Poetry and Grace: Encounter and Spiritual Exercise
Through word to wordlessness

Introduction

In this chapter I show how engagement with particular sub-genres of poetry is prayer which inspires the dynamic journey with God, that is the journey in love and freedom.

I begin with reference to Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who speaks about the affect and effect of poetry on the reader when he defines a poet as:

An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music ...

He continues

And people flock around the poet and say: 'Sing again soon' - that is, 'May new sufferings torment your soul but your lips be fashioned as before, for the cry would only frighten us, but the music, that is blissful.1

My view, which adds sobriety to Kierkegaard’s emotional portrayal of poets, is that a poet is someone who has written and usually studied poetry. There are few poets who do not try to hone their skills by serious technical study of poetry or by reading the work of respected poets. Most know the rules of poetry well enough to know when they are breaking them.

This chapter focuses on the art of poetry and discusses the various encounters integral to the spiritual exercise of prayer in aspects of poetry.

In this chapter I will discuss:

- The conception of a poem

• The character of a poem

• Re-drafting and editing

• Knowing in encountering poetry

• God as poet, I as poem

• Poetry and ministry

Poetry begins with inspiration. It uses word and the technical elements of poetic form to contribute to the experience of voice, sound, content and meaning.

In my experience, writing poetry offers a graced place of integration between the mind, body and spirit. It provides the security I need to explore liminal, risky spaces. Poetry points beyond itself to other worlds, perhaps to an integrated world, to a world of hopes and desires. Poetry points to the God who makes poetry possible.

The conception of a poem

a. Mystery as inspiration

According to Michael Leunig, Australian cartoonist and poet, the part of the mind capable of poetry has become redirected over time. He expresses this idea in the following cartoon.²

The poetic part of Michael Leunig’s brain does engage poetry. As he reflects on the consolation of ‘unknowing’, he offers the ‘mysterious’ confusion, in the last poetic frame, as a source of inspiration and hope.

Poetry emerges from encountering the world of people, places, ideas and all things. It is sometimes difficult to analyse why a particular event or experience is more inspirational to a poet than another, but for me it seems that I am drawn to things which hold a question for me; questions which need to be explored rather than answered.

While crossing the Tasman Sea returning from New Zealand to Melbourne, we passed a mountain jutting up from bleak grey waters. I likened it to an iceberg whose large mass is largely under sea level. I stood on the deck of the cruise liner for as long as it took to pass the mountain. The mountain fascinated me and beckoned the question of its meaning in my life. In my imagination I encountered the depths of the landmass I could not see. I felt small.

Mysteriously the poem *Family Secret* was written before the Christchurch, New Zealand, earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. The mountain now speaks to me of transience. The hidden part of the mountain is suddenly vulnerable at the point of an
earth tremor, just as the mind is vulnerable in the awakening of new awareness. When I listen and watch, I receive the invitation to examine my life. I can choose what response to make. The mountain also symbolizes how we are in cosmic relationships, affected by all around us. We mirror both chaos and quiet stability present in the cosmos.

Family Secret

The mountain emerged
some time ago in fault-line country

quakes and tremors are expected
but no-one speaks about the mountain
There in the distance
now suddenly close

overtaking perception and meaning
casting dark shadows on loved things
it cheats the day of warmth and light
pushes the sky into memory
the well into dreams

and the mountain groans
all around freeze
as the fiery furnace
spews its belly into the ocean

shaping re-shaping
the geography of family

I am aware of the visible ‘mountain’ hiding invisible potency which influences and enhances my life. These influences have collaborated with the power of the Spiritual Exercises asking me to respond to life as a poet.
The character of a poem

a. Revelation

Poetry is concentrated, intense or distilled literature. It is an artistic form of prose. Shelley found that the distinctive feature of poetry is its ‘power to reveal and illuminate.’¹ Poetry, like prayer, has the capacity to reveal and illuminate whatever needs light shed upon it.

In poetry, new perspectives are created in a spirit of trust, as Teilhard de Chardin states ‘I do not know if or in what way I will be tomorrow.’² Poetry is like a dream: unconscious material wants to reveal itself through the poem. I rely on reflection and prayer and the responses of others to further this process of growing awareness. New meanings from the poem emerge just as new experiences and meanings unravel from life every day. The poet and poem therefore are changed between the conception, the writing of the poem and reflection on it.

Poised

to take the only step I can
into the true place
small and irresistible call
heard in every cell propelled
softly dispelling
the anguish of not knowing;
of going where I have never been
the place where I can never look back.
This step I take,
shedding all
labels stamped skin-deep.
This step I take
in unblemished skin
touching your unseen hand

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feeling steady your pulse
ready to hear its rhythm
rock into place
breathe grace-
chords played on heartstrings
shawled, enthralled,
the aura of more.

Where am I to go, my God.
Make concrete your desires.
Is it a word, a phrase I must speak;
a sentence strung along the horizon
tipping me into a new world
Is it the first paragraph
of a new story
waiting silently
for a title.

b. Figurative language

In order to achieve an illuminating and integrated piece of poetry, the poet learns about the word tools and forms of poetry. Among the diverse definitions of poetry, critic Harold Bloom says:

Poetry essentially is figurative language, concentrated so that its form is both expressive and evocative. Figuration is a departure from the literal, and the form of a great poem itself can be a trope ("turning") or figure.5

The trope has multiple meanings in poetry, but in prayer it reminds me of paradox, the way in which God helps the person to see things from a variety of perspectives, often turning upside down what is generally accepted. This extract from my poem *Uncomfortable love* inverts the image of Jesus Christ as ‘meek and mild’.

Do you imagine Jesus softly spoken
when he names the *Brood of Vipers*
or draping silken vowels in *Woe to you*
Do you imagine in the Temple, a calm

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construction of the whip, a temperate
tipping of the tables upside down?

This poem is an example of sustained irony, in which polar opposites are held in
tension. Hejinian speaks about the tension which poetry holds and which gives the
poem uncertainty, and strength in that uncertainty. She speaks about how uncertainty
and doubt can lead us to see truth. ‘Poetry is able to investigate truth by investigating
‘the relation of language and truth’. In My Life, Hejinian shows that context and
process are intricately connected with language and form, and together they
illuminate what we know.

Bloom borrows from Kenneth Burke as he distinguishes four types of figurative
language:

1. irony – which says one thing while meaning something quite different or
   almost opposite – as in ‘calm construction of the whip’ or ‘softly spoken’

2. synecdoche – which is the figurative substitution of a part of something for the
   whole of something – as ‘silken vowels’ substituted for the whole
communication

3. metonymy – in which ‘contiguity replaces resemblance’, that is something is
   linked closely enough to something else as to resemble it – as in ‘tipping
   tables upside down’ resembling overturning institutionalized sin

4. metaphor – which ‘transfers the ordinary associations of one word to another’
   – as in ‘vipers’ above

c. Meaning

The meaning of touch illustrates through verbs, that the simple action of touching
holds different meanings depending on life experience and the culture and context in
which it is received. The poem captures the ambiguities of touch and the ambiguity
of language which in this case is its strength.

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7 Lyn Hejinian. My Life (Los Angeles Sun and Moon, 1987).
8 Bloom. The Art of Reading Poetry, 1-2.
The meaning of touch

She desires him
She tantalizes him

She seduces him
She excites him

She quietens him
She affirms him
She befriends him

She prompts him
She guides him

She annoys him
She berates him

She examines him

She encourages him
She consoles him
She companions him

She offends him
She abuses him
She contaminates him
She infects him
She colludes with him

She tilts her heart to him
She touches him

on the arm.

All language is interpreted through a person’s life experience. In poetry, this spacious ambiguity strengthens its ability to speak to a wide variety of readers.
d. Form

Content is only part of communication. The way in which language is spoken is an important tool of communication. Poetry is written and spoken, such as when I spoke naïve poetry as a child to my mother. Spoken poetry is constructed using aural symbols. Written poetry is constructed of visual symbols such as alphabet or, on the rare occasion, numbers.⁹

Variables in poetry are the arrangements of letters into words and the arrangement of words into sentences, the line endings, the spaces, form and shape, all of which hold levels and nuanced meaning. There is always tension within the form and content, the words and their meanings.

Sonnets, villanelles and haiku are examples of poetic forms. There are metric patterns or rhyming repetitions within a poem such as in a pantoum. Poem patterns parallel life patterns with their constants and inevitable changes and tensions, and when there is a shared resonance of patterns, rhythms and content, the poet and hearer encounter each other.

Acceptable forms in poetry are increasing in number. Some forms look more like prose than poetry, and might use poetic language in the context of a sentence. Others are more recognizably poetry. The following material comparing poetry and prose is about Karl, my husband’s grandfather. The poem uses figurative, multi-meaning language, describing the sound of his German accent, his ambition, the grief of his family, the presence and absence of the story and the cultural context.

