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**Poetry and Peace: Explorations of Language and “Unlanguage” as
Transformative Pedagogy**

Mary Lee Morrison

*Out beyond ideas
of wrongdoing and rightdoing
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*out beyond ideas
of wrongdoing and rightdoing
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase
each other, doesn't make any sense.*

(adaptation of Rumi poem)¹

¹ David Wilcox and Nancy Pettit, "Adaptation of a Rumi Poem," *Fellowship Magazine*, no. Summer-Fall 2008 (2008).

Poetry makes us human. Without poetry and other art forms, the survival of global, planetary consciousness and, indeed, our very existence as a species is called into question. Poetry, through words, reduces our experiences to their essence and, at the same time, uplifts our souls to their highest. The poet and peace activist Denise Levertov (1923-1997) wrote that poets, more than any others, “recognize language as a form of *life* and a common resource to be cherished and served as we should serve and cherish earth and its waters, animal and vegetable life, and each other”². Levertov believed that the poet’s task is to hold in trust that knowledge that language is considered *power* (my italics). Quoting Ibsen, Levertov noted that the task of the poet is to “make clear to himself [*sic*], and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions which are astir in the age and community to which he belongs”³.

Poetry can be transformative. The inexplicable tears that can come when a poem is heard touches something deep within us . The explanation for this, it would seem, lies not only in the didactic process of the hearing, despite the importance many poets place on the power of language. I believe that there are deeper processes that occur within the listener of poetry as the words are incorporated, resulting in a deep communion between poet and listener. I coin these deeper processes the *unlanguage* of poetry. Unlanguage is the point at which the listener’s authentic self emerges, silently, as we hear a poem, and is the pathway in which we agree with the poet that their truth and our truth are in harmony. When our own, authentic self emerges, transformation can begin.

In this essay I explore some of the interplay between the concepts of *language and unlanguage*. I also make the claim that poetry is a form of peace pedagogy. Though I will refer most often to the *hearing* of poetry, both the *hearing of* and the *writing of* poetry can have the power to be transformative, though the hearing carries, I believe, more potential, at least for the present purposes of analysis. I am referring here to the interaction between poetry being read (ideally by the writer) and a listener hearing. One can also read poetry aloud to oneself. The silent *reading* of poetry has, in my estimation, transformative potential, but to a lesser extent than the other two.

The idea for this analysis has its roots many years ago, when I began writing poetry as a child. As I entered my middle years, I began to seek out local poetry readings. Our community hosts a wonderful outdoor summer poetry festival, in which listeners are treated to the wonders of the spoken word, in tune with bird songs and the occasional buzzing of an insect. My adult religious practice as a Quaker has deepened my understanding of the power of “unwords” and the importance of stillness as a discipline and a pathway to a deeper listening, to hear both the spiritual and the temporal, to listen “beneath words”. Hugh Ogden, a well-known poet and professor at Trinity College, sadly recently deceased, frequently spoke extemporaneous poetry in our local Meeting for Worship as a spiritual message for the congregation. As I listened to his words and then pondered during the silence following, I often found my own sense of the Divine

² Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions Books, 1973), 53.

³ *Ibid.*, 111.

heightened, in ways different from and more powerfully enhanced, than when hearing other spoken messages.

Following a January 2009 trip to Turkey and my subsequent research into the work of thirteenth century mystical poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, who spent the greater part of his adult life in the region that became part of that country, I began thinking about the possibility of presenting this nescient work on poetry at the summer 2009 International Institutes on Peace Education in Budapest Hungary. The participants in our workshop were kind and gentle “guinea pigs” as, together, we explored some of these ideas. During the workshop, participants shared their own conceptions of poetry and we explored some queries and ideas related to the ideas of language and unlanguage, which are detailed below. My no means do I consider myself an accomplished poet. My interest in, and experience with both the listening to and the writing of poetry is a continual journey, one in which I take much delight.

Rumi, called the West’s most widely read poet, was born in a province of the Persian Empire in 1207 A.D., in what is now the border area between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. His early childhood was marked by much upheaval and loss. His family, of the intellectual class, was forced to migrate from place to place within the empire, due to frequent wars and civil disruptions. Rumi spent the first part of his life wandering between Mecca, Syria, Anatolia (modern day western Turkey), Baghdad, and Samarkand. Biographers of Rumi have attributed these experiences, both his encountering different peoples and cultures in his wanderings and his experiences of loss, as strong contributors to the depth of his poetry.

Rumi laid the foundation for the mystical practice of Islam known as the Whirling Dervishes, though his son, Sultan Valad, is considered to be the actual founder of the movement. Rumi’s six volume masterpiece, *Mathnawi*, was inspired by his love relationship with his master, Shams al-Din, which led him to abandon his previous life as a scholar and devote his life to mysticism and to the writing of poetry, using the evocation of the power of love as the “root of all outwardly that we see in the world”.⁴ Leslie Wines, one of the biographers of Rumi, believes that the reason for the appeal of Rumi’s poems to westerners is their ability to evoke ecstasy, coming both from the world of nature and from everyday life. In Wine’s words “Rumi attempted to put into language the nature of the invisible universe”.⁵

Following is an excerpt from a Rumi poem given to me by a friend. In simple wording, it is powerful and evocative.

