I think, is also what William Carlos Williams meant when he said:

It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there. (4)

A Death in the Afternoon and No Poetry

Something was crying out to be said in a military hospital on an afternoon nearly thirty years ago when a military doctor and I met with two women to tell them that their son and husband, a young officer, had just died from wounds sustained in an accident during military exercises. After the initial shock of this terrible and unexpected news had passed, the mother turned to the doctor and me with a statement and a question. She said, "Well, my son has gone to God now and I will see him again one day, won't I?"

This grieving mother was not only stating something. She was waiting for a response.



Something had to be said, but the doctor said nothing. He was a superb physician, but also a man with no time for other-world beliefs and talk. He looked to me and I mumbled something, surely not what this mother needed to hear, surely not what wanted to be said in that moment of loss and crushing grief.

Why did I not get anywhere near saying what wanted to be said, what had to be said? Because I greatly admired the older physician and I feared feeling foolish and ashamed to see the scorn I was sure would show in his eyes if I started to say spiritual or religious things to the mother and wife. And because at that period of my life, addicted as I was to logic, I could not bring myself to affirm things that were based only in belief and not on knowledge. So because I had not learned how to say the small things within which the big things lurk unsaid, I said nothing.

An empty space set in between us, a space heavy with disappointment, a space distancing the mother and wife ever further from me and the doctor. Across the space the mother tried to affirm what she had wanted confirmed by either me or the doctor or both of us. "Well, anyway that's what I believe" is what she said. I have been ashamed of myself to this day for not having known how, and for not having dared, to speak to that mother about the big unknowables – the spiritual things, as some would say – that can break into the mind in times

of death and grief. I had studied science and logic, philosophy and theology, but I had no poetry in my mind that afternoon, no mastery of how to say the small things that carry the big things into the heart to echo around within the chambers filled with absence. I did not know how or I didn't dare to do or to say the small things that, said or done rightly, could have brought the presence of another human being into the hearts of a mother and a wife to share their grief.

What Poets Do

What do poets do that makes them so needed in palliative care?

Well poets, W.H. Auden said, break bread with the dead. This breaking of bread, this communion, is the ongoing antiphonal song of poet to poet that survives and continues down all the generations since poets began to open spaces of meaning for the hunt of the human spirit chasing after what is more intimate to human beings than they are to themselves (5).

Poets, Dante said, strive to say that which was never said by anyone (*quello che mai fue ditto d'alcuna*) (6). That striving of the poets responds to a deep desire of the human spirit to hear what has never before been said by anyone.

Poets, I think, reconnect our being at the surface of ever fleeting impressions with our being at the depths of the human spirit, at the depths where we can hear the common cry of humanity within our own cry. They channel the "surface stream, shallow and light of what we say we feel" into "the central stream of what we feel indeed" (7).

Poets – as another example of Arundhati Roy's small things cradling big things – capture and perpetuate in word and rhythm those seemingly simple and everyday experiences that make real and tie together a lifetime's worth of meanings. These events are the origin of those memories of which Dostoevsky spoke when he said that a person who has even just one memory of having been deeply cherished is a person who can be saved (8).

Seamus Heaney created such a memory when he said, perhaps of his mother or grandmother:

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes...

...So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives -
Never closer the whole rest of our lives (9).

Some experiences are so intense, so tightly bound together, that they cannot be expressed in long sequences of words without being torn apart. These are the experiences that L. Wittgenstein has called "unutterable" (10). What is unutterable, however, can be shown, can be evoked. Poets evoke the unutterable in such a way that nothing gets lost. Robert Frost did this in his poignantly compressed two-line poem, "The Span of Life":

The old dog barks backwards without getting up
I can remember when he was a pup. (11)

There are also moments in palliative care when we may fall far short of reaching the hearts of people because we are stumblingly striving to say what can really be communicated only by being shown.

The Poets We Need in Palliative Care

Those who would want to redress the neglect of spirituality in palliative care should not forget to mobilize the poets. Their poetry has arisen out of the human spirit's "immensity of waiting" (12) and of seeking. There are, however, two kinds of poets: the published and the unpublished ones. The published poets sing the songs of the human spirit. The unpublished poets become the song that the published poets sing. Both kinds of poet are needed in palliative care.

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