Karl (poem)

A fledgling in pursuit of family history, and in awe at my husband’s grandfather who jumped ship at Geelong, I hear ‘Ge’, the guttural tones, ‘elong’ an ending neither coarse nor brisk enough. Another ending too brisk for those he left behind. My husband narrates the bits he knows. The bits he does not know gape at me like fish eyes. I watch him. My imagination, true as

⁹ There are poems using symbols other than letters such as: Cameron Semmens (Words) and Paul Toms (Illustrations). “Psalm 23 in Binary” in 23 Versions of Psalm 23 and Other Creative Christian Resources. (Curdnett Publishing House: Montagu Bay, Tasmania, 2009). 64-5. This experimental kind of poetry is limited in its ability to illuminate or communicate, but it does invite interest and the possible expansion of existing frameworks of thought.
memory, I see the knots tied; those travelled, for travelling’s sake; I see him drag the dust to Warrnambool; the Protestant work ethic ploughing, tilling, storing as if a Depression is about to land …

Karl (prose)

When I began my research into our family history, my husband told me the story of his grandfather who jumped ship at Geelong and settled in Warrnambool. I imagine that Karl was an adventurer who came on the ship as a soldier and was excited by the prospect of travel to a distant land. He probably had a strong German accent and would have pronounced Geelong with unrecognizable syllables. I asked my husband for some details which he did not have. I presume that Karl’s German family never saw him again, and no doubt grieved him. Karl came before the First World War and endured the Depression. He was accustomed to the responsibility that goes with hard work. This helped him survive in laboring work and gave him money to build a future.

I read these two pieces of writing to my husband who is an accountant, asking him if he noted differences in his affect. He said that the poetry had more visual elements that amplified his emotional encounter. He became more present to the whole story.

The information is present in both genres but the poetry invites the reader to experience an encounter with Karl as he speaks, struggles and works. The poem ‘shows’, and the prose ‘tells’ the story. A further adjustment happens to the poet and the reader when the character Karl is identified with ‘I’ in the imagination. The first person point of view engages the poet and praying person in a more intimate and possibly more compassionate encounter with Karl.

I knew that if I jumped ship
I could never return home.
I tried not to think
that I might never see my father.
My mother was distraught
in last night’s dream –
I was a young boy again playing
with Hans, forgetting my promise
Suddenly sinking into darkness –
The sun has gone down
here in Ge – long
I talk English like a baby
as I plead for work.

e. Poetry: concentrated extract of life

Poetry is a concentrated extract of life with the depth and richness that comes from allowing it to simmer. The writing and reading of poetic material is more than intellectually stimulating and revealing; more than an emotional experience. It is an integrative exercise calling upon all dimensions of the person to be actively engaged. The poem helps a person to extend levels of knowing beyond literal fact.

In the process of re-drafting I am more consciously aware that my focus is on the authenticity of language and the best or most truthful way of expressing what I desire to say. In this process, the poet pares or expands the poem and changes the arrangement of words to improve clarity and focus. Through re-drafting, the poet is true to her art and therefore true to the reader. As the reader enters the poem, he or she enters not the poet’s experience but his or her own experience. As I ‘read’ my own life in my poetry and prayer, I sense a drawing to enter into a deeper relationship with God and myself.

f. Voice

In his analysis of poetry, Versification, Jon Stallworthy writes:

A poem is a composition written for performance by the human voice. What your eye sees on the page is the composer’s verbal score, waiting for your voice to bring it alive as you read it aloud or hear it in your mind’s ear.¹⁰

As the poet writes the poem, she hears it and sees it. She also feels it. The power of the poem, enhanced by the poet’s attention to aural and visual elements, is music, bearing both the marks of culture and language and yet able to bypass divisions of culture and language. The attributes of the poem which contribute to the quality of its sound, can make the poem meaningful without understanding the text. When reading

poetry aloud to a group of novices I have found it helpful to suggest, rather than try to digest the poem intellectually, to listen to the poem’s music, allow the cadences to wash over and resonate wherever they do.

As the poem reaches the audience, there is a creative inter-subjectivity, the inter-mingling of thoughts and ideas, the merging of instruments, the music of the collective, mystifying and delightful in its synchronicity. Each person hears his or her own instrument as part of the whole ‘orchestra’. This affirms each voice and each player, and inspires hope.

David Whyte, an Irish poet, mirrors my own deep knowing as he speaks about poetry’s power to resonate with life in ways that highlight the shortcomings of many other forms of speaking and writing. His voice inspires me. The way in which I hear the poems he reads, depends on his emphasis, the intonations, the volume and the spacing of words. The meanings echo in me as he repeats each poem. The repetitions also affirm me as a person who needs to hear truth more than once before I can embrace it.

The instrument of voice is more than the physical projection of sound from the vocal cords. Voice is the distinctive character of a person who expresses herself in all her particularity. Voices are layered and may be in tension with each other. Listening in a benevolent way to the tensions, such as hearing both joy and fear in the tones of a voice, allows these experiences to co-exist. For me, this co-existence mirrors the loving God who is willing to accompany me, however I am. I also understand this as representation of God’s desire for wholeness and integration in creation.

**Redrafting**

Ignatius valued the personal integration of all dimensions of the self, and in helping a person to know he or she is loved unconditionally. Redrafting acknowledges the ongoing nature of poetry and my personal growing awareness. It allows for me to be a person-in-process.

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The poet adopts a number of stances in the process of writing poetry. In redrafting for example, the poet moves from experiencing the poem and writing it, to analysing its content and purpose for the reader as well as for personal authenticity and poetic integrity. This involves an awareness of the appropriateness of the language and the poetic form in relation to content and purpose, including for example, the repetitions, pauses and stops.

Zinker, who discussed creative acts as personal and social expression in *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*, says,

> A poem can be rewritten a thousand times, each attempt a new way of experiencing the process of one’s thoughts. The new words themselves modify one’s experience, one’s ideas, words, and images. Analogies and metaphors move fluidly into one another like the conversation of good friends. Each rewritten poem, like each unit of an ongoing relationship, has its own internal validity.

Zinker suggests a mutual ongoing relationship between ideas and poetic language. I hear in the poetic words, “conversation between friends”, that Zinker experiences a sense of ease between the integral parts of the poem. The poem is always open-ended. It is revelation. It is a product relevant to one period in time; a stepping-stone integral to the whole pathway in the poet’s life.

Re-drafting is dialogic, involving the poet’s multiple ‘voices’. It tries to enhance communication or make the poem more accessible to a reader. Editing includes finer details of punctuation and line breaks. Re-drafting and editing makes the poem more precisely representational, individually and universally. A poem remains unfinished in a redrafting phase until a particular poetic voice finds its identity. When the identity is clear, the voice is clear, the poem has boundaries and integrity.

Now I have said it

Her voice is naked.
She is uneasy.
The sound-sense clashes.
She stops.
Ponders the dark blemishes.

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Cosmetics won't help.
She needs a make-over
from the inside out.

Knowing in encountering poetry

a. When words become poetry

For writing to be considered poetry, it must communicate feeling as well as thought: it must have power to move, stimulate, to excite, to satisfy. It should appeal to the imagination; it should be vivid. It must please the ear with its music of sound and rhythm. All the elements must be in harmony and unity. Treatment, imagery, language and form must be appropriate to the subject and to each other. O’Donnell says - a poem must have beauty; it must have power.13

b. Poetic participation

In one of my Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) sessions, I remember saying “the music knows how I feel”14. After reflecting on the experience, I realized that the practitioner-therapist who had chosen the music, had understood to some extent how I felt, and the music increased that understanding through its affirming power. It was in this felt-knowledge or sentir that I recognized that the music and therapist work together. They cannot be separated from one another. Just as in GIM when music and therapist work together, the poem and I as spiritual director work in unison.

Various relationships develop between poets and their hearers. I received a note from a friend which read,

I have been so tired after a few hectic weeks, the only thing I could read in my prayer time was poetry.

My friend’s remark briefly tells that poetry was capable of holding her tiredness, an idea which was new to me. Poetry held her in a balanced place which affirmed rather

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than contributed to her experience of tiredness. Her comment made me wonder if the poetry allowed her to think less and feel more, such as a person might do in listening to music.

Emily Dickinson, a mid-19th century American poet, says of her encounter with poetry:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?  

The poetry evokes a whole-person experience. It heightens her sense of being alive and perhaps being in love. She is caught by the poetry and she allows herself to be seduced. She does not analyze the structure of the poem. She encounters it.

Spiritual poetry is evocative and touches into a person’s deep knowing and meaning-making. Emily Dickinson describes it clearly: when her head is lost to her, she is present to another kind of knowing; words are poetry when they cause an effect on her, an affect in her. A good poem is a transparent invitation by a vulnerable, self-revealing poet into an intimacy for which persons long. Emily Dickenson has her head blown off by such an encounter. It seems that she is describing a psycho-sexual experience; a peak physiological and intimate experience which reminds me of my experience of mystical intimacy.

Dickinson’s simple definition is poetic in that it invites the reader into her emotional and physical experience. She describes an altered state of consciousness which affirms her passion, yet she writes about it as a grounded and embodied person.

Neruda’s poem Poetry puts words on the relationship he has with poetry.  

Poetry

And it was at that age

Poetry arrived


in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silence,
but from a street I was summoned,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among violent fires
or returning alone,
there I was without a face
and it touched me.

I did not know what to say, my mouth
had no way
with names,
my eyes were blind,
and something started in my soul,
fever or forgotten wings,
and I made my own way,
deciphering
that fire
and I wrote the first faint line,
faint without substance, pure
nonsense,
pure wisdom
of someone who knows nothing,
and suddenly I saw
the heavens
unfastened
and open,
planets,
palpitating plantations,
shadows perforated,
riddled
with arrows, fire and flowers
the winding night, the universe.

