

10 Poetry

Some years ago, my husband and I became friends with an elderly resident of a retirement center. Grant was in his 90's. We helped with the church services on Sundays and he would shuffle to the meeting room every week with his little Edna on his arm. Grant was a frail looking man with stooped shoulders and I don't think Edna even reached five feet tall. After he seated her, he would pull a comb out of one pocket and tenderly comb her hair and then reach in his other pocket and pull out a little bow that he would carefully put in place. Then he'd lick his fingers so he could pat down the stray hairs.

Grant had every reason to despair. He couldn't see or hear well. Their only child, a daughter, had died when she was just a young woman. Edna had been suffering the effects of Alzheimers for many years. It had been a long time since she had recognized him and she rarely spoke any words. He was her primary care giver and they lived in one of the independent living apartments.

But he held a treasure in his heart. From the time he was a child, he memorized poetry and would keep dozens of poems refreshed and alive at all times. He was often called upon to recite a poem, and when he would stand, his pale blue eyes would suddenly light up and his voice would become strong and vibrant as he shared beautiful words by heart.

My husband and I went to visit him one night in his apartment. He told us he was so very, very tired, but when I asked if he had a poem for us, his eyes brightened and away he went:

Wynken, Blynken, and Nod one night
 Sailed off in a wooden shoe—
Sailed on a river of crystal light
 Into a sea of dew.
“Where are you going, and what do you wish”
 The old moon asked the three.
“We have come to fish for the herring fish
 The lives in the beautiful sea;
Nets of silver and gold have we!”
 Said Wynken, Blynken and Nod.

He went on to recite all the verses and I asked him if this was a poem from his childhood. He said, “Oh, no. This is what I have been working on for the last several weeks.”

Poetry is how a lonely, tired man kept his heart from failing. This was his ‘jewel’ of life that gave him joy in times of sorrows.

“So shut your eyes while mother sings
 Of wonderful sights that be.
And you shall see the beautiful things
 As you rock in the misty sea.”

He passed away just a few days later and Edna followed shortly thereafter. I will forever carry with me the lesson he taught me of the power of storing up treasures of poetry.

Abraham Lincoln, in the darkest days of the war, lost his much loved little boy to a sudden illness. A few days later, a senator found Lincoln, secluded in a room by himself, his head bowed, with a book of Shakespeare open on his lap, drawing comfort from the words of Constance who had also lost a young son:

My Lord, my boy,
my young son.
My life, my joy, my food,
My all the world.
My sorrow's cure.

Grief fills up the room of my absent son
Lies in his bed;
walks up and down with me.

Oh, Father, Cardinal,
I have heard you say
I shall see and know my friends in heaven.
If that be true,
I shall see my boy again.

As I read the stories of personal sacrifice and loss I've included in our World War I volume, I found myself returning over and over again to a poem that previously had little meaning to me, but now captured what my heart was feeling:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
 In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
 In Flanders fields.

Poetry combines imagery with the rhythm of music. A poet can carry a message to a place deep in the heart with just a few words that a scholar can't reach in 10,000 words. Poetry is painting with words. It seems to have fallen out of favor today. In our hectic ever-rushing noisy world, poetry requires us to slow down and feel; the meaning cannot be sensed by the literal mind; it requires a heart comfortable with imagery.

Many develop a distaste for it by having its technicalities explained before feeling the sheer beauty of the words. Andrew Lang in his book of poetry wrote: "The child does not want everything to be explained; in the unexplained is great pleasure. Nothing, perhaps, crushes the love of poetry more surely and swiftly than the use of poems as school books. They are at once associated in the mind with lessons, with long, with endless hours in school, with puzzling questions and the agony of an imperfect memory, with grammar and etymology, and everything that is an enemy of joy. We may cause children to hate Shakespeare or Spenser..by inflicting poets on them, not for their poetry, but for the valuable information in the notes."

In children's books 100 years ago, no matter what the subject was, the writers inserted lines of poetry everywhere—on the title page, on blank dividing pages, at the beginning and ending of chapters and within the text itself. It was almost as if they were saying, 'Look, I've explained this concept to your mind; now I want your heart to understand.'

O poet, what power lies in thy magic wand!
No sooner dost thou touch us, the dull gray day
is aflame with color and sunshine.

