From Grief, Poetry: Expressive Writings from the Westside Tragedy

BY ROBERT LAMM

I Shall Know Why by Emily Dickinson
I shall know why when time is over.
And I have ceased to wonder why:
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky.
He will tell me what Peter promised
And I, for wonder at his woe,
I shall forget the drop of anguish
That scalds me now, that scalds me now.

—A poem taught to Jonesboro's Westside Middle School students the morning of the schoolyard shootings.

In the throes of personal grief, of suffering the “drop of anguish that scalds me now,” poet Emily Dickinson sought a measure of comfort through writing verse. Her poem “I Shall Know Why” questions the purpose of emotional suffering, then answers itself by professing faith in a divine plan. Emily Dickinson understood the healing power of poetry.

Poets can empower language to elevate sentiment, to ennoble hardship, or to relieve suffering. The rest of us likely live our lives in prose, the plain language that serves us well enough in our everyday transactions. Yet in times of deep emotion, of great joy or deep sorrow, when our souls want to sing or scream but are muted for lack of language, even the most prosaic of us may strive for a poet’s voice.

On March 24, 1998, an entire community was plunged into deep sorrow. At Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, thirteen children and two teachers were gunned down senselessly, allegedly by two classmates. Of those shot, four children and one teacher died from their wounds. Shock and grief were pandemic in Jonesboro. This was a slim, single degree of separation where virtually every citizen knew a casualty or someone bereaved. Perhaps it was the interplay between natural human sympathy, the modest size of the community and the magnitude of the tragedy that sent anguish splashing across Jonesboro’s 50,000 citizens. Like Emily Dickinson we felt the scald, questioning “why.”

On the local television news programs that followed, the tragedy was explained in the prose of journalism. At the end, however, came something different, not typical of a newscast—a poem was read by the anchorperson. A viewer had sent in a poem expressing a mixture of shock, grief, outrage, and spirituality, trying to make sense out of the senseless. Whatever the verses lacked in technical skill was more than compensated by the heartfelt message.

This poetic response to tragedy was an early indication of a phenomenon that was developing among the bereaved. Over the week that followed, poetry about the tragedy became a regular feature of the evening news. Contributions flowed in to the station, unsolicited. According to Kim Wheeler, assignment editor of KAIT news, “The poems came in from all kinds of people, mailed, faxed...this is the first time I have seen that ever happen, not even after tornadoes and other disasters with sizable losses of life.” Students at Westside Middle School wrote poetry also. A seventh-grade class of Westside students eventually presented a grieving parent with a collection of the poems memorializing her daughter. Another anthology was compiled by counselors and published by the National Association of School Psychologists. The Arkansas State University website displayed a collection of poetry about the tragedy. A local songwriter, Lisa Lee, wrote, performed and recorded a song called “Heaven’s Newest Angel.” Poetry was evident even in some of eulogies delivered by local ministers.

I became intrigued by this spontaneous outpouring of poetry. Part of my interest was simply that I lived in this community; like so many others in Jonesboro, I was in shock. As Director of English Education at Arkansas State University, I had direct contact with some of the middle school teachers and students. I had coached some of those children on a YMCA volleyball team. My life was linked with theirs in these and other ways that continue to reveal themselves after the fact.

I had not witnessed this poetic response to tragedy before, but I understood it at least partly. Poets help explain the phenomenon when they speak of emotion as inspiration, as does William Wordsworth in his “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” Similarly, Robert Frost observes that a “poem...begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness.” Certainly, poets understand poetry and its uses. However, the poetry springing from the Westside tragedy was being written by people who probably never would describe themselves as poets. Why would relatively unskilled writers turn to an unfamiliar medium?

To understand the phenomenon we should first know details of the event inspiring the poets. We will then examine the event as treated in the text of three complete poems.
and one section of a eulogy. From excerpts of poems we will identify recurring themes. Finally, we will draw upon psychological theories to explain the relationship between poetry writing and the grieving process.

The Tragic Event
The scenario unfolds on a windy day in late March 1998. Two middle school boys, ages 13 and 11, leoni illness in order to be excused from attending classes. They attire themselves as hunters, wearing camouflage hats, shirts, and pants. Breaking into the gun cabinet of the younger boy’s grandfather, they take three semi-automatic rifles, four pistols, and ammunition; elsewhere they acquire six other pistols. Stealing a van, they transport their weapons and themselves to a location just north of the middle school campus. They position themselves under the over of some trees, allowing a clear line of fire perpendicular to the west doors some 100 yards away. At 12:34 p.m., the younger boy sneaks into the school building, pulls the fire alarm, and then dashes back to their concealed position.