And I infinitesimal being,
drunk with the great starry
void,
likeness, image of mystery,
felt myself a pure part
of the abyss,
I wheeled with the stars,
my heart broke loose on the wind.

Both Neruda and Dickinson speak about their relationship with poetry in metaphors. All four types of figurative language explained by Bloom are present in Neruda’s poem. Nature imagery, such as the ‘branches of night’, shows the poem’s personality; it reaches out, summons and touches. Neruda speaks about his faltering but irresistible response to the mysterious invitation shown in elemental metaphors, especially fire, and the large metaphor of the night sky. In his ‘drunken’ bliss, he exhausts imagery and ends with an image of elopement where he wheels with the stars and frees his heart on the wind. He moves through word to wordlessness as a person praying might move through knowing to unknowing, through kataphatic to apophatic prayer.¹⁷

Neruda explains that poetry summoned him like ‘a fire’ and he had to learn to decipher what that fire meant. Eventually it gave him identity when he did not have one. Neruda communicates to the reader that he trusts the emotional knowing he experiences through his responses to poetry. In fact, poetry is so much his vocation that it is impossible for him to not trust his responses to it.

Keller describes a particular way of knowing:

¹⁷ Jim Manney “Kataphatic or Apophatic Prayer?” In dotMagis blog. www.ignatianspirituality.com
“Kataphatic” prayer has content; it uses words, images, symbols, ideas. “Apophatic” prayer has no content. It means emptying the mind of words and ideas and simply resting in the presence of God. Centering prayer is apophatic. Ignatian prayer is mostly kataphatic.” See also McLeod, Frederick. “Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer?” Spirituality Today 38, no. Spring (1986): 41-52.
The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen, heard or touched — they must be felt with the heart.\textsuperscript{18}

This knowing is a vital element of spiritual discernment, that is, recognizing the influences towards what is life-giving or life-depleting. The synoptic gospels show Jesus fulfilling his call to be Christ with all the fullness of humanity it takes to be Christ. Emily Dickinson speaks of a spiritual experience insofar as it is a deeply human experience. The Ignatian belief that God is in all things, means that God communicates to us through all things, including our bodies, minds and spirits. This knowing has the capacity to console us time and again as we engage with all things.

Although Dickinson implies that her head is disconnected from her heart, it returns to her enough to be able to write meaningfully about the experience. For this reason, I believe she speaks as Ignatius, when he names sentir. For Ignatius, sentir has an intellectual component. It abides in a centered place in a person and is quickened when the person receives input congruent with personal knowing. Jules Toner has this to say about sentir:

> Usually present in the meaning is a cognition which is basically intellectual; and often emotional or even mystical overtones are added. In various Ignatian writings ‘sentir’ indicates cognition savored so repeatedly that it becomes a framework of reference instinctively or affectively used to guide one’s thinking, deciding, and acting.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{c. Poetry as sacramental encounter}

\textbf{Poetry: Prose :: Sacrament: Sign}

Poetry is to prose as sacrament is to sign.

This couplet speaks of the complexity of levels in poetry. The breadth and depth of poetic interpretation varies according to the meanings a person attaches to the poem’s form and content. Generally speaking, sacraments, symbols and poetry are not as self-explanatory as signs and prose. For me as a poet, spiritual direction is more like

\textsuperscript{18} Helen Keller was born in 1880 and died in 1968. She became deaf and blind when she was 19 months old. [http://www.wow4u.com/helen-keller-quotes/index.html](http://www.wow4u.com/helen-keller-quotes/index.html) She was a primarily a writer of prose but was encouraged by her colleagues to change to poetry.

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sacrament and poetry than it is like prose and signs. The directee’s narrative is the sacrament, the place of poetry.

d. Poetic listening in spiritual direction

As nature began to draw me to its detail in my late 30s, I felt a loss that it had not always been so. I made a conscious decision to pay attention firstly to the detail in nature so as to develop as a poet. This capacity has grown and enabled me to research and describe the details of things. In the same way, the spiritual director becomes attuned to sensory input. He or she listens, notices and names what he or she encounters.

The quality of poetic listening in spiritual direction depends on the spiritual director’s personal formation and his or her own ability to listen to interior responses and to trust them. When I am in the space of spiritual direction, I listen to my directees as a poet listens to a poem. I listen and respond to the narrative we enter. As a poet, I invite the reader to enter their sacramental story with me as trusted companion. My role is to help the directees listen to themselves in order to clarify their ever-emerging identities. In a sense a directee is the poem I listen to, so that the layers of the poem can be identified, the struggles named, the growing edges nurtured into the shape the poem wants to take. It is my role to nurture the poem to be its potential.

Gilligan et al propose a technique of listening to the harmonies and dissonances, tonality, key signatures, pitches and rhythm of voice in their work on a voice-centered relational method. The method extracts ‘I’ phrases from a person’s narrative and assigns meaning to various aspects of plot, and voice. The ‘who, what, when, where and why’ of the story contribute layers of meaning. The ‘listening method’ is appropriate to spiritual direction which has the main focus of listening to a person’s

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20 I experienced my senses as ‘inferior’ in the Jungian sense of having an inferior ‘sensate function’. Sensate people have a perceptive capacity derived from attention to sensory input. They ‘keenly observe the surrounding world’. 65% of people are sensate types according to Kendra Cherry. Learning Styles Based on Jung’s Theory of Personality. http://psychology.about.com/od/educationalpsychology/ss/jung-styles_4.htm accessed 8 November 2011 at 5.43 pm.

relationship with God. This kind of listening tries to discern what questions are important for the person’s direction with God.

I listen to cultural cues and the meanings applied to that culture. I listen to the meaning of beliefs and the ambiguity of belief. A poetic listening in spiritual direction asks me to pay attention to my consonance and dissonance as my directee shares; where I feel connected or disconnected to the directee. I listen to the quickening in my spirit as my directee mines her deep desires. I listen to moments of joy, sorrow and doubt. I listen for the graces of love and hope, and what shape they take or might take in the person’s life.

A poetic listening attends to the tone and cadence of voice, the language spoken, the emerging thoughts, feelings and explores behaviours. A poetic listening hears for example, turns of phrase, irony, and clarifies the origins of accumulated beliefs which influence the attitudes and other responses of the directee.

Words become poetry in the relationship between the poet and the hearer; in this instance, the poet is the directee and the hearer is the director. The ‘poet’ offers an invitation to come inside his or her world, and the hearer helps the poet cross the liminal space on the threshold of a new world. As spiritual director, I am privileged to listen to the ‘poem’ emerging.

The underlying core of a person’s narrative is the integrative element providing the deepest level of meaning. Paul Tillich describes it as ‘ultimate concern’. Others describe it as faith or meaning-making or God. I believe there is an ultimacy from which all thoughts and actions emanate. I believe that this ultimacy takes me towards love. Although Emily Dickinson refused the impositions of religious institutionalized belief, she is:

a fitting guide for prayer because she paid attention, indeed paid attention with love. … she pondered deeply the mystery of death, the enigma of suffering, the paradoxes of nature, the ambiguity of life.

Emily Dickinson’s delight in reading poetry is the delight of a person who has found her vocation, who delights in encountering God at the place of her vocation. Her openness to the joy of poetry and the meaning it holds models the openness a spiritual director has towards a person who comes for spiritual direction. In fact it models the openness that anyone exhibits when operating from within his or her personal vocation.24

e. Trusting poetry

In spiritual direction, a trust relationship is built in the same way as in a therapeutic relationship. If my directees are able to trust me, it is the same as trusting my poetry. I use my own poetry in spiritual direction when it touches into their story, and I believe that the poetry might open them to receive the invitations about which Bonny speaks in relation to music:

Music has a way of approaching, evoking, drawing out, untangling, gently touching, acknowledging, affirming, and finally integrating changes of feeling in the psyche.25

f. The poem is the experience

Exploring a directee’s actual poem in spiritual direction is the same as exploring a person’s prayer experience. It opens a way for a new experience of encountering God and self.

I want to make the distinction between the original knowledge and the re-presentation of it. I would argue that in the creation of poetry, the poem can be a dynamic experience of its own rather than an attempt to re-present some original knowledge.26 In speaking about the experience of writing poetry compared with telling the story in it, Ruffing says:

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26 Karl Rahner. Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity. Translated by William V. Dych. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978. Rahner says: “The tension between original knowledge and its concept, which moments belong together and yet are not one, is not something static. It has a history in two directions. The original self-presence of the subject in the actual realization of his existence strives to translate itself more and more into the conceptual, into the objectified, into language, into communication with another.” 16.
In my work on narrative and spiritual direction I argue that telling the story of the experience in prayer is more revelatory of the experience itself as it unfolded than a finished piece of lyric poetry. ... If a directee brought a poem to spiritual direction as a representation of a prayer experience, I would hear the poem, respond to it, and further explore what happened in the experience that is not in the poem! It would be similar with a painting or other artistic form ... the poem captures only part of the experience.27

The presupposition here is that a poem is a representation of an experience. I argue that the poem is the experience with all that is present in its raw form, content and liminality. A spiritual director does well to invite a person to review any experience, including the experience of writing poetry insofar as that invitation helps the person deepen the experience with God. However, telling the experience of writing poetry might be more revelatory for the listener than the poet. Again I refer to the point made in relation to the poem and prose, Karl, about the difference between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ a story: ‘Showing’ is more compatible with poetry and the purpose of spiritual direction which is to deepen a directee’s experience of God. ‘Telling’ is an intellectual exercise, whereas ‘showing’ engages the affect as well.

