



Writing and Healing:

Harnessing Creativity to Promote Well-Being for Ourselves and Others

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NMAAFP Winter Refresher
February 27, 2021

Disclosure

- I have nothing to disclose

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voice behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and
deeper into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life that you could
save.

The Journey
Mary Oliver

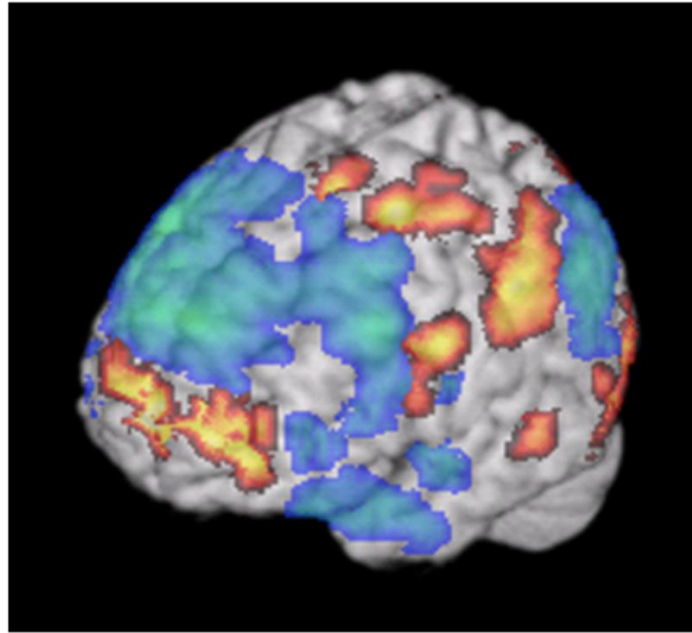


Objectives

- Attach value to the importance of reflective writing in the daily lives of professionals
- Recognize creative writing as a tool of critical self-reflection for ongoing personal and professional identity formation
- Identify different ways to adapt reflective writing and creativity into daily practice and team-based clinical settings.



The Science of Creativity

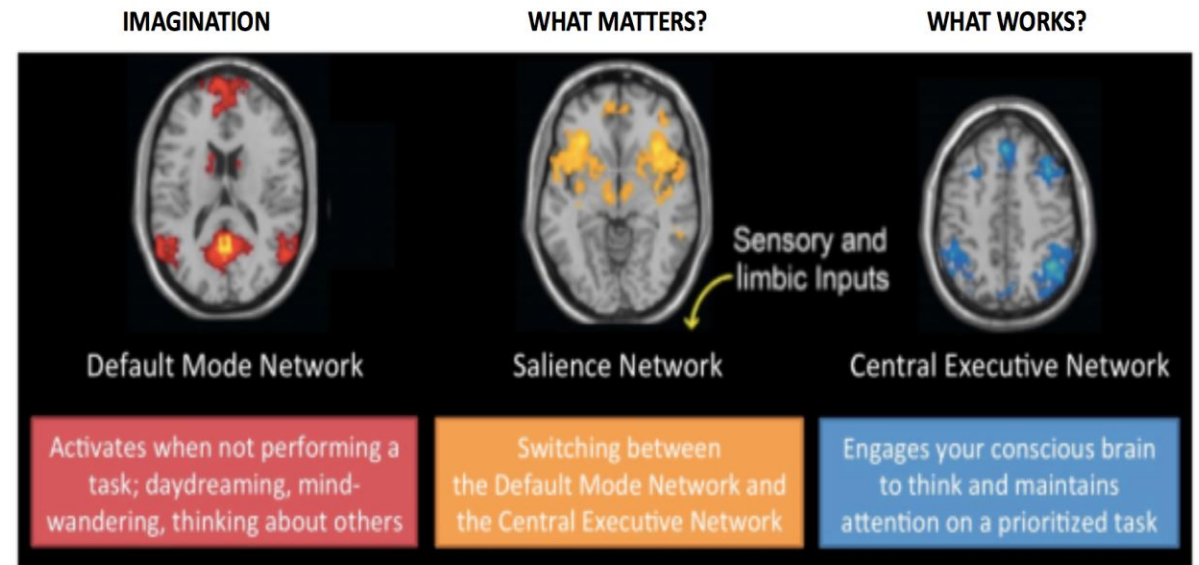


An example of brain activity during a freestyle jazz improvisational performance. Orange indicates areas of activation, and blue indicates areas of deactivation. The pattern seen here is associated with a switch from the Executive Network to the Imagination Network.