Poetry is meant to be read aloud to capture the music and enhance the impression. You can't skim through poetry and have it make any lasting impression. Longfellow's music is especially delightful to children: Listen my child and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere—galloping, galloping, galloping, galloping, galloping, galloping. Or Hiawatha's By the shores of gitchee gumee—hear the beating of the drums. And you can almost hear the pounding on the anvil in his Village Blacksmith: Thus on its sounding anvil shaped each burning deed and thought. Not that you'd read it that way, of course. But the underlying rhythm is there.

Nothing has surpassed Mother Goose for introducing poetry to children. One of my storytelling friends said that when you use Mother Goose, "You are developing ear, mind and heart, and laying a foundation for a later love of the best things in poetry." Or in other words, "If you wish your child to love Homer, give him Mother Goose." Another one wrote, "Children are hardly ever too young to delight in the mere beauty of words..in the music of metre and rhyme, even when the meaning is perhaps still obscure." Mother Goose rhymes are simple enough to share 'by heart'. Keep a full reservoir of them. Your children will just naturally pick them up and start reciting them 'by heart' themselves.

There are many volumes of Mother Goose Rhymes available. You'll find several illustrated versions to choose from in the online library. Just go to the Others category on the Categories page and select Poetry. In our Stories and Rhymes for Young Children' volume, I included a book where, in the preface it states, "...for the first time an attempt is made to group [Mother Goose] in a natural and logical order, following the mental development of the child." The first group of rhymes is for the sheer delight of the sounds of the words and playing with the baby:

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man....

Dancy diddledy, poppity pin...

This is the way the ladies ride, Tri-tre-tre-tree, tri-tre-tre-tree...

Then it moves into rhymes about animals:

Three little kittens, lost their mittens, and they began to cry...

Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse ran up the clock...

Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle...

I had a little pony

Next come rhymes about other children:

Jack and Jill went up the hill...

Little Jack Horner sat in the corner...

Georgy Peorgy pudding and pie, kissed the girls and made them cry...

Then rhymes about days and nights, time and weather:

Rain, rain, go away...

One misty, moisty morning when cloudy was the weather...

Thirty days hath September, April, June and November...

Next come games, counting and riddles:

Ring around the rosies

This is the way we wash our clothes...

London Bridge is falling down...

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall...

And finally, the beginning of storytelling:

Old King Cole was a merry old soul...

Tom, Tom the Piper's son...

I saw a ship come sailing by....

You can see how easy it is to commit a rhyme a day to memory and be able to tell it by heart which is so much more effective at this age than trying to make them sit still while you read to them from a book. And you'll get lots of mileage out of every one of them because children this age love repeating familiar things. You'll get to repeat them over and over and over ...and over and over and over again.

I've read some articles lately that suggest it's possible that the rise of attention deficit disorders in some of our children may be traced back to the neglect of nursery rhymes that lend so well to creating order and focus in the mind at this critical developmental stage.

I realize some of you don't have babies anymore; that your children have passed this stage. If you have older children who missed Mother Goose and you still have little ones in the house, enlist them to learn the rhymes so they can teach them to little brothers and sisters. As I've said before, you can go back and pick up to some extent what you've missed out on. You just can't rush the process going forward. If you don't have any little ones in the house, tell your older children what I've said here and have them commit Mother Goose to memory in preparation for when they become parents. Use Mother Goose rhymes in their copy work which I'll describe in a few minutes.

As your child enters the Imaginative years, Robert Louis Stevenson's Child's Garden of Verses can't be beat. I've included all of them in the Young Children's book; you'll find favorites like "I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me" as well as favorites from Eugene Fields, Christina Rossetti and others. Many delightful poems are inspired by nature.

And then, as your child enters the Heroic years, help him memorize poems that will stir his heart. You can use poetry to deepen the appreciation of the people and events of history. I've included several historical poems sorted by the rotation schedule in Poetry for the Well-Educated Heart. For instance, when you study the civil war, you can give the facts of casualties, or you can share a poem like this entitled The Picket Guard by Ethel Lynn Beers. The poet wrote this as her reaction to a cold headline that read in 1861: A Picket Shot.

"All quiet along the Potomac," they say,
"Except now and then a stray picket

Is shot, as he walks on his beat, to and fro,
By a rifleman hid in the thicket.
'Tis nothing—a private or two, now and then,
Will not count in the news of the battle;
Not an officer lost—only one of the men,
Moaning out, all alone, the death rattle.”

All quiet along the Potomac tonight,
Where the soldiers lie peacefully dreaming;
Their tents in the rays of the clear autumn moon,
Or the light of the watch-fires, are gleaming.
A tremulous sigh, as the gentle night-wind
Through the forest-leaves softly is creeping;
While stars up above, with their glittering eyes,
Keep guard—for the army is sleeping.

