



Stopping Time and Seeing Through a New Lens

An Introduction to the “Poetry and Medicine” Series

BY DANIEL J. BRESSLER, MD

I don't know about you, but my days go by in a blur. When I take my white coat off for the last time in the evening, but also when I raise a glass of champagne to celebrate the turning of a year, or when I sing “Happy Birthday” to a family member, I feel bewilderment along with satisfaction and joy. Where did it go, this day, this year, this decade? (And with the quiet, unspoken addenda, this career, this life?)

During my working day as a primary care doctor, I dictate office visits and other clinical notes on a pocket recorder that is transcribed and inserted into the electronic health record. I also carry around a second pocket recorder that I use to capture snippets of my day, some phrase that strikes me as profound or funny, some seemingly new or original thought that pops into my head. At home I jot down the entries from the second recorder. Sometimes it contains little nuggets I call

“poemseeds.” These I put in a journal. Sometimes they germinate.

Poetry, like all art, provides a provocation that can do more than merely amuse. There's nothing wrong with amusement. It is a form of soothing. It can be a wonderful diversion and certainly it can break tension. But poetry “as art” can — beyond relief — actually change how we see the world. It can even change who we are. It is an attempt, through words, to help us see new things. Moreover, it guides us to see things that were always there but somehow previously overlooked. Poetry can give us a new lens with which to take in the world. Just as the microscope revealed a new world of the tiny and the telescope revealed the world of the cosmic, the poetic lens offers the possibility of perceptual and emotional revelation. Art can pull from the blur of time an honest snapshot of who you really are and what your life

is really about. Honesty catalyzes change. The purpose of art, paraphrasing Rilke, is to change your life.

San Diego Physician magazine has been kind enough to set aside some space in to publish a series of poems that have grown from poemseeds over the past few years. I will introduce them with a few lines relating them to my practice and life, and hopefully also to yours.

Time and Heat Waves

As a practicing doctor, time in both its cyclical/seasonal aspects and its linear/projective aspects affects how I look at the world. The time of year determines the likelihood of certain (especially infectious) diseases. The number of years a person has accumulated dramatically affects the differential diagnosis of a presenting complaint. Chest pain means something very different if you're 60 than if you're 20.

In my own life, this past summer was especially poignant. My son turned 18 and left for college, the last by a year or two in the cohort of friends on our little cul-de-sac with whom he grew up. The street is now much quieter. With heat waves, I often awake early and sit in the dining room, luxuriating in the pre-dawn coolness. Before the business of the day begins, this dark, still time provides a context for me to reflect on the last year and the last 20. Where did they go? Asking imponderables is, I suppose, one form of therapy for my “early morning awakening.” Sometimes, I even get a poem out of it. Here's one of them, called “September Song.”

September Song

*The gardenias are floating in water
The water's suspended in air
The air is supporting my porcelain cup
The floorboards supporting my chair*

*I hear it's the summer from crickets
I feel it's the summer from sweat
I hope in my dreams I'll be wicked
With the mermaids who swim in my head*

*The street that I live on's grown quiet
The children have all moved away
If the past was for sale I would buy it
And release just a minute a day*

*But August has turned to September
As summer is fading to fall
Sunday dissolves into Monday
Like it never existed at all*

*I look toward the past and can't find it
Like the scent of a trail that's grown cold
I take yesterday's snapshot and grind it
To a mixture of strychnine and gold*

*The summer is too quick forgotten
Like all of the seasons before
The gardenia blooms have gone rotten
And the screeching chair scratches the floor*

*It seems like a misapprehension
To expect any season to stay
Or to hope that the kids remain children
For more than a year and a day*

*The moral's not clear from this story
Though I rub my eyes open to see
If my dreams brought some new allegory
Like an overnight package for me*

*But the porch has no new gift upon it
Old toys in the bin gather dust
What's this worn jump rope worth if I pawn it?
Seems the basketball hoop's gone to rust*

*Ah well, take a breath and release it
Ah well, take a shower and shave
The day like the autumn is coming
Like a rising tide, wave upon wave*

*Time takes all things and all creatures
All children, all toys and all streets
And haphazardly changes their features
Till their transformation completes*

*The future awaits on my doorstep
Respectful, its hat in its hand
But as soon as I venture one more step
This future assumes its command*

*The future's a mystery waiting
Tomorrow's a mist and a fog
And if you insist on more detail
You may as well talk to my dog **SDP***

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*Dr. Bressler, SDCMS-CMA member since 1988,
is chair of the Biomedical Ethics Committee at
Scripps Mercy Hospital and a longtime contrib-
uting writer to San Diego Physician.*

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