

Why Poetry Matters: As Easy as Breathing

by Margaret Dubay Mikus, Ph.D.

(First published by *Palabras Press*, online, in 2007)

7/22/98

As Easy as Breathing

What do you do
as easy as breathing,
but push this “nothing” aside?

This may be why you’ve come
on this wild and fearless ride.

Go back
to before you knew

life was hard,
before you learned

to be suspicious
of what came too easily.

Go back to those
innocent days

and ask:

What do you do
as easy as breathing,

better than anyone else?
Bring out your gift

and add to the rest,
all together they may be enough

to move mountains
and the minds of men,

women and children, too.
For the time is coming

when we'll need such power,
the time is near

when we'll see full and clear,
when Radiance will be the order of the Day.

Get ready.
Practice,

let out your light
a little.

Get used to such
dazzling magnificence.

You shake your heads;
I can see you.

You think "She doesn't know
I am not light, I have such dark,

I am not as she describes"
Yet I tell you now

I speak only truth,
not to please,

but to illuminate
what is already.

Margaret Dubay Mikus
© 1998

It is not too dramatic to say that poetry saved my life...unexpectedly and repeatedly. Writing and reading poetry was both the means to wholeness, healing and balance, and its reward. Through my poems I expressed beauty, uncovered what was hidden, explored darkness, came to understand what was happening to me, found comfort, witnessed my unfolding life, restored what was lost, and in the process, healed relationships and my body, mind, emotions and spirit. I "painted" word portraits of the

people I encountered and the landscapes of my unique world. Poetry used everything: a thought, a news article, a conversation, an observation, a dream, and perhaps something that happened ten or twenty years ago; all could be woven into the tapestry of a poem. Writing these poems gave meaning to what had happened, and as it turned out, by risking honesty and truth, mixed with grace and humor, inspired others to make positive changes in their lives too. Poetry encouraged me to be grounded, to reevaluate, to connect to the divine, inner voice. These poems gave my life purpose, allowing me to help others, many of whom I will never meet. Over the last dozen years, I learned to trust this gift. Poetry went from being virtually nothing to me, to becoming the heart, the core of everything in my life. How did this happen? Let me tell you a story.

I am now 55 years old. For most of my life I believed I was not a creative person. And so I went through the door I thought was open to me: academics, biological sciences in particular. I was a voracious reader from 4th grade on, which helped me in school. (I also had some particularly inspiring and encouraging teachers.) Success in high school led to college at the University of Michigan (BS in Zoology) and ultimately a Ph.D. in Microbiology from the University of Chicago. In college, singing in a chorus, music history and English literature courses balanced the required science classes. In graduate school, a total focus on science was expected.

My whole life I'd had health challenges, but overall I felt strong and fit. In 1988, after the birth of my second child, I was shocked by a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Looking back, the MS likely began in the early 80's during graduate school. Although I had a series of symptoms that came and went (typical of this kind of MS), it was my left side that was primarily affected.

Over time, my symptoms worsened and psychotherapy was recommended to deal with depression. Part of my "homework" was a stress-reduction technique called thermal biofeedback. I taped a special thermometer to the smallest finger of my non-dominant hand, noting the temperature. This was a mind-body exercise, practicing deep breathing and using the mind to visualize warm, secure or peaceful places while monitoring the effect on the body. I was amazed that I could increase the temperature of my little finger a few degrees in my first session. With practice, I could easily raise the temperature to 93° F or higher. (When we are feeling very stressed our fingers are often cold. Warming the hands in this way can help reverse the stress.)

My psychotherapist suggested therapeutic massage to help my muscle spasms and to promote relaxation, recommending a registered nurse who had also trained in massage and energy balancing. We began working together and over time, she also became a spiritual mentor. Through her guidance I started inner listening, a technique of becoming still and quiet enough to hear my own inner voice, the voice of the divine within. All this happened very slowly, in baby steps, as was my cautious nature.

Writing assignments were part of my treatment. One night I had taped the thermometer to my finger to practice biofeedback, but then began writing. I noticed that my hand

temperature immediately shot up. The act of writing had a physiological —and beneficial —effect on me! Quite a revelation: the power of my mind could be harnessed to help my body.