Charles Limb and Allen Braun

Creativity and the Brain

- **How Creative You Are:**
- Number of connections between 3 areas
- Speed of activity between those connections



The three networks of the brain that are associated with creativity; the Imagination (Default Mode), Salience and Executive Attention (Central Executive) networks. The networks function together to produce what we think of as creative thought.

Adapted from Bressler and Menon (2010)

Creativity and the Brain

- *"I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them."*

—Pablo Picasso



The Weeping Woman
1937, Pablo Picasso

Review > [Mt Sinai J Med.](#) 2009 Aug;76(4):372-80. doi: 10.1002/msj.20126.

Evaluating the impact of the humanities in medical education

[Andrea Wershof Schwartz](#) ¹, [Jeremy S Abramson](#), [Israel Wojnowich](#), [Robert Accordino](#),
[Edward J Ronan](#), [Mary R Rifkin](#)

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 19642151 DOI: [10.1002/msj.20126](#)

Comment > [Lancet.](#) 1996 Apr 13;347(9007):1046-7. doi: 10.1016/s0140-6736(96)90185-3.

Poetry and the humanisation of medicine

[C Weber](#), [A Pos](#), [A Oderwald](#)

PMID: 8606589 DOI: [10.1016/s0140-6736\(96\)90185-3](#)

> [Minn Med.](#) 2004 Jul;87(7):18-20, 45.

A dose of humanities. At the University of Minnesota and elsewhere, poetry and prose are enhancing the medical school curriculum

[Miriam Karmel](#)

PMID: 15311636

> [Perspect Med Educ.](#) 2012 Mar;1(1):43-50. doi: 10.1007/s40037-012-0008-1. Epub 2012 Mar 13.

The role of poetry and prose in medical education: the pen as mighty as the scalpel?

[Frank J Wolters](#) ¹, [Marjo Wijnen-Meijer](#)

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 23316458 PMCID: [PMC3540367](#) DOI: [10.1007/s40037-012-0008-1](#)

[Free PMC article](#)

Review > [Front Neurol.](#) 2015 Jan 22;6:3. doi: 10.3389/fneur.2015.00003. eCollection 2015.

Creative Expression of Science through Poetry and Other Media can Enrich Medical and Science Education

[Sherry-Ann Brown](#) ¹

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 25657637 PMCID: [PMC4302945](#) DOI: [10.3389/fneur.2015.00003](#)

[Free PMC article](#)

Review > [Med J Aust.](#) 2005 Jan 3;182(1):5-8.

Medical humanities: to cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always

[Jill Gordon](#) ¹

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 15651937

Creativity and Provider Well Being

▪ *Burnout vs. Moral Injury*

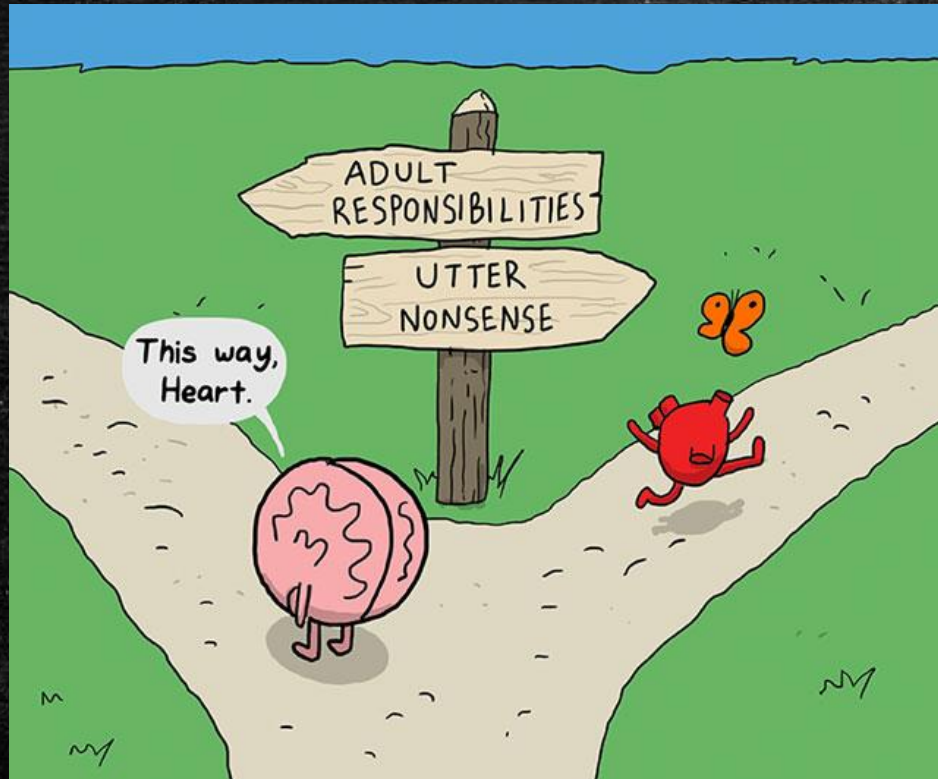
- *Burnout is a psychological syndrome that can be defined as 'emotional and exhausting conditions related to working environment.' The three domains of burnout are **emotional exhaustion**, **depersonalization**, and **low personal achievement**."*