Metaphors are also the best way persons have to speak about what is ultimately unspeakable. I believe that the prayer-poem holds in absence and presence of word and form the truest representation of the experience. I believe also that the poem is the authoritative experience pointing to the author God.

*I am writing the poem* is the experience, is the action, is the encounter. I write this poem and I do not initially redraft it or edit it. It stands as a creative moment.

*I am writing a poem*

It leaves out what can't be said;
what palpates with love and desire.
Do not peep through the keyhole
of the mystical chamber.
Bless my prayer
When I speak it.

27 Janet Ruffing, Email conversation. 3 March 2012 12:39:27 PM
This is my prayer, my poem.
It is more in speaking less.

Sparse language crystallises the poignancy of the experience, and its relevance to the poet. Ruffing makes a distinction between the experience and capturing the experience in the poem. She also states:

For some kinds of mystical experiences, poetry may be the only way to capture something of it.

Again I argue that the poetry creation is the encounter with mystery. It has been my experience at times that unpacking a poem has subtracted from the poem by trying to speak that which cannot be spoken. I am not suggesting that exploration of a poem is not a good idea. As in all spiritual direction, the director needs to listen deeply to what is spoken and unspoken, but also ought to respect the place of poetry in a poet’s prayer experience. Exploring the poem may bring new awareness. Speaking about it can be like an Ignatian ‘repetition’ of prayer, which begins with an experience and asks God to deepen the graces. The spiritual direction conversation is a new prayer.

Fig.14. Sustaining the voice

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28 Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale: Spiritual Direction and Narrative*, 82-83.
29 Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale* and Email conversation. 3 March 2012.
g. Poetry and mystical experience

The argument I have heard in some spiritual direction circles, that poetry is an excellent activity to engage after a prayer period but it is not in itself prayer, emerges not only from the distinction of original knowledge and the representation of that knowledge in the poem, but also from the perspective that judges the focussed activity of writing the poem precludes a focus on God. My view as a poet is that spiritual poetry is a place of encountering God, hence a place of prayer.

God speaks

God speaks in poetry
short words,
succinct utterances
poignant phrases
brief sentences
whispers
whiffs of wind
goose bumps

lips
pauses

silence

The kataphatic experience of writing poetry illustrates the poetic ‘word’ can be a pathway to wordlessness and the mysterious and intimate encounter with God also experienced in apophatic prayer. It is my experience that poetry is a spiritual exercise.

30 Melbourne Poets Union. ‘How does one sustain a voice after decades of writing?’ Celebrating the Celebrated. Flyer, January 2012. Adaptation by Marlene Marburg.
31 The apophatic prayer tradition understands that God can only be known in what God is not, rather than what or who God is. The extreme position is the kataphatic tradition which speaks of knowing God through all things. The Ignatian tradition is kataphatic, but Ignatian prayer includes apophatic prayer, as apophatic prayer is one way of knowing God.
After attending a weekend workshop on supervision of spiritual directors and mystical experience with Janet Ruffing in May 2012, I received further clarity about my own experience of writing poetry in prayer. I was sure that even if all my poetry is prayerful, there are levels of mystical truth and awareness as I write. The highest or most authentic and pure level is that which is characterized by Albrecht32 as the experience of the presence of an ‘embracing-something’, but which is experienced by me more as a permeating presence than an embracing presence. This experience is accompanied by a sense of right knowing, not 'orthodoxy', but a truthfulness which holds irresistibly my attention and respect. There is a quality in poetry which emerges from this kind of mystical experience, different from that which is the result of thinking alone. The editing process of writing poetry often engages more thought than the process of writing the raw material of poetry. My experience of interior hearing the raw data of my poetry is in a sense a ‘mystical locution’. My raw mystical poetry is written in an altered state of consciousness accompanied by loss of ego boundaries and lack of awareness of my usual critical functions.

One cannot speak only of mystical experiences in an altered state of consciousness, as if all other experiences are not mystical. God is found in all things. Emily Dickenson’s joy is an engagement with love, and who else is love but God; her experience meets the criteria of discernment of consoling spirits, that is, there is an increase in love.

I call consolation every increase in hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord [316.4].

As in any kataphatic prayer, there is content, and in this instance, the content focuses the poem. It has the same centring quality as if I were looking at the flame burning within me. I say 'within' because the poem does not seem to be outside myself in any concrete way. Upon encountering the inspiration, the poem emerges in me, and stays within me, even when it is written on the page. When I return to a normal state of

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32 Ruffing, Janet. In Professor Ruffing’s presentation, she mentioned ‘Albrecht’ but I have been unable to access full information about this person. The information I have is: Carl Albrecht - psychological phenomenological understanding of mystical experience. The reference could be one of two books: Psychologie des Mystischen Bewusst Seins, remen: Carl Schinemann. 1951. Or Das Mystische Wort; Erleben und Sprechen in Versunkenheit, presented and edited by H.A. Fischer-Bamicol.Mainz: Matthias-Grinewald, 1974.
Poetry and Grace: Encounter and Spiritual Exercise

consciousness, that is, when the experience comes to an end, the content of the poem can surprise me. God also surprises me by the power of words I have used. This is another experience of God's love which causes my response of gratitude and love.

The poetry is the experience more than an expression of the experience. The mystical locution has a permeating, integrating and unitive character. The brain and the heart, the gut and all other parts of the body are integrated and activated. They are alert. My sense of knowing transcends the boundaries of the perceived self in an assuring and certain way. There is no sense of pride or personal ownership of the words which come in such an experience. I know that the words just are, and I am the receiver of them. I do not have a sense that the words are for others, although the fact that I write poetry indicates that there might be at least a subconscious awareness that the gift of these words need to be concretized in print or written on the page. I do not evaluate or analyse the experience as I am engaged in it. At that time, it is only the experience of God as communicated word which holds my attention, and which becomes incarnated.

God as poet, I as poem

God has shown me that God is the poet, and I am the poem. This idea was initially confusing. Over time, I have found I am the poem from the perspective that the poem is intricately connected with the way I see and relate to the world, the way I understand my spirituality, the way God is present in the universe.33 It could be said that I am the poem speaking as a poet and spiritual director. When I listen to myself, I listen to the ‘poem.’ When I listen in spiritual direction, I am listening to another ‘poem.’

For Ignatian commentators Schemel and Roemer, the idea of naming the significant graced place in a person’s life is called ‘name of grace’.34 In these terms, ‘You are the poem’ is a ‘name of grace’ for me. ‘Name of grace’ is also similar to the way

33 Saint Ignatius of Loyola was a proponent of the principle of ‘finding God in all things’. In the Principle and Foundation [23] of the Spiritual Exercises, he claims that all things on the face of the earth are created to help a person ‘prosecute the end for which he [or she] is created’. See David L Fleming. Draw Me Into Your Friendship (1996).
Herbert Alphonso understands ‘personal vocation.’ Vocation implies calling, which in turn requires a response to embody vocational potential in active ministry. I am reminded again of Neruda’s poem when he says, ‘from a street I was summoned’. I prefer to think of plural names of grace, and a singular source of grace who is God-self whose ongoing presence sustains a dynamic and complex arrangement of gifts and skills in a person.

A search for the etymology of ‘poem’ and ‘creation’, and ‘poet’ and ‘creator’ uncovered an intricate relationship which deepened the relevance of meaning of poetry as my creative passion, and me as ‘the poem’. I know that without listening deeply to the drawing of the Poet-God, I might have continued to understand myself as a hobby-poet. It is difficult to imagine that I could have overlooked poetry as suggested by Tagore:

I have spent my days stringing and unstringing my instrument, while the song I came to sing remains unsung.

I have discovered a new relationship between my names of grace, and in my work as a spiritual formator, I encourage others to recognize their multiples names and the relationship between them. The name I held as sacred during the Exercises was ‘Drawn to Mystery’. This name holds a movement towards God. I experience the naming ‘You are the poem’ as a commissioning of God’s desires for me. God’s generosity allows as many names as necessary.

In an Ignatian perspective where God is found in all things, all things are metaphors of God and occasions of drawing to God. I understand that God is immanent, so close as to be made known to me through the workings of myself, my breath, thoughts, desires, feelings and physicality. I understand my best self is a poem, miniscule, but in syncopation with the voice of a universe speaking its rhythms, cadences and stanzas in the chapters of history. This understanding of God’s presence authenticates

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the methodological approach in this thesis which respects my own life journey, and makes my life journey the frame of the research.

Poetry and ministry

I have shown that poetry understood as a personal vocation is generativity rather than self-absorption. Although poetry writing is seemingly a singular activity, it is always in relation to something or someone. A person cannot self-realize in isolation. As a spiritual exercise, poetry is related to God and all things which have come to bear on the poet’s life experience expressed in the poem. Morris Eagle, using poetry as an example of other relatedness in his study Autonomy and Relatedness on self-realization versus self-absorption, concludes

contrary to the usual assumption of an incompatibility between autonomy and relatedness, in healthy functioning the two trends operate compatibly. ... creativity and self-realization entail vital object relations in the sense of involving intense cognitive and affective links to objects. ... Freud was correct in his insistence that one must move from narcissism to object-love ...

