

When Someone Dies

Teaching resources



Poetry, Metaphor and Myth - the ancient teachers

Through poetry, story and myths we can catch up with ourselves. In our creative words, when we speak out, we bring to life that which is hidden in us.

We unfreeze. We communicate with the world. We can listen and let the soul hear the nuances of feeling and understanding. We are not alone. As we hear stories and poetry and the tales of others' journeys we can rest in the knowledge that we are not mad.

There is no shame in pain.

The ache and the riddles of being a human being enables us to notice that vulnerability, fear, wildness, catastrophe and the deepest sense of love are what allows to welcome us back to the simplicity of being a member of the human race.

C S Lewis, Emily Dickenson, Rainer Maria Rilke all speak so eloquently on the feelings that feel impossible to express. Yet, the point is that they can! We can hear in the words of others our own struggle! Hallelujah!

Using poetry and simply speaking out loud seems to touch deeply. It is when we listen with a 'poetic ear' that the truth of experience and healing speaks.

In the film, Bill tells the story of the Mustard Seed. It is a beautiful and compassionate story which allows a young woman to come into relationship with others. She discovers she is not alone. As she sprinkles mustard seeds we are led to understand that this is her moment of transformation.

The following section contains a number of poems and teaching stories which we hope will be helpful. More than anything, we invite you to collect your own stories. The use of stories and metaphors predates written information. It is often in the space of poetry that we enter into reverie. Reverie is the place of mystery, the space where we can allow in other perspectives. As facilitators this is the space we invite when we create activities such as guided imagery, artwork and meditation.

Stories and poetry on loss

The aim of this activity is to enable participants to use story creatively as a way of exploring feelings about death, transformation, and grief.

As tutor you might like to set the activity up by describing the importance of stories as a way of healing and their uses as metaphors for depth experience. In the film we hear the story of the Buddha and the Mustard Seed – an important teaching story about impermanence and the universal nature of grief. The film is also filled with extracts of poetry and we notice the importance of writing (Clare's journal) as a tool for healing.

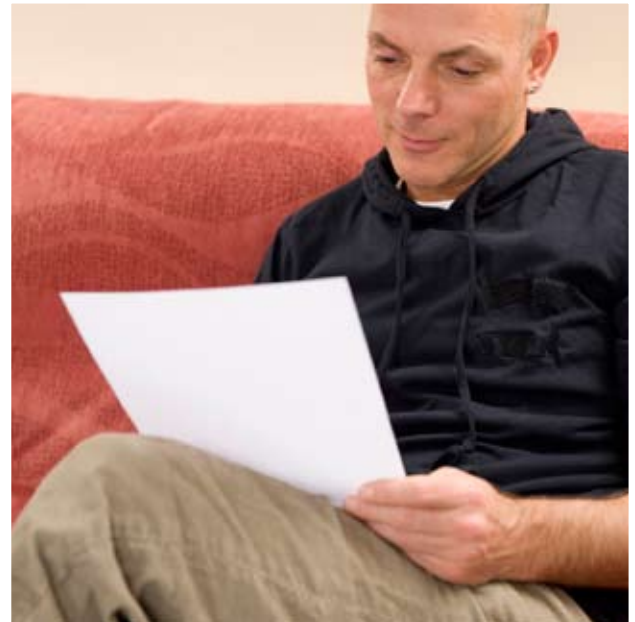
Activity

Allow at least an hour for this activity. Have pens, crayons and art materials to hand!

Using the poetry and story worksheets spread them out on the floor in the centre of the room (enough copies for each person).



Invite participants to walk around the room, looking at the titles of the sheets. When ready ask them to choose a sheet – it may be on the basis of which one 'intuitively' attracts them.



Taking the sheet, invite a quiet space where participants can sit quietly reading the chosen story/poem. They might wish to make some personal notes. A few directed reflective questions can be used to prompt thoughts, e.g.

- » Reflect on its meaning and how the story impacts on them – can they identify with it? How might it fit into their life?
- » What part of them 'chose' the story/poem?
- » If appropriate find an image which resonates with the story. Take time to draw or sketch it.

Invite them to find a partner spending 10 minutes each sharing their reflections.

Allow at least 10 minutes at the end for general group sharing and processing.

When the Heart

When the heart
Is cut or cracked or broken.
Do not clutch it
Let the wound lie open.

Let the wind
From the good old sea blow in
To bathe the wound with salt
And let it sting.

Let the stray dog lick it
Let a bird lean in the hole and sing
A simple song like a tiny bell
And let it ring.

Let it go
Let it out
Let it all unravel
Let it free and it can be
A path on which to travel.

Michael Leunig (1945 -)

The Traveller

At the gate of a small town, an old woman is sitting by the roadside. A traveller approaches her and enquires about the nature of the people in the town. She asks him how he found the people in the last place he visited. “Oh”, he replies, “they were gossips, mean spirited and a most unfriendly bunch.” She says that he will likely find the townspeople here much the same.

Another traveller arrives and asks the same question. Again she asks him how he found the people in the last town he visited. “ Oh”, he replies, “they were fun to be with, generous and kind.” She says he will likely find the people here much the same.’

Orpheus and Eurydice

This is the tale of Orpheus, the wonderfully gifted minstrel who attempted to rescue his dead sweetheart from the Underworld.