There's only the sound of the lone sentry's tread,
As he tramps from the rock to the fountain,
And thinks of the two in the low trundle-bed
Far away in the cot on the mountain.
His musket falls slack—his face, dark and grim,
Grows gentle with memories tender,
As he mutters a prayer for the children asleep—
For their mother—may Heaven defend her!

The moon seems to shine just as brightly as then,
That night, when the love yet unspoken
Leaped up to his lips—when low-murmured vows
Were pledged to be ever unbroken.
Then drawing his sleeve roughly over his eyes,
He dashes off tears that are welling,
And gathers his gun closer up to its place
As if to keep down the heart-swelling.

He passes the fountain, the blasted pine-tree—
The footstep is lagging and weary;
Yet onward he goes, through the broad belt of light,
Toward the shades of the forest so dreary.
Hark! Was it the night-wind that rustled the leaves?
Was it moonlight so wondrously flashing?
It looked like a rifle—“Ah! Mary, good-bye!”
And the life-blood is ebbing and plashing.

All quiet along the Potomac tonight,
No wound save the rush of the river;

While soft falls the dew on the face of the dead—
The picket's off duty, forever.

There are so many golden truths stored in poetry. You'll find many books of classic poetry for children on the same Poetry page I just mentioned. A favorite of mine that is available to borrow on internet archive is a 1957 book, Helen Ferris' Favorite Poems Old and New. If you want to own your own copy, it's still in print. Another personal favorite for older children is called Heart Throbs, which is linked in the online library. My grandfather owned a copy of this book that was passed down to my father which was passed down to me. It was printed in 1905 and was the result of a national contest run by a popular magazine of the day. The editors of the magazine invited Americans to submit the poem, anecdote, or thought that had most touched their heart and the book was a compilation of the winners, or the ones that were entered most frequently. It represents the heart of America a hundred years ago....I can't help but wonder what a similar contest would give us today. Anyway, I think you'll find lots of selections that will become new personal favorites.

I've picked up some wonderful books of poetry for children at library sales with beautiful illustrations. There doesn't seem to be a real call for them anymore and you'll likely find some real treasures. Create a shelf full of poetry books that is somewhere your children will have quick access.

A childhood of beautiful poetry will prepare hearts to feel at home with the great poets like Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton; Tennyson, Wordsworth and so many others who require that we be comfortable with imagery and who offer us one of the highest forms of literary experience, with multi-faceted layers of rich meaning and understanding. And what that translates into is more joy and satisfaction for you and your children.

As you share poetry with your children, anticipate words that may not have a clear meaning to them. One day I was sharing a story with a little granddaughter who was four or five at the time. I told her how, from the time I was a little girl, I dreamed of playing the harp. But it was more than forty years before I finally owned my very own. I loved that harp. Every time I walked by it in the living room, I practically pinched myself to think I really, truly had a harp! I loved to play it. And then one day her grandpa—my husband—got very sick. For a long time he couldn't work. It was about the time her mom was getting ready to marry her dad and I didn't have any money to pay for her wedding and I wanted her to have a pretty wedding dress. So I decided to sell my harp. It made me cry, but it also made me happy because I loved her mom more than I loved my harp.

My little granddaughter was very quiet while she listened to me tell this story. A little later she came back with a picture she had colored with crayons. There I was, sitting in a little boat out in the middle of a lake, with tears running down my cheeks. And on the other end of the boat was my harp, acting as the sail. I was sailing my harp.

Now, I treasure that little picture. It was the sweetest gift, but it serves as a reminder to me that I need to be careful with little children that what I am describing is the same as what is being

imagined. It makes me think of another little boy who kept begging his mother to tell him the poem about a little boy who gets sick and throws up a ribbon. She couldn't for the life of her figure out what the poem was until she read 'The Night Before Christmas' and got to the part where he tore open the shutters and 'threw up the sash'.

Moving on to another thought, I read a recent study where volunteers agreed to sit in a room, alone for fifteen minutes. The room was stark bare; no pictures to look at, no magazines lying around. They also had to agree to not take any electronics in the room with them—they had to leave their iPhones and iPads behind.

Can you guess how many minutes it took before they started going absolutely stir crazy? The average time was 5 minutes. They kept reaching for phones that weren't there. It was just them, alone, with their thoughts. And for most of them, there weren't many thoughts to keep themselves company.

Now contrast that with a group of prisoners Victor Frankl observed in the Nazi death camps. At peril of losing their lives, they gathered together to recite poetry, improvise plays and sing songs, which were forbidden. It was how they survived.