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6682395/>

- *Moral injury describes the challenge of simultaneously knowing what care patients need but being unable to provide it due to constraints that are beyond our control.*

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6752815/>

Creative Culture and Medical Culture— Paradox or Perfect Partners?



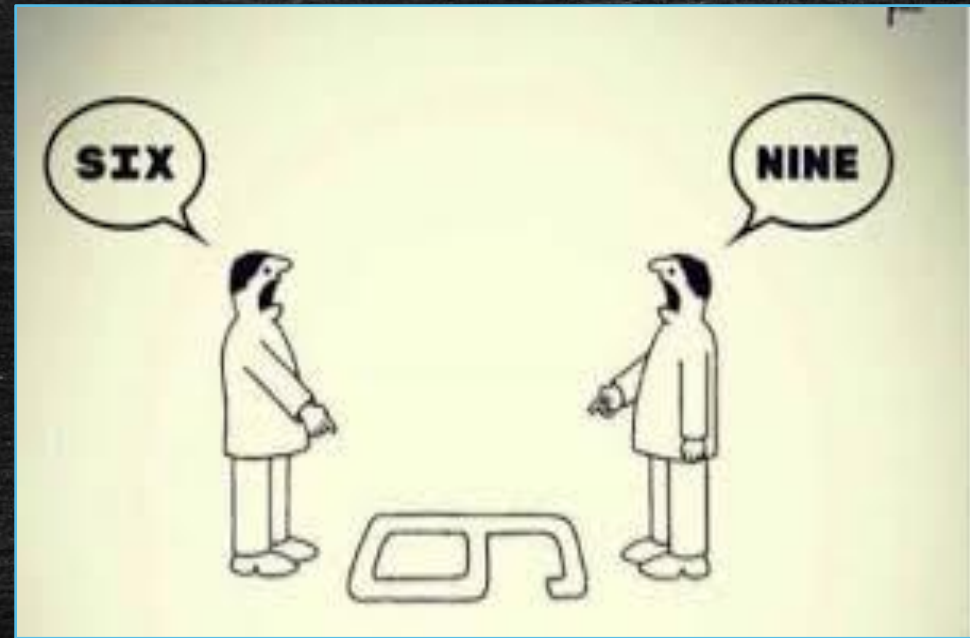
www.theAwkwardYeti.com



theAwkwardYeti.com

To sum it up... *Why Reflection?*

- Learn to pay attention to what matters and remain present—
Time capital
- *Process the why and the how* of the now to inform our future selves of what worked and didn't
- Serves as a medium to express what we perceive and why with psychological safety—
Your Voice Matters
- Helps us seek necessary perspectives beyond our own—
Personal and Professional Growth



Tips for writing...

For folks who *maybe* don't love freeform

- Bullet points are your friend
- Single words...drawings...repetition of an idea...scattered ideas on a page...incomplete sentences followed by lots of dashes and ellipses—*also your friends*
- Ignore grammar—Unless it's important to you
- Write in a different color
- Try a different point of view
- Nix the Judgement

Three Reflective Exercises to Bring Humanism to a Team Setting

- Poetry Rounds
- 5 Minute Free Write (+/- a prompt)
- Melodies with meaning

Poetry Rounds

- A team member (including you) brings in a poem
- Can be any poem on any topic
- Read it twice as a team out loud—two different voices
- Gently pause for 60 seconds of silence and ask people to reflect
- Ask each person to write down a word, a phrase, or a couple words on their list or in their phone (they don't have to share!)
- Go about rounds/patient care for the day
- Encourage them to do something creative or reflective that evening with what they wrote down

Sometimes
the short poems
are the hardest
to write
change one word
and the whole poem
avocados.

Atticus

Poetry Rounds

- Why it works:
 - Usually takes 5 minutes or less
 - People don't have to talk, but they are still engaged
 - Tailors reflective capacity to an individual's preferences—*more than just writing*
 - Poems read twice stay with us longer
 - Requires in the moment processing of an idea/emotions from the poem while also encouraging and providing a framework for actionable follow-up reflection on one's own time and at one's own capacity.

