



Engaging the Minds and Hearts of Cognitively Intact Residents

Amy Fox, RN, MSW

A newly formed poetry group created surprising exuberance among cognitively intact residents in an assisted living (AL) facility. The three enemies of boredom, isolation, and loneliness, made worse by inescapable proximity to those with cognitive impairment, had been contributing to their hunger for activity to stimulate the brain and the soul. It is the intent of this writer to explain how the group was inexpensively and simply formed, and illustrate how it exceeded expectations in resident interest and participatory engagement.

One middle-aged volunteer had been asking the activities director for a meaningful way to spend an hour every other week with the residents. The director thought she had seen some recent interest among the residents in hearing poetry being read aloud, so she suggested leading a poetry group. Not specifically trained in leading literature education meetings, the volunteer was skeptical (see "How to Read Poetry"). However, she did have comfort and ease spending time with residents in an AL facility and was willing to try anything in which residents had shown prior interest. This volunteer also remembered that her own elderly relatives were educated in a cohort group that was often required to memorize poetry in elementary and high school.

Picking up a dusty anthology of favorite poems from her home bookshelf, the volunteer came to the first session with some favorites marked and ready to read aloud. One gentleman and 4 ladies arrived.

A few open-ended questions were asked:

- Does anyone remember part of a poem?
- Who was required to memorize poems?
- What themes seem to be prevalent in these poems you all remember?

These questions started lively conversation and the usual challenges of managing a group, such as controlling the "performances" and the conversation to ensure fairness and polite behavior.

All participants reported enjoying the hour (which

How to Read Poetry

Starting a poetry group may seem like a daunting task, especially for those who believe themselves incapable of understanding poetry. Many resources are available on the Internet to help volunteers and participants get over their initial fear. Some are listed here:

The Owl at Purdue: <http://garts.latech.edu/owl/literature/poetryguide.htm>

The Library of Congress:
<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-howtoread.html>

The University of Pennsylvania:
<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Teaching/Handouts/readingpoetry.html>

The Poetry Foundation:
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/feature.guidebook.hirsch.html>

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

stretched to an hour and a half), and wanted to know when it could happen again. A date was set, and the volunteer promised to look up a few poems not in the anthology and the definition of a few words such as “haiku.” The group agreed that it would be fun to write their own poem the following week.

The next meeting had 2 additional residents present, including 1 more gentleman. He came in spite of his embarrassment to be in public due to aphasia from a stroke, but his background as a journalist made him ripe for the content of the meeting. He requested the reading of Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” (see “My Last Duchess”) explaining that it held significant memories for him of a girl who broke his heart in the 8th grade. Although this gentleman did not return to more meetings, the leader found a brief explanation of the poet’s life online, printed it out, and delivered it to his room when he politely declined joining the group for the third meeting. The volunteer hopes to renew his interest in participating at a later date.

Resources for Poetry Group Leaders

Typing key words into a search online can provide helpful clues to a poem’s meaning, or facts about a poet’s life that may illuminate some hidden meanings (ie, finding meaning within the symbolism of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by performing a quick search into the background of Samuel Coleridge). An ongoing challenge is finding poetry that does not offend with erotica (thereby eliminating more of the modern poetry), nor deal with the subject of death in too gloomy a fashion. However, nature, death, and love seem to be common themes (see “On Aging” by Maya Angelou, and “Do Not Go Gently into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas). The leader of this group has realized that a blunt, open conversation is needed, to ascertain what the residents themselves feel is appropriate. It may be that the very sensitivity of certain topics creates a universal hunger for their open discussion.

At the second meeting, the group did indeed write a short, 4-line poem, which was formed around an old-fashioned term ‘grog blossom,’ (meaning a red nose, usually from drinking). The word had arisen in one of the recitations, and some were unfamiliar with the term. The humor in the term caused the group to use it as the

On Aging

Maya Angelou

When you see me sitting quietly,
Like a sack left on the shelf,
Don’t think I need your chattering.
I’m listening to myself.
Hold! Stop! Don’t pity me!
Hold! Stop your sympathy!
Understanding if you got it,
Otherwise I’ll do without it!

When my bones are stiff and aching,
and my feet won’t climb the stair,
I will only ask one favor:
Don’t bring me no rocking chair.

When you see me walking, stumbling,
Don’t study and get it wrong.
‘Cause tired don’t mean lazy
And every goodbye ain’t gone.
I’m the same person I was back then,
A little less hair, a little less chin,
A lot less lungs and much less wind.
But ain’t I lucky I can still breathe in.

basis for their funny poem. It took almost 4 more meetings to get a quorum agreement that the poem was finished. It was then given to the activities director to publish on the weekly menu calendar (on which there is usually at least 1 empty square); and when it was published, the participants were proud.

This caused the volunteer to encourage writing on an individual basis, during the many hours residents spend alone. She gave out a partial sentence, dealing with a theme of nature, and asked them to return to the next meeting using that phrase in a poem. The results were interesting. One lady’s poem was only 4 lines long. Another wrote 4 pages. The short one was published, and the poet’s pride was enormous. This posed a challenge of how to give equal airtime to all writers...what to do with the long poems?

The volunteer decided to begin a Poetry Group book. To inaugurate this new challenge, she received permission

To keep the heart unwrinkled, to be hopeful, kindly,
cheerful, reverent—that is to triumph over old age.

– Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *O Magazine*, October 2003

My Last Duchess

Robert Browning

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
the curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess's cheek: perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of you. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such a one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
the company below, then. I repeat
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine dowry will be disallowed
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

to celebrate with wine for those who could have wine with their doctors' permission, and faux wine for those who could not. The beverages were cheerfully provided by the facility's staff. (The idea came from their lament that it had been a long time since they were able to enjoy a bit of spirits. This was not a break from the regulations, but it had not been done in a long time). They made an exuberant toast to creativity and language. Binders were made containing all the poetry to display the residents' work to visitors, staff, and families.

Because several residents have trouble writing or typing, the leader sometimes takes poems home to type—a role that could be filled by a volunteer high school student to act as poet scribe. Some residents do not want to write anything. It is important to repeatedly state that writing is not a requirement for attendance. Choosing a quiet location, such as a library room, also helps residents hear materials being read to them.

The group continues, the binder is thickening, and attendance has increased. Members who have standing

doctor appointments, such as the man on thrice-weekly dialysis, have requested that their doctor appointments not interfere with poetry group time.

As discussion of ways to ensure autonomy in AL continues, with worries about weighing risk vs. benefit inherent in the provision of personal choice, we can cheerfully report that this is a win/win: engagement, stimulation, choice, laughter, reminiscence, camaraderie, caring, and community...all without risk! **ALC**

Amy Fox, RN, MSW, is President of Fox Care and a member of the board of directors of Consumer Consortium on Assisted Living (CCAL). Amy can be reached at afcm@comcast.net.

We Want To Hear From You!

ALC will feature "Activities for Living Well" in each issue. We want to hear from you. Send your stories of inspirational senior living to: jhorvath@healthcommedia.com.