Orpheus had been taught by his mother to play the golden lyre given to him by Apollo. Such was his skill on the instrument that together with the sweetness of his singing voice, he could charm wild animals and even cause trees to uproot themselves and follow in his steps. Jason and the Argonauts took him along when they quested after the Golden Fleece, and Orpheus saved them from shipwreck by drowning out the treacherously alluring voices of the Sirens with his own musical excellence.

Orpheus fell in love with a nymph named Eurydice. Their life was blissful until one day whilst dancing, she stepped on a poisonous snake. It bit her and she died on the spot. Lamenting, Orpheus played mournful airs as she was carried to her grave. All who heard felt their heart moved.

Disconsolate and with life appearing dark without his beloved, Orpheus found a cave which lead to Hades and he followed Eurydice to the Underworld. Hades was the place that no living man could enter until the day of his own doom. Yet here, his musical charms were so persuasive that the King of the Dead permitted the minstrel to take his sweetheart home with him - on one condition.

This condition was so simple yet he could not heed it. Perhaps he could not bear to keep his eyes off his beloved for a moment longer. Perhaps he wanted to share his rapture at birdsong and sunshine as they approached the mouth of the cave. Or maybe he wanted Eurydice to hear the latest beautiful alluring song that he had worked out on his lyre. In any case, he did the one thing he had been forbidden. He turned around and looked at Eurydice. In that moment she disappeared back into the underworld and she was lost to him forever.

Buddha and the Mustard Seed

The Buddha delivered teachings to many people. Not only was he renowned as a great, compassionate and fully enlightened human being, but also as a skilled teacher and a miraculous healer who could even bring the dead back to life.

One day, a woman, named Kisa Gotami approached him after a teaching begging that he do something to restore her dead child to her. The Buddha listened patiently to her plea and saw how great her despair was as she clutched her dead infant close to her heart. He said to her, “Mother, if you bring me just one mustard seed from any household in which no person has died, then I shall revive your child.”

The woman was greatly encouraged by the Teacher’s words. She travelled from door to door throughout her own village, but could not find even a single residence in which no one had died. She went out of town, wandering to this hamlet and that in search of the tiny seed that the Buddha had requested. Days later, muddy and footsore, she returned to the place where the Buddha and his followers were passing the rainy season.

She was ushered into the Teacher’s presence worn out, but not discouraged. “Master, try as I might, I could not locate the token you requested as an offering. But I have come to understand that death visits every household and eventually, every single one of us.”

Having taken this understanding deep within, she carefully carried her dead son and buried him surrounded by a circle of mustard seeds.

Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am in a thousand winds that blow,

I am the softly falling snow.

I am the gentle showers of rain,

I am the fields of ripening grain.

I am in the morning hush,

I am in the graceful rush

Of beautiful birds in circling flight,

I am the starshine of the night,

I am in the flowers that bloom,

I am in a quiet room.

I am in the birds that sing,

I am in each lovely thing.

Do not stand at my grave and cry,

I am not there. I do not die.

Mary Elizabeth Frye (1905-2004)

Stop All the clocks

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

W H Auden (1907-1973)

A Parable of Immortality

I am standing upon the seashore.
A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze
and starts for the blue ocean.

She is an object of beauty and strength,
and I stand and watch until at last she hangs
like a speck of white cloud
just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with each other.
Then someone at my side says,
“ There she goes! “

Gone where?

Gone from my sight . . . that is all.

She is just as large in mast and hull and spar
as she was when she left my side
and just as able to bear her load of living freight
to the place of destination.

Her diminished size is in me, not in her.

And just at the moment
when someone at my side says,
“ There she goes! “
there are other eyes watching her coming . . .
and other voices ready to take up the glad shout . . .

“ Here she comes! “

Henry Van Dyke (1852 – 1933)

On Death

Then Almitra spoke, saying, We would ask now of death.

And he said:

You would know the secret of death. But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life? The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light. If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life. For life and death are one, even as the river and sea are one.

In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond; and like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring. Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.

Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honor. Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king? Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun? And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing. And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb. And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

Kahlil Gibran (1883 - 1931)

When I Die...

When I die
when my coffin
is being taken out
you must never think
I am missing this world

don't shed any tears
don't lament or
feel sorry
I'm not falling
into a monster's abyss

when you see
my corpse is being carried
don't cry for my leaving
I'm not leaving
I'm arriving at eternal love

when you leave me
in the grave
don't say goodbye
remember a grave is
only a curtain
for the paradise behind

you'll only see me
descending into a grave
now watch me rise
how can there be an end
when the sun sets or
the moon goes down

it looks like the end
it seems like a sunset
but in reality it is a dawn
when the grave locks you up
that is when your soul is freed

have you ever seen
a seed fallen to earth
not rise with a new life
why should you doubt the rise
of a seed named human

have you ever seen
a bucket lowered into a well
coming back empty
why lament for a soul
when it can come back
like Joseph from the well

when for the last time
you close your mouth
your words and soul
will belong to the world of
no place no time.

Rumi (1207 - 1273)

On Death

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Mary Oliver (1935 -)

I Go Among the Trees and Sit Still

I go among the trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
Around me like circles on water

My tasks lie in their places
Where I left them
Asleep like cattle.
Then, what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight
What I fear in it leaves it
And the fear of it leaves me.
It sings. And I hear its song.

Wendell Berry (1934 -)