My interior desire to write poetry is a desire to connect with God and myself in relation to the world. When listening poetically in spiritual direction I engage a creative mode in which self-realization is implicit. When I write poetry, I am less conscious of the process, and more engaged in it. The spiritual exercise of writing poetry has a life of its own inseparable from my ministry.

Conclusion

Through an exploration of definitions and characteristics of poetry, I have shown its particularity and difference to other forms of writing, especially in relation to immediacy, affections and invitation. I have shown examples of how the poem is inspired and brought to life on the page, and how it reveals the interior life of a person in relation to his or her meaning-making system.


This chapter addresses the inseparability of word with audible and inaudible voice. It has also shown that redrafting and editing a poem is congruent with person-in-process. The chapter has shown that knowing at its most meaningful, integrates body, mind and spirit. Importantly I have discussed the poet’s experience of writing poetry as an encounter with God, not only as a reflection on such an encounter. In terms of the broad thesis statements, this chapter has shown that:

- Through writing poetry, the poet accesses material from deeper levels of awareness, and raises his or her consciousness of previously unknown influences. This affirms poetry writing as a tool to growing self-awareness and self-growth.
- Poetry as an art is a language of spiritual experience. It can express a deeply personal experience of encountering God and can invite a person to a mystical experience of wordlessness.
- Poetry as word and sound are inseparable. Together they inform the speaker and hearer of a variety of meanings which can be examined and elucidated.
- The poet and reader engage an experience of inter-subjectivity in which resonance informs a person of spiritual movements which can be found to be either life-giving or life-depleting.

The analogy of a directee as a poem and the director as poet, has been helpful in understanding the listening layers in spiritual direction. Consonance and dissonance in the director as she or he listens to the directee, is similar to consonance and dissonance in the poet as she listens to the poem. The ‘poem’ and ‘poet’ in the ongoing process of redrafting, stretch known boundaries, moving into deeper relationship with themselves and the world which contributes to their development. The representation of this in the poem reveals itself in translucence and simplicity, characteristics of authenticity and integrity. The idea of the turning or trope of the poem, a poetic characteristic described by Harold Bloom, parallels the ongoing tropes or conversions in a person’s life as they choose to accept the invitations to grow in wholeness.\(^\text{40}\)

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The chapter has elucidated the various encounters in which a poet engages, and these also have analogies in spiritual direction. They are the encounter of poet with the inspirational elements of the poem; the encounter between poet and audible voice with inflection, intonation, volume and cadence; dialogical encounter between technical elements which contribute to meaning in the poem’s development; conversation between the various voices within the poem which contribute to the poem and the poet in ongoing ‘redrafting’; the encounter between the poem and the hearer of the poem. All these encounters are part of the encounter with God, and which contribute to deeper levels of knowing about self and God and deeper intimacy with self and God. They are part of a participatory journey in which interiority and exteriority interact to make us who we are. We define ourselves through them. Thomas Merton says,

Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.41

We cannot actually engage the interior journey without encountering the exterior world of people, places and things. In this way my poetry and writing this thesis no longer belong to me but to many. I do not have an exclusive claim upon my story.

While astronomological and cosmological theories and truths are presenting their wisdom to us each new day, we need to reconnect with ancient wisdom.42 As Michael Leunig says, ‘the part of the brain that once held poems is now used for storing passwords’.43 That part of the brain is still capable of storing metaphors and making connections between all things.

Poets have always known the connections between all things. When we experience ourselves connected with God and as part of God, we enter mystical prayer. The spiritual exercise of writing or hearing poetry when experienced as deep consoling resonance draws us in mystical union. We enter through word to wordlessness.

Discernment: Poetry Writing, Re-drafting and Spiritual Direction

My claws cannot hold the pen
Write me the way I am

Introduction

When I began the Spiritual Exercises, I did not think of re-drafting and editing as a process of spiritual discernment and decision-making. As I prayed the Exercises, it became more important to me that all stages in the development of a poem reflected my increasing trust in God’s immediate communication to me. Poetry became the fertile ground of self-belief and growing love for God and God’s creation.

This chapter addresses the process and outcome of discernment in relation to re-drafting and editing poetry. It shows the process of trusting that decisions made are part of God’s self-communication through the creative imagination. With this belief, I am assured that my poems have the potential to be life-giving to others even though I will not always be privy to that outcome.

In the re-drafting and editing process, the poet enters the poem usually with a more critical perspective than at the poem’s creation. This chapter will describe and explore:

- Spiritual discernment and discerned action
- An example of discernment and discerned action in re-drafting the poem, ‘The purpose of poetry’.
- Content in process: discernment in writing and re-writing the chapter.
Spiritual discernment and discerned action

Monty Williams, poet and Jesuit says that discernment is living in an intimate relationship with God so that, at any moment, God is immediate to us. Discerned action ensues from this ongoing intimate relationship with God. In the concrete work of my life, discerned action or the process of deciding from all the choices available which ones are the most creative and life-giving and will serve not only the person deciding but will serve others, has been a part of my process of writing and editing poetry since I have been exposed to Ignatian discernment in praying the Spiritual Exercises. While I made decisions previously about what to include and what to omit and how to arrange words, I would not have named it as discerned action. Interior movements in terms of affections, dissonance and consonance as well as my vocation as a poet, contribute to each small decision in the creation of the poem. In re-drafting and editing a poem, all dimensions are scrutinized so as to express the heart of the poem as authentically as possible.

a) Attentiveness

Franz Meures writes that spiritual discernment is possible in a person who is attentive in three areas:

1. Attentiveness to God and God’s revelation, which Meures understands as listening to the Gospel, praying and contemplating the cross
2. Listening to interior movements – in relation to thoughts, feelings, plans, aspirations, day and night dreams – ‘all I can find in the inner space of my soul’
3. Listening to the external reality of facts and information.

To point one I add listening to the natural world including relationships between people and things. All of these things are sources of revelation. To points two and three, I add that attentiveness to self and the world is key to writing. The poetic

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stance is to be as attentive as possible not only to the ‘inner space of my soul’ but the interface between the exterior world and interior responses. Editing and re-drafting the poem requires astute attentiveness. It requires attending to the level of attentiveness. Attentiveness creates the possibility of effective spiritual discernment.

Ferder in *Words Made Flesh* describes a four-stage process of listening to oneself in terms of feelings. The stages are to notice, name, own and respond. This simple schema is cumulative and cyclic.

The spiritual director (or giver of the Exercises) attends carefully to interior movements, feelings and desires, as the directee relates his or her experience of God. The director can do this by having attended to his or her personal formation. The poet also can only communicate what she knows. ‘Transformation’ is a process whereby what is latent or repressed comes into consciousness. It does not imply that a person changes into something she or he is not.

b) Immediacy

*Immediacy* was not a poem I thought I would write. I allowed the ‘distraction’ of the feather to become the poem’s content. There are times in prayer when a seeming distraction is God nudging me towards another focus. Immediacy or mindfulness heightens awareness; it holds an authentic and often poignant invitation, and seems to bypass my inner critic. In this way, I know to be attentive to what I experience as immediate because it helps me towards discernment.

Immediacy

Where the journal fell open,
the small feather she had forgotten,
marked the place to write.
A pressed, kookaburra’s tail in miniature,
or was it from a duck or speckled dove?
It consoled her as feathers do.
So she began to write and notice

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the feather became more buoyant
shadowed from the light above
three-dimensions
alighting from the page.
For a moment, she stilled
her eyes on the feather,
said aloud  I wonder
what the feather feels
to be the focus of a poem.

As I reflect on the poem I recognize that the question in the last three lines is actually about the poet and is re-phrased as:

I wonder  
what the poet feels  
to be the focus of a poem

I am in the focus of every poem I write whether I decide to be or not. All the words come from my perceptions, and they have meaning at levels deeper than my awareness can imagine. I have learnt to trust the process of free association writing, and to explore the difficult questions, even ‘what does it feel like to be the focus of a poem?’ And the present experience is one of spiritual consolation in that it enlivens me, and draws me to love and hope in the spirit in which Ignatius says in the Spiritual Exercises: ‘I call consolation every increase in hope, faith and charity’ [316.4].

c) Relevance of feelings

To Ignatius, God is the source of all things, and hence whatever is experienced is sourced in God. God moves in human life and prayer through our bodies, thoughts, words, emotions, actions and encounter with all things.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith writes about a sincere prayer life:

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5 As in other chapters, the numbers refer to the Annotations [1-22] or Notations [23 – ] in David L. Fleming. Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, a Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading. (Saint Louis, Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996).
6 ‘The duty proper to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is to promote and safeguard the doctrine on the faith and morals throughout the Catholic world’. The Congregation for the Doctrine of
... there will ... be moments in which ... [a person] “feels” nothing of God. ... these trials are not spared anyone who takes prayer seriously. ... The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be “mastered” by any method or technique ... We therefore should allow God to decide the way [God] wishes to have us participate in [God’s] love.7

The absence of feeling can be an experience of spiritual desolation, in which case an exercitant is encouraged to not make decisions:

although in desolation we ought not to change our first resolutions, it is very helpful intensely to change ourselves against the same desolation by insisting on more prayer ... [319].