Poetry Rounds

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The Journey
Mary Oliver

Responses

- *"I want to ask the wizard for a heart..."*
- *"Toxic people"*
- *"How do I get to where I need to be?"*
- *"Stiff fingers remind me of arthritis"*
- *"Mend my life!!!!!! I just need a day off"*
- *"I wish I had time to see the stars"*

The Five Minute Free Write

- Great for individual and group reflection
- Serves as a form of meditative practice
- Set a time for 5 minutes
- Write whatever comes to mind
- Let the pen keep moving



So Many Prompts

- Tell about a time words mattered
- Tell of a time you listened to yourself
- Write about a time you listened
- Begin your writing with "How strange a thing is life..."
- Write about a situation of peril or protection
- Tell about a time a story moved you
- Write about a broken heart
- Write about a time a needle was involved
- Tell about a time you hoped for something
- Write about a time you overcame fear
- Write about a time you were cold
- Write about a time you colored outside of the lines
- Write about a sunrise or a sunset
- Write about a journey
- Tell about a time music mattered to you
- Write about a time when death was present
- Write about a time you were seen
- Write about a time you saw another

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Melodies with Meaning

- Great for Ice breakers, provider/team meetings
- Engages medical assistants and support staff
- Ask for a volunteer to choose a patient—known or unknown to the group
- Ask them to choose a song that reminds them of this specific patient
- Ask them to write a few words of *why* they chose that song
 - Cite specific highlights from the lyrics, melody, general mood
 - Needs only be 3-4 sentences
- Gentle encouragement of tasteful, thoughtful song choices that promotes a culture of respect for each other and the patients



Melodies with Meaning

- **Patient:** xx is a 46 yo former professional athlete with hx of MVA that resulted in a C-spine fracture and quadriplegia
- **Song:** "I hope you Dance" by Lee Ann Womack
- **Rationale:**

I once spent 30 minutes talking to xx about his love of painting. His hands were deformed. Broken knuckles I could picture bloody and tied together when he mounted up on the O-line of the turf. He'd started to develop contractures in his wrist and had inward bowing and lost control of his fingers. Moved to using sponges instead of brushes. And I'll never forget the painting he made of the ocean. It was abstract. Large strokes. 50 shades of perfect blue. And he'd never even seen the ocean in person. *I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance. Never settle for the path of least resistance. Living might mean taking chances but they're worth taking.* I just remember hearing the song on some 4 hour late night drive on the 285 from Roswell and thinking of him. I've heard that song a lot, and don't particularly know why, but I cried.

Mezirow's Framework for Reflection

- Theory of reflection and Transformative Learning
- Personal identity and life experience shapes the way we view events
- Expanding experiences and discussing with others allows for the formation of new perspectives



Mezirow's Framework for Reflection

- **Content reflection:** reflecting on the sequence of events related to the experience
- **Process reflection:** reflecting on how we responded to the event or experience
- **Premise reflection:** reflecting on underlying theories, opinions, or values that shaped our response or what happened to the event or experience.

Academic Reflective Writing

- More structured approach
- Smaller groups work (4-7) work best
- Guided weekly reflections
- Often follows along with a text

Creative Writing and Critical Reflection

Danielle Ofri's *What Doctors Feel*

- **Chapter 1- The Doctor Can't See You Now**
- **Verbal discussion:**
 - What are ways we can show compassion for others?
 - Does this differ in the healthcare setting?
 - Ofri writes that empathy is easier when we have common ground with the other person. What challenges does this create when dealing with people with diverse backgrounds and life experiences?

Reflective Exercise

- Reflect on a time you wish you would have responded to a situation in a different manner than you did.
 - Describe the situation/circumstances/setting. Describe the people involved.
 - What happened? **Content reflection**
 - How did you respond then and how would you respond now? **Process Reflection**
 - Why? What underlying notions, beliefs, and attitudes contributed to your initial response? **Premise Reflection**
 - 250 words/1 page.

Resources on writing

- *Bird by Bird* – Anne Lamott
- *The Modern Library Writer's Workshop* – Stephen Koch
- *On Writing* – Stephen King
- *A Poetry Handbook* – Mary Oliver
- *Writing Down the Bones* – Natalie Goldberg
- *Taos Writing Retreat for Healthcare Professionals*
- *Women in Medicine: Arts and Humanism in medicine*
- <https://www.theintima.org>

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Questions?

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