Since high school, I had not read much poetry and I did not write poetry. But in my therapeutic healing journal from this time, I later found that I had written some poems. At this point, at the ripe age of 41, I also began voice lessons. I had sung in church choirs and in school and community choruses most of my life, but did not think of myself as a singer. My voice teacher focused on allowing my full, natural voice to come through, working on clarity, breathing and releasing blocks (often unconscious). As it turned out, these voice lessons became crucial to recovery of my writing voice as well.

Through a multi-faceted approach, well-supported by trained healthcare professionals, I healed from MS in April of 1995. I left my job teaching biology courses at Lake Forest College. I did not know what I would do, but the expanding field of integrative medicine intrigued me. I continued my own healing work supported and guided by those professionals I came to call my “Greek columns” for their unique and essential support of my healing process.

The first summer after the MS was gone, my community chorus was going through a difficult time and I wanted to support my choral director. I tried writing a letter, but it didn't come together. After an outdoor concert by opera diva, Montserrat Caballe, I went home and heard clear lines in my head. Though it was late, I began writing and continued for 3 pages! I could tell there were spaces that needed to be filled in. I worked on the poem, for that's what it was, for a week. On a sunny Saturday afternoon, my heart pounding, I read the finished work to my husband. I had never done anything like this before and it seemed so exposed and risky. He liked the poem and so I read it to my voice teacher, who was also encouraging. I am very grateful to them for nurturing the fragile new shoot of my first “real” public poem.

I knew I wanted to record the poem so that my director would hear it as I had heard it. I also chose special paper and a particular font. I wrote to him explaining this very unusual gift. I had such fun making all this up!

12/8/98

Risk

It's a risk
to wake up every morning

and see
if you fall short

or stand tall,
grow an inch or a foot,

see what seeds may land
and take root,

your heart cracked open
like a walnut.

It's a risk
to get up every morning,

leave the land of dreams
and begin again,

leave the land of dreams and dreaming,
stride on solid ground,

learn and teach,
grow and glow...

then throw out all you know
and begin again.

It's a risk.

Margaret Dubay Mikus
© 1998

In October of 1995, following a group healing in which I asked the Universe to “sing from the Heart,” I began writing a poetic journal. For me poetry was about wholeness, joy and bliss. Every part of me—what I observed, discussed, felt, read, dreamed and thought could end up in a poem. There were no rules, no red marks, no harsh critics. A new world was opening up to me. At first I wasn't sure I was even writing poetry. I began reading poems, reading about poetry—including Mary Oliver's *Poetry Handbook*—and listening to poetry readings. Chicago was a great place to be! I also began reading my poems publicly: at open mics, my yoga class, healing services, family funerals, my children's school classes, and my workshops. The enthusiastic responses encouraged me to keep on.

When I wrote, time disappeared, I was in a “flow” zone. Typically I would hear a few lines in my head that intrigued me. These words seemed to be highlighted in some way. I

wrote longhand not knowing where they would take me. I got out of the way and let the poem come to me. This required patience and trust. Sometimes it was a journey of discovery, sometimes a way to express something I felt passionate about, sometimes a portrait or an observation of nature. Always, I felt compelled to write.

On occasion, I also heard music with a poem. So I sat at my piano and tried to write in the language of notes and rhythms to capture the music on paper as well. Because this was much more difficult, I did not write many songs. Now I record on my iPod—much easier!

At 44 years old, a year after healing from MS, I was diagnosed with breast cancer: two unrelated tumors, one in each breast. This was particularly devastating for one already doing healing work. I completely fell apart, and then regrouped. I added to my healing tools and my healing team, again using a multi-level approach. My poems became a lifeline, expressing and recording every stage, from testing, diagnosis, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, recovery and renewal.

8/30/96

Should We

be known
by our scars
or by how far
we've come since
that wounding?

Could we
look at
where we are,
not
where we've been
and what's been done?

Margaret Dubay Mikus
© 1996

I read my new poems to the coordinator of the Breast Center at Highland Park Hospital where my medical tests were done. Eventually, I gave her a three-ring binder with about eighty poems. She decided to give out copies of some poems to women who were newly

diagnosed with cancer and even to a woman who was getting a bone marrow transplant. It became clear that these poems were not just for me, but resonated with others too, perhaps giving voice to our shared experience in a way that was healing for all of us. It also turned out that the poems allowed me to later revisit those challenging days and process emotions I could not handle at the time, kind of a personal, time-release healing effect.

