

POETRY FOR WELLBEING  
WORKSHOPS

WORKSHOP 3

# BEING HUMAN



## INTRODUCTION

*Our thanks to John Glenday for writing this workbook for us.*

Today, we're going to be writing about that little detail of our lives: other human beings and the way we interact with them.

Being human isn't just a physical state; it's a social one too. That's why, as human beings, we're driven to communicate. That's all writing is, after all – a way to communicate things that are tricky to say, or to communicate them in a more vivid, engaging way.


Why?

For fifteen billion years, the universe has been expanding and maturing, and it'll go on for another fifteen billion years or so. In the middle of that, there's this tiny, briefer-than-brief spark of light and noise – and that's us. Human beings. We've been around for a couple of million years or so and, with the way things are going, will be for another few hundred thousand if we're very lucky – if we begin to care more for the environment and ourselves. Somehow, in all that silence, humankind has appeared, and for that flicker of time we can recognise one person from another. We can fight and fall in love; we can make mistakes; we can achieve wonderful things.

And we can also communicate: we can speak and sing. After that, it will be back to silence until the end of time. That's why we feel driven. There's so much to say, and so little time.

This afternoon, we'll be communicating with each other through words. But bear this in mind. We only have limited time – two hours in this case – so how do we make our words count?

We do this by saying what needs to be said as clearly and effectively as possible, and by not saying what doesn't need to be said.



Let's recap the five essentials of effective writing, poetry or otherwise.

- Use the five senses
- Focus on physical things and leave the emotions to the reader
- Don't tell the reader things, just show them
- Don't say too much
- Keep it very simple


Let's also remind everyone to share anything they write. This is because poetry has two lives – as breath in the air and as ink on the page. Sometimes one life is stronger than the other, so often what we think doesn't sound great on the page can be wonderful when read out loud. And thinking that your poem is 'not good enough to read aloud' isn't a good reason for not sharing it. Sharing is part of the editing process, and reading aloud is one of the ways we hone and improve our craft. It's also fun. Scary at times, but fun.

Before our first exercise, note again that if anyone feels uncomfortable about reading out loud because their writing is personal or private, they shouldn't feel compelled to share.

## **EXERCISE 1: COMMUNICATING**

And now let's start communicating. Let's introduce ourselves, and try to use as many of those golden rules as we can.

**Six Word CVs:** Introduce yourself to each other in a mini CV. You can only use six words. Ideally I want three of these. They can reflect any aspect of your life or your wished-for life.



Now, let's look at a poem which reflects on a time when communication has been tricky. Think about those five rules again while we share it, and we'll try to answer a few questions the poem raises (bear in mind there are no wrong answers to these):

**Read:** 'Black Silk' by Tess Gallagher

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54052/black-silk-56d233f5af71d>

**Discuss together:** Take some time to discuss this poem using the prompts below.

- Who are the people in this poem?
- What is happening?
- How do we know this?
- What is not being talked about?
- How is grief handled?

Of course, poems about death are really always poems about life. The old joke is that death is what gets poets up in the morning, but it's not really true. Life is what gets us up in the morning, and death tells us so much more about what it is to be alive than it does about itself.


Our lives consist of relationships and heritage. Of longing and belonging. The poet William Soutar talked of the three essential relationships in life:

- People to people
- People to the landscape
- People to the past

## EXERCISE 2

**Read:** 'Where I'm From' by American poet George Ella Lyon, which reflects her upbringing in rural Kentucky in the 1950s

<http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>



George Ella Lyon has encouraged other writers to use her work to generate new poems of their own, based on their landscapes, their people, and their own histories:

Notice how she mentions certain classes of things:

- Items from around the house in specific detail
- The landscape around her childhood
- The sights, smells, tastes of her home
- The family members and snatches of their stories
- Family photographs/memories
- Local places she knew (Artemus and Billie's Branch)

Right at the end, she does something different: 'snapped before I budded/leaf-fall from the family tree.' What exactly does this mean? We can't be sure, but it invites us to guess, to wonder, which all great poetry should do.

**Write:** Spend 20 minutes on your own poem, using 'Where I'm From' or a similar title, and bear in mind the way Lyon writes hers – she's showing us far more than telling us what her world was like. Now show us your world.

Read back what you've written. Let those who wish to share do so. Allow time for questions, answers, and final reflections.

## **AN EXAMPLE FROM ARIANE**

I am from a confusion of fallen angels.

From the stream that trickled along the end of the gardens, where we washed out our handkerchiefs and played at self-sufficiency.

I come from long bicycle rides and the darkening evening they found us under the bridge, miles from home.

I am from hay bales, where we sat together spooling our futures before us.

Futures that now are past, present, imperfect.

I am from village shows, asparagus beds and electric fences.

The eggshells we tiptoed across, that domestic no man's land.

In writing poems in response to 'Where I'm from', some workshop participants commented that the exercise took them back to a place where they 'didn't want to go', or which was challenging for them to visit. Although the poem 'Where I'm From' by George Ella Lyon is often used as a prompt for creative writing, it does encourage reflection on the childhoods which we enjoyed, experienced, and, at times, just had to survive.

For grounding, at the end of this workshop we read the following poem together, and it might be a good idea to have an uplifting poem or two ready to share in your workshops.

**Read:** 'Everything is Going to Be All Right' by Derek Mahon

<https://www.poetrybooks.co.uk/blogs/news/poem-a-day-everything-is-going-to-be-all-right>

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