

Haven Herald



How poetry brings comfort in times of grief by Janice Moody

When a loved one dies, we look to a variety of ways to help bring comfort to our grieving process. We find self-help books on grief, memoirs, works of fiction with death and grief woven into the plots. Often, we find excerpts from these writings that bring comfort to us as we process our own personal grief.

Whether you are a lover of poetry or not, reading poems or even just excerpts from poems can bring solace to our lives.

In a Washington Post Thursday Opinion essay on May 25, 2023, Josie Glausiusz wrote about how poems gave her an anchor in her grief as she lost her 12-year old son to cancer. As he lay dying in his hospital bed, she climbed in next to him and wrapping her arms around him, recited “Jabberwocky”, a poem he loved: “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/ did gyre and gimble in the wabe...” Her son was a passionate reader, but as his cancer advanced, he was unable to read. His mother read to him. This brought comfort to both.

A few days later she started her own poetry group, calling it “Poetry Is Medicine”, inviting friends to join and share poems that brought joy to their lives. When her son died, her grief was enormous, and she stopped posting poems. Then a friend sent her “Late Fragment” by Raymond Carver: “And what did you want? /To call yourself beloved, /to feel myself beloved on the earth.” In response to this Josie says in her essay: “It offered me some small comfort, because I knew that even in my son’s darkest hours, he was always loved-and still is-and was never for a moment alone.”

As she began to realize how reading poems had brought comfort not only to her son, but to her as well, she began once again to share poems with her group. It was a way to move through her own grief and be able to get up in the morning to take care of her daughter who was also grieving the death of her brother.

Letter from the Executive Director

Fall takes us to a different mood as we anticipate change once again. The vibrancy of this season of colors and cooler days offers a welcome contrast to summer’s hot temperatures and high humidity. Fall calls us to get outside and enjoy the beauty of this special time of year, but for those who are grieving the joy may be difficult to find.

At Haven this is a busy time of year as we prepare for our fall groups, workshops and community presentations. The beautiful fall foliage that surrounds Haven’s house is a gentle reminder that change is part of life. The predictable rhythm of the seasons may provide a bit of hope and comfort to those who are dealing with the overwhelming changes that losing a loved one can bring.

The topic of this newsletter is how poetry can resonate for those in grief. A poem can be a connection to what we are feeling or give perspective to the profound experience of loss. Poetry is very personal but it can also be powerful. A poem might be exactly what is needed and appreciated in our moment of sorrow.

Jill Bellacicco



**Haven is committed to the emotional support of the bereaved,
and to the seriously ill, the dying, and their families and friends.**

FOLLOW UP

After this essay was published the Washington Post followed it with another Thursday Opinion piece on June 15: “Which poems help in hard times? Here’s what readers told us.” Josie Glausiusz’s earlier essay prompted many readers to share poems and excerpts from poems that they found helpful in difficult times.

One writer shared how after his parents died, he began memorizing difficult poems as he mourned. Doing so helped him “distract himself from himself.”

Another reader often turned to the poem “Go Now” by Gary Snyder. The poet is dealing with his wife’s illness and death from cancer. The line in the poem that the reader especially related to is: “This is the price of attachment /Worth it. Easily worth it.”

Perhaps one of the most poignant examples comes from a woman whose husband of 47 years was in a coma, and she read many times to him E.E. Cumming’s “I Carry Your Heart With Me.” She would end the poem with her own summation, “Your heart is in my heart; my heart is in yours.”

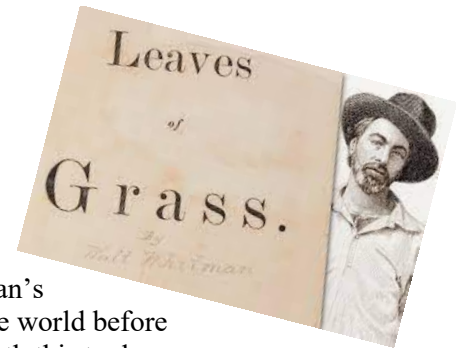
As Josie Glausiusz said in her earlier opinion essay: “With just a word or a phrase, a poem can reach the hidden places that prayers or well-meaning advice cannot.”