Inside the middle school, teachers and students react as they would to any routine fire drill, exiting in an orderly fashion — 150 through the west doors. The two boys begin a shooting spree. Bullets that whiz by some students later are described as sounding like bottle rockets. As victims fall to the ground, other students are slow to interpret. At first, some believe they are observing a game or a dramatic enactment; some applaud. Then realization. Then pandemonium. By the time it is over, fifteen are struck down. Four students and one teacher die.

The Poems

One Normal Day
by Amanda Gragg, 7th grade

This one day of school, just one normal day. Then at 12:34, it changed in every way. At the sound of the drill we all ran outside. We saw people fall; we just wanted to hide. Such an awful day that I’ll never forget. We just stood there and watched Wondering which friend was hit.

I remember Paige and her wonderful smile. Passing her in the hall made your day worthwhile. Then Natalie Brooks and her loving heart. She carried her Bible. I remember that part. Stephanie Johnson, she’d always say Hi. And wave at me happily while passing me by. Brittany Varner, I didn’t know her that well. But she was outgoing and funny you could tell. Mrs. Shannon Wright, so loving and true. She had a strong heart, and I thought she’d pull through. These are the people we lost that we love. But someday I’ll see them in the heavens above.

“One Normal Day” was one of the first poems written by students in response to the tragedy. The author, Amanda Gragg, was already in the habit of writing verses to entertain an elderly friend, a blind man. After the tragedy while sitting in home room, Amanda began writing “to get stuff off my mind”

After completing the poem, Amanda shared with friends. Many of them consequently decided to try poems themselves, which they subsequently shared with one another. It was days later that their teacher, Debbie Pelley, made a class assignment: “If I were the mother of your lost classmate, Stephanie Johnson, I would want to know everything about her last day. Write something—a letter, a poem, a para-

graph—for Stephanie’s mother.” Notably, very few letters and no paragraphs were written; instead, most students chose to write poems. The poems more often addressed the students’ reactions to the events, not Stephanie’s last day. Once the students began writing they seemed to follow their own imperatives, using the poems to work through their grief.

“One Normal Day” begins with a chronologically account of the event. The shock of the incident is conveyed by contrasting the day’s normal beginning with the abrupt “we saw people fall.” The middle section of the poem functions as a farewell to the deceased as each student and teacher is named and memorialized in a couplet. Some touching details, such as the fact that Natalie carried her Bible, are included in this section. The concluding couplet gives hope through religion, thus resembling the poetic strategy used by Emily Dickinson in “I Shall Know Why.”

A few students placed their poems on Stephanie’s vacant desk. This display evolved into a shrine that remained until the end of the school year.

Ms. Pelley collected and bound the poetry, which the class then presented as a gift to Stephanie’s mother.

Children of the Wind
by Brianne Meeker, 6th grade

When the wind blows, your world falls apart And a heartbeat is sought after, Never knowing when your turn is on its way. Like the flowers that gently just blow away. Like a child. Like a heartbeat.

When the wind blows, all sways and sways Like a world that is unsteady in many ways, Never knowing when you
are going to be harmed
Like a child unharmed
but scarred in many ways.
Like a child. Like a heartbeat.

When the wind blows, water scatters away
Like children from harm when
death unfolds its arms
Like a child should.
Like a child. Like a heartbeat.
—Dedicated to my teacher and
friend, Mrs. Wright

"Children of the Wind" is deep and remarkably well crafted for such a young writer as Brianne Meeker. Its free verse bears images of mortality and vulnerability that haunt each stanza, repeating and intertwining. Written just three days after the incident, the poem was spontaneous and self-assigned, taking only about 15 minutes of composing time. Brianne says that the poem is intended to be a song.

On the afternoon Brianne wrote the poem, she was accompanying her mother and brother on a fishing expedition to a friend’s pond. In the days following the shootings Brianne clung to her mother, staying close as if for protection. But as they arrived at the pond Brianne withdrew from her mother, declining to participate because at that time she did not care to see anything perish, not even a fish. Since Brianne routinely kept a journal, she had a notebook handy. Sitting among some nearby trees, she began to write.

The wind, gusting then as it had the day of the incident, became a key, repeated image of Brianne’s poem: a destructive force of nature that reveals no conscience. Other, more delicate images drawn from the countryside around her are likened to a child: a leaf, a flower, the water — all are helpless, all are affected capriciously by the dangerous breeze. The image of a heartbeat, a symbol of life, is linked with a child. In the parlance of the poet, we learn that a child can be killed as easily as a flower can be scattered by the breeze.

As the Bells Started Ringing
by Tiffany Ishmael, 6th grade; and
Samantha Ishmael, 10th grade

As the bells started ringing, I started to smile.
I thought it would be the perfect chance
to visit with friends for a while.