How true are these words of Marie Antoinette, who knew loneliness as few of us will ever know: "What a resource amid the casualties of life is a well-cultivated mind! One can then be one's own companion and find society in one's own thoughts."

How would you or your children fare, left alone with your thoughts?

The objective is not to see how many poems we can pour through our children; it's to see how many we can help them hold on to.

Our brains have a tremendous capacity for memorization. Prospective students at a leading university in Turkey hundreds of years ago were required to demonstrate that they had memorized the entire Koran to even be considered for admittance. For hundreds and even thousands of years, before written language, the history of nations was passed from generation to generation in ballads committed to memory. Their genealogies were kept the same way. Were it not for the ballads, awareness of many of the people and events of the olden days would have vanished long ago.

But most of us have allowed our brains to become very flabby. We know we can look up anything on the internet, so we don't train ourselves to remember. Helping our children memorize poetry strengthens that memory muscle. Our memory skills diminish as we age. Take advantage of this prime time for memory work. These days I forget what I'm saying right in the middle of saying it, but I can still recite you this poem I memorized for a talk in church before I was ten:

I knelt to pray when day was done
And prayed, Oh Lord, bless everyone.

Lift from each saddened heart the pain,
And let the sick be well again.
And then I woke another day
And carelessly went on my way.

The whole day long I did not try
To wipe a tear from any eye.
I did not try to share the load
Of any brother on the road.
I did not even go to see
The sick man just next door to me.

Yet, once again when day was done,
I prayed, Oh Lord, bless everyone.
But as I prayed into my ear
There came a voice that whispered clear,
“Pause now, my son, before you pray.
Who did you try to bless today?”

God’s richest blessings always go
To those who serve Him here below.”
And then I hid my face and cried,
Forgive me, Lord, I have not tried.
But let me live another day,
And I will live the way I pray.

Little children need to be taught concentration and poetry is one of the best means. Memorizing poetry fosters the habit of attention that will reach into all other aspects of learning.

And remember what I said about the vital importance of oral expression? That the secret of the Greek’s artistic nature lie in the fact that they had their children spend their time in poetic recitation rather than in writing exercises. Although you can certainly kill a love of it by assigning and forcing it.

The imagery and rhythm of poetry are the secrets behind its long-lasting and staying power. When you help your young children memorize poetry, first let them take in the whole poem before you start breaking it down for memorization. Listening to the rhythm of the words will give the words something to organize themselves by, so let it be oral work rather than giving them the written words to memorize from. Then maybe work on just a line or two a day, not in a formal, sit-down, “Let’s memorize this poem session”, but rather in the course of the day-- while you’re driving to the store or making a bed together or picking up toys.

Be sure you’re breaking it up by complete thought or image rather than by end of lines. If you were learning Wordsworth’s Intimations of Immortality, it would be confusing to say, “Trailing clouds of glory do we come”

and then
“from God, which is our home.”

You would want to give the entire thought as one: “Trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, which is our home.”

Or look what happens to In Flanders Field when you break it down line by line:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

Doesn't it make more sense to unfold the poem, thought by thought, like this:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow between the crosses, row on row, that mark our place;
and in the sky the larks still bravely singing, fly scarce heard amid the guns below.

If you go to the Poetry section in the young children's online library, I've linked to a couple of books that will give you ideas for helping children learn poetry. But it's really not rocket science: choose poems suitable to their age level and interest. Start with simple ones that will help build confidence. Give them opportunities to share them with family friends or grandparents. Keep the images in mind over the words. Clarify images that may be unclear or confusing to children.

Read poetry every day. Invite your children to choose favorites they want to work on memorizing.

In one of the books I just referenced about how to help children love poetry, the top suggestion was to encourage them to create their own anthology of favorite poems. That goes for you, too.

You can call Poetry notebook whatever you like, but I like the word 'Gem' because it describes something that is very small, but is very valuable and lasts a long time. Poems are small but are of great worth. The first notebook you should organize, if you don't have one already, is your very own. Let your children see you copying favorite poems with cursive handwriting and decorating the pages to add to its pleasure, if you like. Read to them from your book of Poetry Gems.

For your child, the Poetry anthology he creates not only will become a lifelong treasure, it serves as a first reading book and also a means of practicing, first printing, and then cursive handwriting in a meaningful and enjoyable way. They will want to include their very best work and it will become a source of pride to show grandparents and aunts and uncles and others.

