

# **Ballad – Inscription – Healing Wells**

## **Three Bibliotherapy Workshops**

**Valerie Gillies**

### Workshop 1

#### **The Use of a Ballad in Psychiatric Hospital**

'They say I'm crazy, but I wasn't crazy till they brought me here!' In response to this remark by a patient in a 'locked' ward, I brought in a ballad by the poet Charles Causley, from Cornwall, 'John Polruddon'. A ballad, which is a poem that tells a story, can provide patients with the opportunity to tell their own stories or write their own poems, and this ballad, which is about the disappearance of Polruddon after pirates have sailed in close to his house, held a fascination for the eight patients, men and women, sitting around a table in a side room of the ward.

I began to recite the poem by heart (while keeping a copy close by me, for this was a group where people often became easily distracted).

John Polruddon

All of a sudden

Went out of his house one night,

When a privateer

Came sailing near

Under his window-light.

As the daylight ebbed outside on a dark Halloween afternoon, we sat with our blank sheets of pastel-coloured paper and Stabilo Easygraph HB pencils. This is a ward where there are frequent 'missing person' incidents with the police attending, and the patients immediately felt an involvement with the story.

They saw his wine,

His silver shine,

They heard his fiddlers play.

'Tonight,' they said,  
'Out of his bed  
Polruddon we'll take away.'

The story is a true one, from Tudor times. What happened to John Polruddon? Was he kidnapped to become a slave in America? We only know that he vanished from his farmhouse above the Cornish coast.

And never more  
Through his own door  
Polruddon went nor came,

Though many a tide  
Has turned beside  
The cliff that bears his name.

As the poem ended, one woman shouted, "Quick, give me paper! Quick, I want to write something!" and the others reached for paper and pencil, too.

Who is each person here? Who were they before they were admitted here? What is that sense they have of being carried off from where they once were? These were questions I didn't need to ask: the ballad had raised them already.

The group wrote their own ideas in poetry and story, some with my help to scribe for them, after they had heard the ballad. A portrait of John Polruddon emerged on paper at one side of the table, while all around, other writers filled their pages with new legends. Nurses told me later that the patients talked to one another about these stories in the ward all the following week.

### **Further reading**

Charles Causley, *Collected Poems 1915–2000*, Picador, 2000  
ed. James Reed, *Border Ballads*, Fyfield Books, 2003

## Workshop 2

### **A World of Few Words: Making Inscriptions with Outpatients at a Day Centre**

“I used to like reading, but I don’t anymore.” This is a common experience among people who are recovering from illness or undergoing prolonged treatment. Often people don’t want to take a lot of words on board, either to read or to write. Yet they may have an underlying hope that they will read and write again someday, to reconnect with the world. The return of words can embody a return to health.

The inscription workshops took place on wintry mornings with people recovering from mental illness, at a day centre. It was a challenge to work outside at that time of year, with people having to put their coats back on after they had recently taken them off. Some group participants had travelled through wintry hills and icy back roads to get to the Centre. However, this setting of run-down hospital buildings, soon to be closed, did have the advantage of an old Victorian garden, greenhouse and orchard outside. The inscription workshops concluded by helping people to take photos of their writing, in the garden, which can easily be done by people using their own phones.

#### *A Writing Workshop for Inscription*

We begin indoors, by listening to a few haiku, and to these witty, humorous examples in particular:

windy demo —  
swatted in the face  
by a ‘Peace’ flag

a try! a try!  
Cymru yes! could swing it yet —  
the cats leave the room

(Nigel Jenkins)

the puppy  
ferociously challenging  
a daffodil

rain falling  
especially  
on me

(Alan Spence)

We write one or two haiku, together, line by line going around the group, and putting the lines up on a white board. These describe our journey through the snow to the centre this morning. Outside, it has just stopped snowing. In response to this, we go out into the garden, armed with teaspoons from the kitchen, to write in the snow. The tops of hedges, the lawn, the panes of glass in the old greenhouse, all are covered with sufficient depth of snow to make a surface for people to write a word or two. A low curved wall around the doorway has snow lying on top of its coping-stones, and it is here that a young man recovering from his illness writes his one carefully-chosen, accurate word: "coping". It says it all. We take photographs of the inscriptions for everyone to keep.

This is writing that you *feel* as well as read. The strong instinct to feel the word by inscribing it has been with us since humans first invented writing. There are many ways to enable people to create their own inscription. All of them can be adapted to the environment in which the workshop takes place, and can help people reconnect to nature. We struck it lucky with the snow, but other seasons lend themselves to this kind of writing experience, too.

#### *Laurel leaves and a twig*

For example, in summer I can bring in a few laurel leaves. People can choose a single word to inscribe on it, which is simply done by using the blunt end of the pencil, or a twig, to trace the letters lightly. They will not be visible at first, but by popping the leaf inside clothing, next to the skin if you can, or inside inner garments,

to warm up, and leaving it there for the rest of the workshop, then taking it out about an hour later, the letters will be revealed as if by magic.

### *Embody the word*

“I need to walk, to write.”

Take a few minutes to observe your surroundings and jot down some words. People can be encouraged to walk around the room, look out of a window, or best of all, to spend a little time outdoors, observing and jotting down on paper. It’s good to walk and write, if possible; to change the colour of pen, the thickness of paper, to feel the resistance of pencil on paper, to change position, standing or sitting. This kind of observation can work even in hospital grounds:

### **Between Walls**

the back wings  
of the

hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders

in which shine  
the broken

pieces of a green  
bottle

(William Carlos Williams)

*Choose a word or two.*

Looking over the jottings, where does the energy lie in this writing? Which word, or three words, will you choose to inscribe?