We filled the hallway like any other drill
And exited the metal doors
to see our loved ones killed.

The guns sounded like the fourth of July,
but the sight wasn’t as nice.

My mind went blank, my heart stopped
and my body froze like ice.

I saw people running
and others on the ground.

I just sort of stood there looking all around.

I notice familiar faces falling down in pain.

Why was this happening?
Who was to blame?

I never got to say goodbye
to friends that I once knew.

I wish I could go back in time.

I wish there was something I could do.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.
It’s hard to believe it did.

I saw some of my best friends
get killed by another kid.

The Prom and Graduation are things
they will never get to see.
Writing Through Trauma

Their parents won't get the chance
to give them car keys.
They won't be able to cry on our shoulders
when someone breaks their hearts.
Because a tragedy had to come
and tear their lives apart.
It's hard to wear a smile
to hide a million tears.
But I'll eventually get over it
on through the years.
I know I'll see them once again,
but in a sacred place.
And we can pick up right where we left off,
and my pain will be erased.

The first half of "As the Bells Started Ringing" is a narrative of the incident, beginning with the false fire drill. It progresses from exterior details and sense impressions (stools doors, firecracker sounds) to interior impressions (astonishment and confusion) of the observer. Typical of many Westside poems, it asks "why?" Near its conclusion, the poem laments losses — the experiences the victims and families will never share. It ends with an uplifting message that is couched in faith in an afterlife.

"As the Bells Started Ringing" was written collaboratively by middle-schooler Tiffany Ishmael with her older sister Samantha. After the shooting, Samantha and the rest of the Ishmael family acted as a support group for Tiffany. Samantha believes she began to see the event through Stephanie's eyes: "I was feeling the same pain." The process of composing collaboratively helped both girls manage their grief.

According to psychologist Nick Mazza, collaboration offers many of the same benefits of individual writing: recognition of feelings, a measure of control over one's own emotional response, and an outlet for those emotions. Collaboration adds to that a sense of cohesion with another individual or group, diminishing isolation and validating the experience.

The Eulogy

Seven days after the tragedy, the Jonesboro Ministerial Alliance held a memorial service for the benefit of the community. Called the "Service for Hope and Healing," an estimated 8000 attended. The service included a giant-screen, videotaped message of condolences from President Clinton, a live appearance by U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, a performance by an 850-member all-denominational choir, and a series of short eulogies delivered by many of Jonesboro's ministers. Of these eulogies, the one delivered by Reverend Adrian Rodgers was singularly moving, receiving a standing ovation after a passage naming the five loved ones:

Even though the deaths of these students and their teacher were untimely and tragic, we can take comfort in knowing that Natalie Brooks, whom her mother said loved
learn, is now with the Master Teacher.
Paige Herring, whom teachers and fellow students called 'the peacemaker,' is now with the 'Prince of Peace.'
Stephanie Johnson's mother said her daughter shone as brightly as her favorite color, yellow. Stephanie is now with the 'Bright and Morning Star.'
Brithney Varner's mother, Suzanne, said her daughter loved older people. Well, now she can talk to Methuselah, who was 969 years old when he died, and to the Ancient of Days, who is from everlasting to everlasting. Mrs. Wright, who gave her life for another, is now with the One who gave His life for her.

— Excerpt from eulogy delivered by Rev. Adrian R. Rodgers

Delivered in a rousing style reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King, the passage sent waves of good feeling through an audience haggard with sadness. The biblical allusion to Methuselah actually received appreciative laughter from all attending. It led to a remarkable moment: people were laughing and crying at the same time. By the conclusion of the passages, all rose to their feet and applauded their gratitude. To this day, some of those who attended cannot tell the story of being "lifted up" without involuntarily reexperiencing that same emotional rush, tears and all. Over the days that followed, Reverend Rodgers would receive over 500 phone calls and letters of thanks. Two congregations offered him churches.

I believe that passage of the eulogy drew its power from its poetic elements, particularly balance and symmetry. Each of the departed is described in two clauses: the first, earthly and in the past; the second, heavenly and perpetual. In each pair of clauses, the earthly image transforms into a similar heavenly image, giving us a visual impression of the otherwise invisible spiritual transformation undergone by the loved one. For example, we envision first a girl being kind to an old person; next, she is pictured in heaven with the oldest person mentioned in the Bible.

Reverend Rodgers had delivered only one eulogy before this. He says, though, that when he heard of the shooting he strongly
felt the grief of the parents and knew that he would be called upon to lift their spirits.

**Themes**

Many of the Westside poems exhibit common themes, some of which can be recognized as the sequential stages of grieving studied by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, author of *On Death and Dying*: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Other themes that appear in the poems include expressions of fear, reflections on mortality, and tributes to the loved ones.