While desolation and depression might be similarly experienced, desolation is to be distinguished from depression because of its spiritual basis and characteristics. Desolation is described by Ignatius as:

Darkness of soul, disturbance in it. Movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad and as if separated from his Creator and Lord. [317]

Absence of feeling might be evidence of the experience of spiritual dryness such as described by Twining in her research about bipolar disorder:

Spiritual dryness … is the experience of loss of connection with self, others, and God; that is loss of identity, purpose, belonging and religious expression.8

A spiritual director attends to absence or disturbance of feelings as a poet attends to writer’s block.9 They are the content of the poem.

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9 Writer’s block is the general term given to the inability to generate writing ideas. It has a multiple range of causes.
Bats and Wings

When I pray: *please God,*

_Help me write the way I should,*

Bats panic against the flesh of my gut

My claws cannot hold the pen

When I pray: *please God,*

_Write me the way I am,*

Bats still their wings over my heart

Turning the pen upside down

From the *Spiritual Exercises* in relation to the discernment of spirits, we find Ignatius describing the disturbance I experience in the first quatrain of *Bats and Wings*:

First Rule. The first: it is proper to God and to his angels in their movements to give true spiritual gladness and joy, taking away all sadness and disturbance which the enemy brings on. Of the latter it is proper to fight against the spiritual gladness and consolation, bringing apparent reasons, subtleties, and continual fallacies [329].

The consolation present in the second quatrain is also described by Ignatius:

Every increase in hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord [316].

d) Indifference

The personal disposition from which an Ignatian person begins the process of discernment is openness and indifference to all possible outcomes.¹⁰ I have experienced this level of indifference at a few challenging times in my life. I saw indifference in my father as his health failed and he surrendered to his vulnerability. Indifference is another way of speaking about interior freedom. Dunn, in his article suggesting ways of becoming interiorly free, describes interior freedom as a pre-requisite to prayerful communion with God:

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¹⁰ In Ignatian ‘indifference’ a person stands at balance before the choices available, and outcomes possible [23].
For those who have engaged in the spiritual work of personal or communal discernment, the concept of interior freedom is known as a requisite element for listening deeply to God. Sifting and sorting what is of God versus the urgings of our own ego is a lifetime endeavor to be sure.\textsuperscript{11}

Indifference involves the appropriation of interior freedom exercised from the graced experience of God’s unconditional love. Indifference is not apathy but is an attitude esteeming God’s desires above one’s own personal attachments. Indifference accepts God as active in the world, and allows me to respond to God from God within me. This response is discerned action, and as such God is praised by this action.

In editing and re-drafting a poem, indifference demands that I am willing to relinquish the poem in full or in part. Although a few poets, with whom I have work-shopped my poetry, claim they will not discard a poem believed to be given to them by God, I value spiritual discernment in editing and re-drafting as a gift from God. No matter how much I love a word or a phrase, I would rather relinquish it than have it distract from the meaning of the poem. I would rather a cogent and truthful work than one compromised by a distracting idea.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig15.png}
\caption{Re-drafting poems in childhood}
\end{figure}

Ignatian indifference is a faith perspective in which a person wants neither one thing more than any other, except that it praises God [23]. The complexity of discernment is quickly apparent when a person, as in the case of Ignatius, knows neither what will glorify God nor what habitual disorder in his patterns of thought and feeling might preclude a truly indifferent discernment. There is evidence throughout the Judaeo-

Christian scriptures that good men and women, kings, prophets and sages struggled in times of transition to discern and to know the best decisions to make. Jesus himself went into the desert to discern God’s desires for his life. (Mt 4.1-11) While neither Jesus nor Ignatius had the psychological and sociological language to articulate the influences which came to bear on their discernment, Timothy Gallagher says that:

Ignatius … took into consideration almost everything that influences Christian life and Christian decisions: The Holy Spirit, good angels, demons, what flows from the human spirit’s rational and volitional structure, what comes from one’s imagination, one’s memory, one’s emotions, one’s sinful and disordered nature, what one eats and drinks, light and darkness and even the seasons of the year.\(^{12}\)

Of course not all contemporary commentators on *The Spiritual Exercises* evaluate Ignatius similarly. Ronald Modras comments:

the Spiritual Exercises are predicated on a number of logically unverifiable assumptions but for Inigo they were based on experiences so real and profound they were unassailable.\(^{13}\)

For Ignatius, empirical evidence in finding God in all things, is only one aspect of reliable information about God; his interior prayerful experiences were discerned as equally trustworthy. Ignatius uses two similes to explain the experiences of consolation and desolation in spiritual discernment:

The good angel touches such soul sweetly, lightly and gently, like a drop of water which enters a sponge; and the evil [angel] touches it sharply and with noise and disquiet, as when the drop of water falls on a stone [335].

These experiences are a guide to the mind and heart of a poet when discerning what is authentic to a poem. It is the poet’s role at times to write about disconsolate matters as much as consolation. All things can be occasions of God’s invitation to transforming grace.

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e) The role of imagination and mystical experience

In the mystical tradition, visions offer spiritual revelation. As Ignatius moved forward in his pilgrimage, he experienced mystical union in visions which enlightened his understandings of matters pertaining to God and humanity. In whatever manner they were experienced, Ignatius allowed these experiences to offer the content of spiritual revelation just as dreams might do.

Along with visions, Ignatius valued imaginative contemplation. In a framework of intentional imaginative prayer, he allowed ideas and images to emerge. The content stimulated a variety of experiences. Visions, dreams, prayerful contemplation and meditation, poetry, art and music, often emerge from altered states of consciousness and offer opportunities for spiritual discernment, and the invitational possibilities of mystical union described in the following poem:

Yes

You are our desire

And we are wrapped in silence
    heavy in presence
    as far as hearts can feel

Yes        a simple surrender

There is nothing else
    to want

A poet in paying attention to interior movements and reflecting on them can determine the language which expresses best what the poem wants to say. Apostolic

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14 Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) a contemporary of Ignatius, described in detail the outcome of her inspirational vision of the soul, as a crystal globe shaped like a castle and containing seven mansions or concentric rooms, which she understood as the seven-stage pilgrimage of faith culminating in union with God. Heidi S Hess, ed. Let Nothing Trouble You: 60 Reflections from the Writings of Teresa of Avila, The Saints Speak Today (Michigan: Charis Books, Servant Publications, 1998). 13.
spirituality is predicated on good discernment. In Ignatian terms, this is discerned action which for me finds creative expression in the art of poetry writing.

f) Considering metaphor

I have noticed over time that my brain makes connections between disparate ideas better than it once did. The brain, comprised of 100 billion highly specialized nerve cells engaged in communication through the action of synapses that enable extraordinary processes significant to thought and feeling, is capable of engaging self-awareness and reflecting on that self-awareness.

The amygdala, a small part of the brain assigns meaning to experience and draws on that meaning when receiving input.¹⁵

![Amygdala](image)

Fig. 16. Brain and amygdala.¹⁶

In therapeutic situations as well as spiritual direction, people assign diverse meanings to the same input. While some people suffer ‘metaphor blindness’, human brains generally are able to abstract from two or more unrelated thoughts, words and ideas, a common idea that is expressed in an abstraction or metaphor.¹⁷ I explain this through the following personal examples of inter-sensory abstractions:

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¹⁶ *Memory Loss and the Brain* Newsletter of the Memory Disorders Project at Rutgers University.

With a selection of shapes before me. I decided to choose a shape which I felt was resonant with the word, ‘khaki’. This is my chosen size, shape and orientation for the sharp word ‘khaki’.

Fig. 17. Khaki

It was after I heard the word ‘khaki’ and associated it with ‘sharp’ that I chose the shape. ‘Khaki’ is a hard k consonant sounding a middle range sharp or crisp tone, and to my mind the shape matched the sound. On analysis, ‘sharp’ related to the auditory inflection of the word khaki, which I heard as two staccato sounds produced from the middle of the tongue with the lips open. I abstracted visual and auditory input and designed an appropriate shape in my mind that unintentionally had two complex angular sections matching the two syllables.  

A second example elucidates the point further: ‘Blue’ is soft colour to which I assigned a blue coloured circle. On analysis, the sound of b in blue which emerges from low range voice tone, breath opening through soft lips, produced in a single syllable word, was immediately identified as round, and one simple shape reflecting one syllable.

When I choose a metaphor for a poem, I am seldom aware of these components. But they are important in discerning the feel of a poem. When I want to create an image of gentle holding, I will intuitively know to use predominantly soft consonants. The poem ‘yes’ above is soft in shape and contains only one hard consonant ‘d’ and two semi-hard consonants ‘t’ and ‘t’. When I wrote the poem I was not conscious of these details. I have developed an interior sense of knowing and recognizing the metaphor when it emerges. When it emerges I scrutinize it for its capacity to sustain and hold the meaning for the whole poem.