Reading these two essays, one begins to realize that poetry brings comfort to both the dying and to the survivor.

WHAT WORKED FOR ME

By Janice Moody

The rhythm, the choice of words, the imagery, the beauty, the ability to take a quite ordinary thought or image and turn it into poetry had a profound effect on me as I began to read again several months after the death of my wife, Betsy. I found whole poems, or sometimes just a line or two that brought some peace and solace as I worked through my grief. Over the years we had often shared our favorite passages from literary pieces and had even attempted to have a poetry group bring their favorite poems to recite and discuss.



When we traveled with friends, we often began the day with lines from Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass”: ‘Afoot and lighthearted I take to the open road. /Healthy, free, the world before me, /The long brown path before me, /leading wherever I choose.’ After Betsy’s death this took on new meaning for me as I continue to recite the lines when traveling without her. I feel as if she is still with me.

Another passage from Whitman helps keep Betsy close: “I celebrate myself, /And what I assume you shall assume, /For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

In another passage from Whitman the excerpt feels as if Betsy is speaking to me: “Goodbye, my Fancy! /Farewell dear mate, dear love! / I’m going away, I know not where.../ The slower fainter ticking of the clock is in me.../Yet let me not be too hasty.../If we go anywhere, we’ll go together to meet what happens, / May-be we’ll be better off and blither, and learn something.../So now finally, Good-bye – and hail! My Fancy.”

It has been five years since she passed away, and yet when I read these lines, I find a slight smile appearing. Her body was slowing down in the end, and, yes, she was leaving me, but I see us blithering and learning together as we travel new paths.

There are so many other poems that bring comfort and joy to me as I continue to live without my spouse physically present. Here are some of my favorite poets and a few poems:

W.H. Auden, “Funeral Blues.” I especially like the lines: “He was my North, my South, my East and West. My working week, and my Sunday rest, My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song. I thought that love would last forever ...”

Carrie Newcomer, Jan Richardson, and Joyce Rupp have poems that address the emotional impact of losing someone and the grief that we work through in order to thrive, to have purpose in life once again. Here are some of my favorite excerpts:

From “The Presence of Absence”
Carrie Newcomer

From “Blessing”
Carrie Newcomer

“There is a hole in the place you used to be.
Sometimes it fades
Like an ink stain or memory,
Or a word on the tip of your tongue.
Sometimes it yawns open like a crumbling pothole
Deep enough to take out a tire,
That strands me by the side of the road,
...
This hollowed out place has become a companion,”

“May you wake with a sense of play,
An exultation of the possible.
...
May the friendships you’ve sown
Grown tall as summer corn.
And the things you’ve left behind,
Rest quietly in the unchangeable past.”

From Joyce Rupp’s book,
PRAYING Our GOODBYES

“Somewhere within
The seed has sprouted.
I can feel its movement;
I can sense its energy.

Somewhere within
The rainfall has reached.
My desert is gone,
My dryness has disappeared.

Somewhere within
I’ve been given life again.
I can say goodbye to emptiness;
I can say hello to fullness.



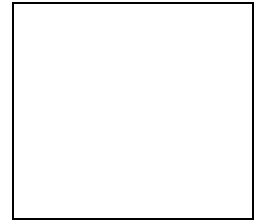
HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net

Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

4606 Ravensworth Road

Annandale, Virginia 22003



Fall Schedule

NEW

In Person - Open Suicide Loss Support Group
2nd Saturday of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Parent Loss Workshop
Saturday, November 4, 2023
10:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Call Haven to register for groups.

ZOOM - Suicide Loss Support Group
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

Haven of Northern Virginia
4606 Ravensworth Road
Annandale, Virginia 22003
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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our voicemail after hours