Some of students' poems focus on one or a few of those themes of grieving. "Children of the Wind" examines mortality, perhaps with an underlying expression of fear. The poem is interesting not only for what it examines but also for what it omits: there is no mention of the lost friends, no overt expression of acceptance. Upon reading this poem, one cannot escape the feeling that the author is still struggling toward acceptance.

Remarkably, some of the poems display most or all the stages. For example, the poem "As the Bells Started Ringing" expresses denial by stating, "This wasn't supposed to happen. It's hard to believe it did." Anger appears in, "Who was to blame?" Perhaps bargaining is evident in the statement, "I wish I could go back in time. I wish there was something I could do." Depression is revealed in the line, "It's hard to wear a smile to hide a million tears." Acceptance concludes the poem: "I know I'll see them once again, but in a sacred place...and my pain will be erased." Such poems act out the process as if vicariously grieving for the poet.

Debbie Pelley, the teacher who encouraged her class to write about their grief, provides perspective on the grieving process in her letter to Tina Johnson McIntyre, mother of Stephanie Johnson: "I don't think we have to feel guilty for feeling emotions of bitterness if we will move on through them [the stages] and back to God as a loving father."

**Poetry as Therapy**

When the National Crisis Team began their crisis intervention at Westside, they advised teachers to get students to express themselves, explaining that within certain boundaries the concern should be with the ability to express rather than with the content of the expression: the repressed students are at greatest risk. According to team leader Scott Poland, "teachers are often in the best position to spot indicators of some troubling behaviors. We don't want to put teachers in the position of being therapists, but they can refer to counselors or parents." Thus the expressive nature of poetry constitutes part of its therapeutic value. According to Westside teacher's aide Rose McGowan, the poetry served as a window on the children's coping mechanisms: "After the shootings, you could see the hurt on the kids' faces, but you didn't know how they were dealing with their feelings until you could see it on paper. Poetry was a positive way to expose their inner feelings."

Psychologist Nick Mazza explains the value of Poetry Therapy, the clinical use of language arts in growth and therapeutic capacities: for trauma victims, poetry therapy provides a release and helps the individual gain a sense of order and control. According to Mazza, "The writing serves as an outlet and safety
Writing Through Trauma

valve, a safe place to begin to express feelings and sort them out.”

Control of the emotion seems connected to control over the language of poetry. Educator James Britton confirms the value of control: “when told that a student had begun weeping over a piece of her own writing and had left class to shape it, he observed, ‘And, I should think, the more shaped, the more therapeutic’” (Britton, 1982).

John Fox, a certified poetry therapist, regards poetry as a therapeutic means of self-discovery: “Poetry is a natural medicine; it is like a homeopathic tincture derived from the stuff of life itself... Poetry provides guidance, revealing what you did not know you knew before you wrote or read the poem. This moment of surprising yourself with your own words of wisdom or of being surprise by the poems of others is at the heart of poetry as healer.”

As we realize the value of poetry in our lives, especially the personal need for poetic expression in times of emotional trauma, the role of teachers of English and language arts assumes a new dimension. Understanding and writing poetry is not merely an exercise in art appreciation. It is more than just a means of developing the ability to analyze and communicate. When a teacher teaches poetry, the lesson ultimately may be about emotional survival. Every student is “a poet and don't know it.” Helping a student discover the inner poet may be one of the most important goals of teachers of writing.

**References**


Poland, Scott. (1998, January). [Phone conversation with Scott Poland, Leader of National Crisis Team; Director of Psychological Services for CY-FAIR Schools].


Robert Lamm is director of the Northeast Arkansas Writing Project.

---

**U. of Oregon Writing Project TC Wins Hechinger Award**

Each year at the November meeting of the National Writing Project, the NWP and The Center For the Study of Writing present the Fred Hechinger Award to a classroom teacher who in his or her work successfully connects writing research to writing practice. The award is named for the late New York Times education writer who, until his death in 1995, served as chair of CSW’s National Advisory Board.

This year’s award went to Linda Christensen, a teacher for more than 20 years at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon. Christensen has had a long-time connection with NWP, having participated in the summer institute at the University of Oregon in 1980.

In nominating Christensen, Nathaniel Teich, Project Director at the Oregon Writing Project at the University of Oregon, writes that “both her classroom teaching and her public professional activities have been grounded in rigorous critical scholarship, questioning established assumptions and practices while advocating a responsible agenda for change. Additionally, she has admirable ethical concerns for respectful understanding of a multi-cultural society, and warmth and sensitivity to students of all abilities.”

The awards committee recognized Christensen for her “outstanding work with diverse groups of students, and her clear connection between the research on multilingual, multicultural classrooms and the creative teaching practices she developed.”