9/20/96

Cancer Can Give You

Cancer can give you
the ability to say
"I'm not going to keep
the crud in my life,"
and then
let it go.

Cancer can give you
the ability to see
clearly what is real
and what is false
and then
act on that vision.

What a gift!
Urging us to change
what needs changing,
giving us the opportunity
to take back our power.

This is a time to learn
to ask for help
and to receive it,
to trust what is worthy of trust
and to relearn
how to breathe deeply.

This is a time
to learn
to love ourselves
and to take care...
and to sing from the heart
whatever that means for you.

Margaret Dubay Mikus

© 1996

During cancer treatment I also took photographs. By the end of my time with MS, I could no longer focus my eyes well enough to use my camera. Because it took all my energy to just walk, I could not walk and take pictures too. Once the MS was gone, I joyfully resumed my interest in photography. I particularly loved taking “picture walks.” For a while I carried my tiny Pentax camera everywhere so I would not miss any good pictures. When taking these photographs I was again in a blissful state where time disappeared. I thought of my photographs as visual poems.

When talking with someone, a poem might come to mind, either a new one or the title of one I had already written. I would take note and try to send it to them. Their positive responses encouraged me to keep writing. But this was a very labor-intensive way of getting my poems out into the world! So I created *Life Support Cards*™ using some of the photographs I took during cancer treatment combined with poems I had written. I also designed my website, FullBlooming.com. In 2002, I selected poems I wrote during cancer treatment and recovery for my first book, *As Easy as Breathing: Reclaiming Power for Healing and Transformation—Poems, Letters and Inner Listening*, (revised in 2005). And finally, this year I released my first CD, *Full Blooming: Selections from a Poetic Journal*. I did not know how to do any of these things, but people came to help and I learned as I went along. One essential thing a Ph.D. had given me was confidence in my ability to learn! I am most grateful for all my teachers.

My Reiki teacher was a valued part of my healing team. He said that a Ph.D. in microbiology (becoming an acute observer) was the perfect training for being a poet! It took some time for me to call myself a poet. How could I give up the apparent status of being a college science teacher, a profession I had worked hard at? To be a poet seemed much less powerful. But here’s the thing: against a little poem people do not put up defenses that have to be worn or battered down. So the healing message, inspiration, comfort, hope, kindness, openness or awareness can just sneak right in and do good work, sometimes allowing a profound transformation. The listener may see herself or himself differently, envision some new possibilities, and perhaps in some small or large way, alter their course. That, my friends, is real, authentic power.

At the end of extensive radiation treatment, I was very burned and was given a short period to heal. I had to decide whether to continue or to stop treatment. How could I make such an important life decision while I was so off balance? I approached this in my usual way: asking for inner guidance, reading, writing poems, talking with many health professionals, and pleading with the Universe to send me help. One person who came at this time was the man who replaced my backup sump pump battery.

2/10/97

A Messenger

A man came to my house today
to fix a sump pump
and replace the battery.

He was heavy-set, wearing
smoke-filled work clothes,
spoke kindly and worked well.

He talked of a sister who had died
of breast cancer and of her last year,
“Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease.”

How clearly
I can occasionally
see;

so fearful of death,
I start to believe in
limited view and limited options,

and lose hope
and lose heart.
I deserve better.

Margaret Dubay Mikus
© 1997

How amazing that this person came to me at just this crucial time! Three years later, he again came to replace the battery and I told him I had written a poem about him. He seemed interested, so I gave him that poem and a few others. It turned out that when he read his description: “smoke-filled work clothes,” he saw himself differently and stopped smoking! I didn’t hear about this until three years later, when again the battery needed replacing. I was stunned and amazed and grateful. Often we do not know what healing our words may set in motion. This year we spoke again. He told me he still does not smoke and that he had recently told the story of the poem and sent it to a friend who smokes! What a demonstration of the power of poetry to heal! We do not control what happens. All we can do is the part that is ours, from our most loving, honest and grace-filled space. And then let it fly!

2/25/03

The Poet

I am my mother's daughter
and I am the Mother of my Self—
one who made the form
and one who filled it.

And I am the mother of my daughter,
a beauty like no other.
She forgot to wash her socks until midnight
and, smiling her smile, asked if I could put them in the dryer
and I did...easily...again.