In spiritual direction, we speak of being attentive to unspoken cues, such as body language, but there are layered cues in the subtleties of language of which we are

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18 V.S. Ramachandran "Art, Reality and the Brain: The Quest for Aesthetic Universals."
unaware. Some spiritual directors might be able to use their directee’s language, sounds and tones in a conscious way in order to elicit the meaning assigned to such data. They will be able to seek clarification, and even elicit a description of God’s relational characteristics in the metaphors spoken. This skill is possibly a growth edge in the practice of spiritual direction.

The demystification of figurative language is as integral to spiritual direction as psychotherapy. This focus on the directee’s language is sought initially in spiritual direction to seek mutual understanding between persons, to explore, affirm or facilitate reviewing or re-drafting a person’s meaning-making system, to nurture a person’s relationship with what is of ultimate concern. While all words are metaphors in so far as they point to something other than the word itself, spiritual metaphors, such as *Empty Light* a poem later in the chapter, intentionally wrap themselves within and around an inexpressible and intangible reality.

Metaphors can sit comfortably in the place between knowing and not knowing. Metaphors are symbols enabling me to understand and manage my world. Metaphors are expressions of a person’s experience of the world. They can be manifestations of deep desires and dreads. Metaphors speak from a present perception, and hold potential to create the future. A metaphor might be the first inkling or foreshadowing of what can be known. Metaphors invite levels of listening.

Well-known, tired or clichéd metaphors can be deconstructed and reconstructed. New pathways in the brain can be created; old pathways or patterns of thought and behavior can be challenged. Some metaphors need to be deconstructed because they are associated with painful memories. The metaphor for God as ‘Father’ for example, can be difficult for men and women who have felt degraded by patriarchy or whose experience of fatherhood has been hostile or irresponsible. My own experience of the word ‘Trinity’ as a metaphor for personal relationships within God, has at times felt like an intellectual imposition. I readily associate Trinity with its origins in second century Tertullian’s thinking and in subsequent controversies until the council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. I have written a brief poem about Trinity from my present stance.
Trinity (1)

Three in one
sounds more like an ice-cream
than a doctrine about God

Trinity

*homoousion* beyond metaphor

more of a distraction than abstraction.  

In both the writing and the product of the poem, I felt disturbed. I discerned the interior movements to have emerged from unchallenged pious or institutional values of the past. The inner critic wanted to punish me for thinking differently to the institutional Church.

Using the re-drafting process to transform myself in relation to the word and its meaning is one of the choices available to me. Spiritual direction would help me to deconstruct this metaphor, explore its meaning in terms of my relationship with God, and find if there was any life left in ‘Trinity’ for me in my religio-cultural context.

Novel metaphors in faith and spirituality such as the feminine Trinity, God as ‘Mother’; faith as ‘humility’ and spiritual director as ‘anointed companion’ challenge us to accommodate, even embrace these metaphors, or to change the meaning of the metaphor to suit what is already known.  

Exploring metaphors in writing poetry as in spiritual direction requires openness to faith matters such as who God is and how God is present in life. An open disposition to language ensures that persons can grow towards interior freedom in a world where God cannot be diminished or restrained by language of ‘God’ or anything else. So the next poem about Trinity has emerged.

Trinity (2)

Two is company
Three is a crowd
Of syllables

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19 *Homoousion* is a Greek concept which explains the way in which the three ‘persons in the Godhead are related.

Trinity is too upper case,
Too church
Too trite
Too Doctor Trine

But as Mystery,
Trinity is

more than two or three
pointing to the throng of throngs
beyond shape and numbers
heaven and earth
intimate
free, ambiguous
beyond beyondness

An example of discerned action in re-drafting ‘The purpose of poetry’.

In this section I engage in a spontaneous reflexive exploration of my poem Why Poetry. I do not know what will be uncovered. I want to know more about the language and its meaning, where God is in this poem for me, and where I am being challenged and affirmed; where the poem is saying less than I would want or more than it ought. I want to know what God is calling me to. I refer to Ignatius’ Annotation Two in the Spiritual Exercises, in which he says:

It is not in knowing much, but realizing and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies the soul [2].

This statement means that entering the depth of God and self is more satisfying than knowing about the breadth of self and God. The purpose of poetry suggests that poetry is a tool for entering deeply rather than broadly.

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a) The poem

The purpose of poetry (1)

poetry is not for arguing
not for apologetics
but it is for wine
and celebration of ancient forms
for digging into the ruins
of cities and monuments
and shovelling out the raw findings

life squinting in the light
remnants almost fossils
thirsty dessicated stories
inviting another story
a chance to sip from a different cup
the delicate and unfamiliar

Accustomed to experiencing writing as organic, I began with only the first line in my mind. As anticipated, the poem wrote itself; I did not intentionally judge the words in the process. Initially I knew the poem was about the interior life and integration. The motifs of wine, celebration, excavation were not explored, although I tried, as I usually do, to use one main metaphor to achieve the goal of writing a poem about writing poetry. My intention was only to write the poem, to experience the writing of it, to allow it to surprise me or receive whatever God had in store for me. However, I suspect there was another subconscious agenda.

I have found the focus on one metaphor helpful in deepening my self-expression and personal formation. I recognize and am amazed that my initial intention, in writing a poem, can be overtaken in the act of writing. I have the sense that this poem did that, and that the outcome is not what I deeply knew it might be. I do not worry about that at all because I have a higher value in being true to that which emerges in my consciousness.
b) The process of re-drafting

As I read draft one as a whole, I feel disheveled and overwhelmed. There seem to be too many ideas in it. The line ‘but for wine’ comes suddenly. It jars me. I accept that is not necessarily a destructive thing. Poetry can be confronting, but I would want to have a good reason for jarring the reader.

Poetry is not for arguing
not for apologetics.

These two lines claim argument and apologetics are not worthy of poetry; I do not want to taint the openness and acceptance inherent in poetry by opinionated statements. However, I am surprised at how vehement I am. In fact these first two lines contradict what I am advocating. Perhaps I ought to ask the question rather than push my views on the reader. I ask myself if I have a tendency to argue my opinion.

but it is for wine
and celebration of ancient forms

Again I am putting my opinion on the reader by saying what poetry is. However, this assertion does not preclude poetry being more than what I say it is. It is therefore more spacious and not limiting like the previous assertion. I am satisfied with the two lines.

The metaphor of ‘wine’ with its adjacent, ‘celebration’, inspires thoughts of full-bodied wine: a wine which celebrates the wholeness of poetry, the wholeness of humanity. It is a celebration of deep red or purple shiraz or cabernet grapes. The poetry invites the past into the present. It is a shared ‘celebration’ as in sacramental communion or a party of friends gathered for dinner. It is noisy. Poetry therefore is relational. At its best, it courts the poet and reader bringing them into relationship with what is worded and not worded in the poem. Poetry belongs in a gathering of what is known and unknown, what is predictable or surprise, what is mutual and individual.

‘Ancient forms’ are all that has formed me, those things of which I am both conscious or unconscious. This part of the poem shows thankfulness for those who have been a
part of my personal growth. As I write this, I am happier with the two lines than I originally felt. In a sense the words belie their origin. ‘Ancient forms’ surprised me, and I can only presume that they came from a subconscious, perhaps quite old memory. The two lines do not impose much on the reader, do not tell what kind of wine, what is ancient, and what to believe. These are important elements in poetry as much as spiritual direction.

for digging into the ruins
of cities and monuments

These two lines speak about the process in which I am presently engaged. I am probing the meaning of metaphors or what is left of them. Cities are the structures around which I have my livelihood. I think of them as stable and solid and yet of compromised values which disenchant me.

When I think of Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011, and how this city might once have been considered safe and stable, and is now wrenched apart by earthquakes and tremors, I realize that cities are impermanent. They do not necessarily satisfy the soul. ‘Monuments’ are objects of worship, the false and perishable ‘gods’, that need to be exposed for their insincerity. I am thinking of material possessions, fluctuating values in the share market and real estate, the credentials I have, the intelligence I too often think belongs to me forgetting its temporal nature.

When I retire from paid employment, there is no guarantee that I will have enough money to sustain my current lifestyle. I ask myself how I feel about that. In writing about it, I choose to trust God, not an interventionist God who will give me what I want or even need, but God the giver of peace in whatever comes to pass. The possibility of poetry as a monument is quickly released as I choose to use it in whatever way God desires [234].

And shovelling out the raw findings.