### *Options for inscribing*

Water on dry paving-stones; use a sports water-bottle. Photograph the inscription before it dries.

Chalk on an old roofing-slate.

Luggage Labels (best quality brown). Pencil marks will last for months, even outdoors, tied to a tree.

Plant Name Markers (wooden). Can be re-used, if lightly sandpapered down. Write in pencil.

Yellow Dusters. Use red or black marker pen, a washing line and pegs.

Postcard or photo for a friend: use a black or silver Posca pen to write a word or phrase across the image. Once this is posted, it becomes mail art, and may prompt a response from the recipient.

There are many more possibilities, especially if the budget allows. Write on paper hats, on paper lanterns, print on T-shirts or even on the hospital plates, to put up in the canteen.

Today we live beneath a cascading torrent of information. Sometimes the selection of a single word, or of three words, is how we survive, just keeping our heads above water. It is part of our process of individuation: choosing our own word, making our own mark.

### **Further reading**

Nigel Jenkins, *O for a gun*, Planet, 2007

Alan Spence, *Seasons of the Heart*, Canongate, 2000

ed. Charles Tomlinson, *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*, Penguin Modern Classics, 2000

ed. Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay, *The Order of Things*, pocketbooks, 2001

## Workshop 3

### **Healing Wells Writing Workshop for psychiatric hospital or general hospital.**

For this workshop you need to be able to show one or two recent photographs of wells, either from *The Spring Teller* by Valerie Gillies, or from Phil Cope's *The Well at the World's End*. There are also many photographs of wells on the internet. Pass the photos around the group. Ask people what they notice about these places. Then give out some copies of this poem, 'Frog Spring'.

### **Frog Spring**

Surprised by my tasting the spring, a golden frog  
leaps to the bank. He flies to froggy places,  
his ankle-joints stretch the moment.

A puddock from his pop-eyes to his paddle-toes,  
he darts out of the vital pool. Immortal frog,  
to see him so healthy is a sure sign

the spring will do the same for me.  
He hops past my shoulder into the paddy-pipes,  
the reed-bed pockets frog. He vanishes through,  
each spear of rush keeps its own drop of dew.

#### *Guide for the Workshop leader:*

##### The Poem

Reading this poem is a way of awakening body, mind and heart. Listen for words and phrases that speak to you. You are tuning up your ears. Be ready to receive words, make room for them. You are opening the book of the land. When you listen, you're not trying to get anywhere. When you visit a well, you've already arrived. It's not telling you the next place to go. It's here, right now. You are bringing yourself to it, to become so immersed in the place that you lose track of time. You open your heart to a quality of timelessness.

## A Story

Tell a story about a well, from Phil Cope's book. Ask to hear some stories that people have heard or know about wells. Have they seen one anywhere? Do they know of anyone who has visited a well, or fetched water from it? Listening to stories encourages us to develop 'golden ears' for hearing each other. Each person who says something should feel that they are being listened to. In this way, their ideas will come to life and grow. When they are listened to, the fountain will spring up.

## A Sketch (optional, if time allows)

Invite people to make a sketch of a well, using pencils and crayons. The sketch can be a rough drawing, very simple, of their idea of a well. There could be a grassy bank above a pool; watercress or reeds or flag iris growing at the edge of the water; a frog or a pond insect there, or a dragonfly above it. The clear water is flowing out of it and away. One or two colours can be added, but the sketch is a way of focusing, not the whole of the workshop. Keep it to ten minutes or so.

## Write (in pencil, on a blank sheet of paper)

"The well you've chosen is already speaking to you. Can you hear it? What does it say?"

Use either spoken words, to be scribed by the workshop leader, or free-flow writing for 10 – 20 minutes (depending on the abilities of the group) to explore the place and the experience of imagining it.

## Share

This writing can be shared with others, if people want to. Ask them to listen to their own words, to listen for the word or phrase that speaks from the heart. Repeat any phrase that seems particularly true. Let the word or phrase rise up like springwater in the workshop. Read a line over again, let its meaning shimmer like water coming out into the sunlight. Encourage people to lean back and close their eyes to think about their favourite line, if they wish. Remember, the words should be shimmering for them.

## *Products of the workshop*

Choose from the following ideas:

A

Taking a small card, a sticky note or a bookmark, people can write (or the workshop leader can scribe for them) a word or phrase to keep in their pocket for the rest of the day. Which phrase will they choose to memorise, to let it rise up again and again like the water in the well?

B

Return to the sketch or to a print-out of a photo and write on it, on any place that there's room for a few words. Gold or silver Posca pens are ideal for this.

C

For this you will need blank paper and coloured pens, fine-liners as well as thick marker pens. Take a fresh sheet of paper and write the chosen word or phrase over and over again, using different colours and different handwriting: script, print in capitals, scribble. Let the words overlap one another. Each time someone writes the word or words, let them echo. One example from a recent workshop was the word 'leaf' written overlapping many times and in several colours. This looked very effective and the group enjoyed seeing it; several people remarked that it looked like real leaves.

Enjoy the space to write beside the well!

'In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start.'  
W.H.Auden

### **Further reading**

Valerie Gillies, *The Spring Teller*, Luath, Edinburgh, 2008

Phil Cope, *The Well at the World's End*, Seren, Wales, 2015

'Swordy Well' from *Selected Poetry of John Clare*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Faber and Faber, 2004

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