Who rules on any given day?
What boundaries between the roles I play
tying me to sanity?

No instructions, no models or even myths.
In all the worlds there ever were
not one has ever been exactly like me...or you.

Or has done what we are about to attempt.
I am tempted to stop, not life, but struggle
to be more, to become what I imagine.

But a poet who is fearless,
who carries on regardless,
whose words are kind and true and honest

is more than essential for survival...
is the compassionate and dispassionate glue
that holds it all together—

or later, after the fall,
uses the bricks from the wall
to make something else altogether.

Margaret Dubay Mikus
© 2003

Slowly, it became clear that this poetic journal, written from the heart, was the very core of me, my life purpose. When life became chaotic and everything else fell away, the poems remained. The poems gave meaning to my experiences by allowing me help others, my deepest lifelong desire. Through poetry I could understand, express, heal and release what happened to me, continuing to grow.

Why does poetry matter? Lisel Mueller began writing poetry after the death of her mother: "I...placed my grief/ in the mouth of language,/ the only thing that would grieve with me." Mary Oliver wanted to live her life as "a bride married to amazement." Emily Dickenson, wrote that "hope is the thing with feathers," in a poem which my mother unexpectedly and delightfully read to me over the phone the other day and which has shown up several more times since I began writing this piece.

So why does poetry matter? Poetry brings beauty, clarity, harmony and truth to a world that is starving for those things. Particularly in these troubled times, poetry heals, inspires, restores, revives, comforts, grieves, rejoices, replenishes, nurtures, nourishes, reveals, resonates, laughs, cries, grimaces, soars, digs deep. It gives the opportunity to be aware, healed, whole and powerful, to make affirming changes for ourselves, for those around us, and for the world we live in. It does this not by battering down the old walls, but by a miracle as defined by *A Course in Miracles*: a shift in perception from fear to love.

2/1/07

Poetry as Healer

And you might say,
how can poetry heal,
it is not a pill I take
into my body?

And I would respond thus
from my heart, the source of poetry:
poetry is word spoken
which is vibration
which is energy
and the body which is matter
is energy very slowed down,

so poetry is energy
into the body which is energy
so energy heals energy.

Of course the frequency of vibration
of the words is important. There are
words that tear down, as you know.

And, as has been graphically shown with
the crystals of Emoto, there are words
which health can be built upon.

These words from the heart
with healing intent,
these are the words that heal,
there is no doubt.

Try them out.

Margaret Dubay Mikus
© 2007

This is the challenge, the charge, I lay at your feet. What do *you* do as easy as
breathing? The world needs what you have to offer, the gifts you alone can give. Leave
behind your small self and risk stepping into your magnificence.

9/21/98

Better and Better

Shiver of anticipation,
sliver of fear

as I await
what awaits me.

Does life, or can it
keep on

getting better
and better?

...Yes,
I choose Yes.

Margaret Dubay Mikus

© 1998

Bibliography:

“Should We,” “Cancer Can Give You,” “A Messenger,” “As Easy as Breathing,” “Better and Better,” and “Risk” are from *As Easy as Breathing: Reclaiming Power for Healing and Transformation—Poems, Letters and Inner Listening* by Margaret Dubay Mikus, Ph.D. (2002, Writers Club Press, an imprint of iUniverse, Inc., revised in 2005):

“The Poet” is in *Letting Go and New Beginnings: A Mother’s Poetic Journey* by Margaret Dubay Mikus, Ph.D. (2011)

“As Easy as Breathing,” “Better and Better,” “Risk,” and “The Poet” are read by Margaret Dubay Mikus on the CD, *Full Blooming: Selections from a Poetic Journal*, (2007)

Another version of the story of the sump pump man appeared as the Artist Essay, “Purpose” (including the poem, “The Messenger”), in *WomanMade News*, Spring, 2004, Chicago, IL

From her poem, “When I Am Asked,” *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems* by Lisel Mueller, Louisiana State University Press, 1996, Baton Rouge, LA

From her poem, “When Death Comes,” *New and Selected Poems* by Mary Oliver, 1992, Beacon Press, Boston, MA

From her poem, XXXII (Life), *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* by Emily Dickinson, Barnes & Noble edition, 1993

A Course in Miracles, published by Foundation for Inner Peace, 1975