This is the process in which I am engaged. ‘Shovelling’ has a harsh meaning but it is not a harsh word with hard consonants, and its music is satisfying to me. I hear the shovel scrape stones and rock. It is heavy to lift, so I want to take small amounts at a time so I can carry the weight of it. I wonder if ‘shovelling’ is the right word. It feels
like I am being harsh on myself, and perhaps disrespectful towards the spiritual journey. Is it better for the journey to unfold gently or to be revealed harshly? Both are true. I do not want to change the word because it holds some truth especially in relation to raw findings. Rawness is the weeping, bleeding vulnerability I feel when I am exposed or choose to risk something new. I am indifferent to those words.

life squinting in the light
remnants almost fossils

‘Life squinting in the light’ is a metaphor for eyes that are not used to seeing. There is life which takes time to adjust to new ways, especially if the ‘monuments’ are fossilized, entrenched and seemingly unchangeable. Science makes it possible to bring life from ancient DNA. I choose to believe that life is always possible even when there is a great deal of ‘squinting.’ As least ‘squinting’ is an active word in the present continuous tense. There is movement in which it both resists and wants change. I have squinted in terms of letting go of my anxiety in certain inter-personal situations. I have moved forward and am willing to open my eyes just a little more.

thirsty dessicated stories
inviting another story

The nature of anxiety is that it longs to be befriended, for someone to love, for me to love my anxiety into wholeness. It has been with me all my life. I have alienated it and wanted it to die, but it wants to live and drink life-giving water. This feels as if it desires love and compassion. This is the new story.

a chance to sip from a different cup
the delicate and unfamiliar

I return to the original metaphor of drinking. For me, the ‘cup’ metaphor is eucharistic, (Gk, euwharistia – ‘thanksgiving’; kharizesthai – ‘give favour to’). It is the opposite of ungratefulness and alienation. If I do not receive the learning available though this exploration, I am alienated from myself. In this discernment, I

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22 Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) is a nucleic acid that contains the genetic instructions used in the development and functioning of all known living organisms. It is self-replicating blueprint material. www.news-medical.net/health/What-is-DNA.aspx, http://education.technyou.edu.au/view/91/164/what-dna both accessed 15 August 2012 at 11.06 pm.
choose to embrace the eucharistic meaning. The old cup is empty and worn. I want to drink from a different and new cup, and this desire writes a new poem:

I choose a fragile holding,  
soft hands around my anxious self.  
I imagine transparent glass,  
long stemmed and able  
to hold good wine.

As I bring myself before God who is both familiar and unfamiliar, I bring the anxious part of myself, and know that I do not have to argue with God to be accepted and loved. I do not have to engage apologetics or give a defence for any part of myself. I can believe that good wines can be self-conscious and anxious, but if rested and allowed to take on the temperature of their environment, they can be self-assured, mature and balanced.

c) The re-draft

I am aware that I am ‘re-drafted’ along with the poem. The analysis of the poem has brought me in touch with my strengths and weakness. The poem is softened but still carries the truth that I am rough and gentle on myself at times, and that perhaps an awareness of these behaviors are the touchstones of discernment for me.

Why poetry (2)

Is poetry for argument or apologetics

or for digging into the ruins  
of cities and monuments  
and shovelling out the raw findings  
life squinting in the light  
remnants almost fossils  
thirsty desiccated stories  
inviting another story  
wine toasting ancient forms  
sipping a fragile cup  
delicate and unfamiliar
After listening to the reasons for and against including the new lines in the poem, I omitted them. The lines helped me to understand the poem, but they are overstated and impose an explanation on readers which could hinder rather than help their exploration of their personal connection to the poem. As a spiritual director, I frequently choose to speak or to refrain from speaking. In Ignatian terms this is consistent with the instruction in the *Spiritual Exercises* which encourages the giver of the Exercises never to be a hindrance to another person’s intimate communication with God [15].

The new lines helped me to embrace the capacity which a gentle holding can have in transforming anxiety into balance and gentle celebration. I am reminded of the parable of the new wineskins in which old wineskins cannot hold new wine (Lk 5.37). It seems from my poem that the new wineskins are fragile, capacious and capable.

As I return to the first draft of the poem, I understand it as my statement of faith about the purpose of poetry. I do not want to change the title at this point but later I do change it, simply for the reason of spaciousness and the reader’s accessibility. As I examine this last draft of the poem, I recognize a positive transformation and yet I know there is more to discover about myself. I sense that I have touched some deep earth layers and yet, at this stage, I want to resist digging, and be satisfied with the companionship of my unknowable self, the ‘I am who I am’. In this movement I am drawn into the contemplative place that intimately encounters the unknowable God, ‘I Am Who I Am’ (Exodus 3.14).

**Empty Light**

Metaphors are nowhere close.
So let me put down the pen
and be in empty light

d) Reflection on the process of re-drafting

Most of the poem remained the same. This affirmation helps me to trust the process of free-flow writing and re-drafting. The most challenging surprise was that the poem’s tone contradicted its content. I asserted that poems don’t assert! Recognition of this was a consolation for me. I was reminded about being gentle with myself in
the process of ‘re-drafting’ my life. I was delighted to hear my belief in God who loves all of me, even my anxiety, the part of myself which I have found difficult to accept.

In all these revelations I listened to my thoughts and feelings and discerned what was to be rewritten or retained. These decisions rested on my sense of rightness or consoling resonance, which is informed over years of valuing openness to learning and integration of gospel values. The ‘sense of rightness’ is a spiritual movement; a metaphor for discernment. It is consolation. I am able to discern through interior movements what words are consistent with my values; that is, the ‘word’ God speaks in me. As I have worked my way consistently through the poem, I have endeavored to be self-reflective and to challenge my thinking, my words, their origins and meanings. I have changed my poem to speak from my new platform of self-awareness. This is spiritual discernment in keeping with the three criteria of Franz Meures and my own additional criteria. After the poem and I have been re-drafted, I can look outwards to the audience so as to make the poem accessible. This is an apostolic outcome.

Weeks later, I returned to the poem, and re-drafted it.

Why poetry (3)

I do not want to defend poetry.
I want to write
that poetry is treasure
excavated from ruins
personal cities and monuments
shovel by shovel
full of raw earth
and life in it
squinting in the light
remnants and fossils
thirsty desiccated stories
inviting another story
toasting ancient forms
with a fragile cup
‘Sipping the delicate and unfamiliar’ is an ongoing, active and consoling grace of writing poetry. Gerald O’Collins says that consolation ought to be our normal place of being. This is the place from which discerned action will always be congruent with God’s desires. Any disturbance of that consolation invites a slowing down, a deep listening to its origin, and an embrace of the light which such listening offers. Disturbance of a consoling nature is possible when God calls a person to a new awareness or action. The whole process of writing this thesis involves elements of awareness, reflection, reconstructing meaning and allowing all parts of my brain to participate in graced resonance.

Content in process: discernment in writing and re-writing the chapter

The discernment processes of engaging body, mind and spirit, so as to determine the poetic elements appropriate to create a particular poem are similar to that which I have utilized in forming this chapter and whole thesis.

Originally the present chapter began as a free association piece of writing. As I re-drafted and edited this chapter, I included an ordered progression of content in dot points, a technique only available to an experimental form of poem. In contrast to poetry which is condensed and figurative and which retains a healthy ambiguity and spaciousness to invite the reader’s own input, this chapter proceeded to expand the points in the logical order of the dot points so as to make the intended meaning clear.

Non-fiction prose requires discussion of one thought or idea in relation to another but it does not necessarily require abstractions in the form of metaphors nor does it necessarily produce a heightened emotional response in the reader. While there are exceptions, I believe that poetry shows through scenes and stories, prose tells through narrative; poetry is more likely to show the reader the way to their own path, prose is more likely to tell the reader which path to go on. The distinguishing feature of poetry is in its form more than its content.

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Conclusion

This chapter has shown that at every stage of the poem’s development, I experience interior movements which are the key to graced discernment. Interior movements involving mind, body and spirit, impress themselves upon me as authentic or inauthentic. Authenticity translates to life-giving choices even in terms of small decisions to be effected, such as what is the most authentic word to include in a poem. The chapter concludes the following statements about poetry as a tool of discernment:

- In writing poetry many choices are made about what to include or omit. In the spirit of discernment, these choices contribute towards authenticity in the poet and integrity of the poem. Writing poetry is a tool of growing self-knowledge, inviting personal appropriation of that knowledge.

- Writing poetry is a tool for supervision. It makes the mind more acutely attuned to the nuance of language. It makes the heart become more aware of its desires. In doing so poetry invites readers to hear the sound of their own voices.

In this chapter, I have shown that immediacy invites ‘unedited’ awareness which has a quality of authenticity. I have shown that Ignatian indifference, the rules for the discernment of spirits and definitions of the experiences of consolation and desolation are helpful in knowing what might engender an increase in faith, hope and love, these being both the tools and evidence of graced decision-making.

I have described briefly the way in which metaphors are abstracted from the memories of various life experiences stored in the brain, and how they are tools of both spacious ambiguity and clarity in writing a poem. They are also of interest to the poet so that she can come to greater self-awareness and hence personal authenticity. The work in this chapter has moved me to a greater awareness of why I chose the original words in the poem, Why poetry, and whether those words revealed what I wanted to say.

As I reflect on the way that I use poetry as a tool of self-growth, I am aware that when I began the Spiritual Exercises, none of these tools were part of my life. I wrote poetry and I let it be what it was. Now I am conscious of what I am writing. I am
aware of the decisions I can make and why I am making them. Ignatian discernment using attentiveness to interior movements is the tool which has contributed to this formative process.

Over years, I have noticed that my faith in God and my valuing poetry have grown in positive correlation. As I re-draft and edit the poems, God is re-drafting and editing me. My affections, desires and consolations in writing poetry are meaningful in themselves, but the fact that my poetry is confirmed by others, I am encouraged that poetry is both prayer and discerned action.

Following the first poem of this chapter, *Immediacy*, I ask: “I wonder what the poet feels to be the focus of a poem.” The feather was a metaphor for me. Its buoyancy was the dynamic consolation in encountering God through my writing. This consolation is the grace from which I discern the next step, but I live my discerning life as a poet, aware and grateful that it is from the creative tension between consolation and desolation that the poem emerges, and discernment is possible.

I want my poetry to lift from the page.