A 3 ring binder is a good first option because a child can create individual pages and add them as

he goes along. If he makes a mistake, it's not hard to throw the page away and create another one as opposed to starting with a bound journal or a bare book where the pages are all intact.

For a toddler who isn't reading yet, you could glue pictures from Mother Goose rhymes that will trigger a rhyme he's familiar with. You can shop thrift stores to look for illustrated Mother Goose books that you won't mind cutting up. Or you can print out images from the old Mother Goose books we've linked online in the online library for young children. So now, when he sees the picture of a clock with the mouse running up it, he recites the rhyme associated with it.

I started a Poetry Gem book with a little granddaughter who is just learning to read while I was helping my daughter with a new baby. I had her pick a nursery rhyme and then had her show me where she wanted me to write it on the page. I wrote the words as she dictated them to me, and then I had her read them with me as I pointed to each word. Then she took the page and illustrated it. We punched three holes in it and put it in her 3 ring binder. After a couple of days, her little 4 year old sister wanted to do the same thing, so we started hers as well. – The power of the heart seeing something happening. If I had required her to color a page, I doubt she would have been interested. Not only was she feeling the delight of the poetry itself, I accomplished several lessons with this simple little activity: I demonstrated that words can be written out. I showed left to right. I was giving her heart a chance to watch the act of writing play out. I could tell that Emma, the four year old, was watching carefully how I drew circles and lines to form the letters. I was giving her something to imitate. A book of poems like this can become a very personal first 'reading' book. One of my daughters had a first grade teacher who taught them to read entirely from poetry pages they recited and illustrated.

As a child starts learning to write, copying poems that she is memorizing can provide copy work to practice handwriting, even if she just starts with just one or two words a day. The pages can continue to be illustrated or decorated with designs or stickers. Little children love cutting paper, so why not have them cut out pictures from old magazines to keep in a box that can be used to decorate their poetry pages. Cutting out pictures is one of the activities you can have your children do while you're reading stories to them to keep their hands busy and thereby hold interest longer.

Eventually, as your child matures, encourage the use of cursive handwriting to copy all the poems they are memorizing or are including in their anthology of favorite poems. Yes, it may be easier to print them off the computer. But the very act of cursive writing connects parts of the brain and deepens the whole process that wouldn't happen if you just type in the words. Encourage your children to memorize scriptures or passages of Shakespeare or great quotes as they get older and add them to their Gems notebook. And how do you encourage them? By letting their hearts see you do it.

As I said before, these poetry books can become a lifelong treasured possession—sort of a scrap book of worthy thoughts.

I was reading poetry before I went to bed the other night and ran across a poem I hadn't seen for more than fifty years. But as I read the first lines, a whole scene opened up to my memory of my

childhood room, and the dusky sunlight that filtered across my bed as I heard the poem as a child. And my mother was there. I don't even have words to describe to you the experience, except to say that it was pure joy. This was the poem, called Velvet Shoes:

Let us walk in the white snow
 In a soundless space;
With footsteps quiet and slow,
 At a tranquil pace,
 Under veils of white lace.

I shall go shod in silk,
 And you in wool,
White as a white cow's milk,
 More beautiful
 Than the breast of a gull.

We shall walk through the still town
 In a windless peace;
We shall step upon white down,
 Upon silver fleece.
 Upon softer than these.

We shall walk in velvet shoes:
 Wherever we go
Silence will fall like dews
 On white silence below.
 We shall walk in the snow.

Definitely a poem worthy of my poetry gems book.

Poetry Tea Times have become popular with families where you put a nice tablecloth on the table, pick some flowers if you have some, and pull out your nicest china teaset. Enjoy some delicious treats and some hot cocoa or other drink while you share poetry with each other, preferably poems that are being memorized, but certainly reading them aloud from books works, too.

I've had some moms say, but I have boys! You'll be surprised—poetry isn't just for girls. And especially consider how many of the great poets were men!

Did you watch the Dead Poet Society with Robin Williams? You will probably remember the words from this scene:

“We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, Law, business and Engineering—these are noble pursuits necessary to sustain life, but poetry, beauty, romance,

love, these are what we stay alive for.”

And now we're to the end of another talk. So let me end with this thought:

The stories of history teach us that when a people have lost their heroic spirit; when their hearts have grown cold; it's not the scholar or the scientist who fans the flame again. It's always the poet – a Thomas Moore in Ireland or a Lord Alfred Tennyson in England– who rises up and breathes new life and plants new hearts in nations. So I'll leave you with a question I jotted down from my readings:

Art thou the poet that shall save the world?