



JOHN FOX

When WORDS HEAL

POETRY AS A PATH TO INNER PEACE. By Aria Seligmann

So much in life goes unsaid. The deepest emotions well up within us, sometimes overflowing in a release of tears or exploding in a torrent of anger. Sometimes we're dumbstruck by our attraction to someone. Sometimes emotions are held inside and pushed further and further down in hopes they will disappear.

Poetry therapist John Fox has a way of accessing those emotions, a method of finding words to describe them, of turning those words into poems like carefully crafted vessels to hold those feelings.

Fox wrote his first poem when he was 12, having his first "Portrait of the Poet as a Young Man" epiphany while watching a girl skate. Perhaps it was the fluidity of her movement that struck him. He'd had trouble with his right leg his entire life, needing numerous surgeries to remove tumors, spending endless days in a hospital bed, in pain. He found solace in writing.

Now, Fox, 48, is a published poet, a certified poetry therapist, and president of the National Association for Poetry Therapy. He's an associate professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco and teaches in the Graduate School of Psychology at John F. Kennedy University in Orinda and the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto.

The author of *Finding What You Didn't Lose: Expressing Your Truth and Creativity Through Poem-Making and Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making* and numerous essays and of course, poems, works extensively with children and the pastoral community. He also holds public workshops and lectures, and will be in Eugene March 5 and 6 to share his gifts.

Reflecting on the physical pain he suffered growing up, Fox says writing poetry was "a way of saying it. You couldn't usual-

ly." His leg had to be amputated when he was 18. "There were definitely some unspeakable aspects about that."

Fox studied creative writing in college, but like many, found the academic process creatively restricting. "I didn't care what someone thought about my poem. Objectifying it wasn't what I needed. Tearing it apart from a linguistic point of view didn't do a whole lot for me."

After graduation, he continued writing, but nothing came of it in terms of livelihood. In the early '80s, he began meeting people who led him along his destiny path — one after another introducing him to the next, opening the way to leading workshops for those grieving the loss of a loved one and those suffering from physical illness.

Then he met Joy Shieman, an early pioneer in poetry therapy who'd been working with this particular brand of creative art therapy since the early '60s.

He trained and apprenticed with her as the movement took off.

His method includes beginning by reconnecting with the joy of language, so often lost when we're children. "As children we find the sound of words pleasurable as we're making and hearing them for various reasons," says Fox. But too often children are criticized in school, or feel pressure, distancing them from that joy. "We teach children to spell words," says Fox, "but do we stop and ask them if they like how they sound?"

Fox uses a playful approach in working with his students. "I'm aware I'm not there to teach them how to write poetry, I'm there to provide a place for them to express what they'd like to say," he says. He helps to develop a safe connection with them by putting them at ease.

"I'm there to listen and if I can communicate by being a good listener ... My experi-

ence is that people don't get listened to very often."

He'll start with students' experiences and where they found poems useful, then encourage them to look at the experience in a fresh way.

That happens by having students take random words out of a bowl — a technique he used even before magnetic poetry — and "just mess around with them; treat them like clay or paint, it doesn't have to make sense." Always remembering that creativity comes out of playfulness, he keeps things light.

That doesn't mean he treats his students' feelings lightly. After working with them in exploring imagery and words, he has them share their poems.

"Someone at age 50, when they lose someone dear to them, may be up at 2 a.m. making a poem because it's the only way to express what they need to say. It's not someone's idea of craft," he says. By reading the poem to others, "someone can hear," he says.

"The poem becomes the container for that feeling of grief or love for that person. It helps to distill and condense that feeling. They can sort of get ahold of it. Something about poetry allows for paradox and ambiguity and very contrary feelings without having to explain or make sense."

Fox has frequently witnessed the transformative process that takes place within his students. One woman, he says, was struggling but "found tenacity in herself. Wonderful images came up about what that meant. It gave her deeper faith in things she didn't know."

By reading her poem aloud, she became empowered by her own voice, and realized that others were listening to her.

"So often we keep silent or muffled," he says, adding, "Each of us has a voice that has real value and you don't have to write like somebody else — just write in a way that feels right to you." **EW**

John Fox will give a public talk at 7:30 pm, Friday, March 5 and will hold a workshop from 9:30 am-4:30 pm on Saturday March 6, both events at the Tamarack Wellness Center, 3575 Donald St. Friday: \$20; Saturday: \$125. Information and pre-registration: (541) 685-9009.

Even To This

What my thoughts have troubled about all through the night after night!

It's so very scary

sometimes

I feel

would rather

what's the worst that could happen? because it just hurts too much

or having had enough of my own self-hatred against myself, lonely is

nowhere else to go time to stop feeling sorry for myself,

time to open my heart even to this and call to God.

— John Fox

'We teach children to spell words ... but do we stop and ask them if they like how they sound?' — John Fox

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