⁴ Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi Past and Present: The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalal Al-Din Rumi* (Oxford, England: One World Publishing, 2000), 406..

⁵ Leslie Wines, *Rumi: A Spiritual Biography* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000), 17.

On a day when the wind is perfect
The sail just needs to open
And the love starts
Today is such a day

What is Poetry?

We began our workshop at the 2009 IIPE with some brainstorming of what words came to mind when we thought of the word “poetry”. Several individuals in the group, at first, expressed anxiety around poetry, citing their early educational experiences as giving them messages that poetry is hard to understand and that, if you write poetry, it must be done just “right”. Coming to the workshop was, for at least one participant, a way to address these fears. Here are some words we shared about poetry: “express in-between, association of time, finding new words, inspires, way of singing in words, symbolism, insider language, twisted, rhyme, subjective”. One participant quoted Heidegger’s words “language is a house of being”.

Heidegger, as Denise Levertov notes in *The Poet in the World*, wrote that to be human is to be rooted in *conversation*. Levertov expands on this notion to say that the poet develops this basic need for dialogue in ways that are audible to others. Through listening, the hearer is awakened to take up his or her own inner dialogue, all too often neglected in a world of constant outer stimulation.⁶ Louis Untermeyer, author of *A Consise Treasury of Great Poems*, claims that poetry is the most potent form of communication. He goes on to note that poetry is also conversation as a *craft*.⁷ That is, the purpose of a poem is to create something that was not there before. We may conclude that to *make*, therefore, implies a form of *action in the creation*. Poetry, according to Levertov, sets in motion elements in the listener that would otherwise remain stagnant. Levertov makes the claim that language is a form of *life itself* (my italics).

I believe that it is necessary to distinguish between that poetry that has the power to truly transform and that which is merely “words on paper”, a distinction that is fraught with analytical difficulties, as what might be deeply evocative for one reader could be less so for another. For the sake of argument, I distinguish between that poetry that is the free form thoughts of a writer, perhaps for emotional release or autobiographical writing as a form of therapy, and words and poetry which employ the frequent use of metaphor which, I believe, can lead to a greater depth of silent communion between the poet and the listener. The latter can awaken the deeper, more universal truths within the reader, writer or listener which is the lifeline to “life itself”. Deep poetry relies on the use of metaphor as the pathway between language and unlanguage to help us reach our inner core.

Poetry as Peace Pedagogy

⁶ Levertov, *The Poet in the World*.

⁷ Louis Untermeyer, *A Consise History of Great Poems* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953).

Poetry asks questions about the deepest issues related to the human condition. Peace education does the same. Wordsworth wrote of the task of poetry as binding together, by passion and knowledge, “the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth and over all time”.⁸ Louis Untermeyer notes that the aim of a poem is to make the hearer or reader feel and see with new acuteness and awareness. The poet is the bearer of everything that humanity holds dear and uplifts, the keeper and transmitter of all that humans work for.⁹ Thus it can be concluded that one of the tasks of poetry is to bring forth, those transformative potentials in listeners that can be the basis for deep social and structural change. The poet Jane Hirschfield notes that “poetry can help you find your way to a larger life that otherwise would be yours to live”.¹⁰ In the words of Walt Whitman

*Allons! We must not stop here.
Let us press on together,
my friends and companions.
and let us sing songs of praise
of life's beauties and wonders
as we go.*

Conversation is at the heart of peace pedagogy. It is the task of peace educators to help instill values in our students that create the conditions for individuals’ understanding one another across so much that divides us. The basic human need for dialogue is also captured in good poetry. Poetic dialogue initially takes place between the poet and the listener/reader. As the words “sink in”, the processes of unlanguage begin and the dialogue is then begun between the listener and him/herself. If we agree with Betty Reardon that the word “conversation” connotes a more thorough, interactive process than does “dialogue”, then Levertov’s conceptions of the power of poetry to engage us in conversation with the deepest questions of our human existence and with ourselves comes to life.

Conversation is related to, as Reardon writes, “a community of inquirers, sharing questions and insights, mutually responsible for creating the changes needed”.¹¹ Levertov writes that conversation is made audible by the hearing of a poem, freeing the listener or reader to then take up his or her inner dialogue.¹² Humans are rooted in conversation. Yet to be fully human is also to withdraw from conversation for periods of time, giving honor to reflection and appreciation for all that is human, including appreciation for the others with whom we converse and to those with whom we may find deep disagreements. In order to be peacemakers and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ William Ayers, *Teaching toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 106.

¹¹ Betty Reardon, *Comprehensive Peace Education: Educating for Global Responsibility* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 49.

¹² Levertov, *The Poet in the World*.

effective change agents, in order to create the values necessary to transform the world into one in which human development, human rights and human economies flourish, it is essential to, in the biblical tradition, “withdraw into our wilderness” from time to time.

It is in the rhythm of hearing/understanding/contemplation and then moving outward that a holistic framework for changing our thinking, the bases of peace pedagogy, can best occur and then we are called to act on this thinking. Conversations with others and conversations with ourselves are key. Poetry is a powerful path in this process. I believe that one of the reasons Rumi’s poetry has touched so many westerners is that the words go to the deepest places we all hold, touch our spiritual hearts and help connect us, not only with ourselves, but to a larger sense of the holistic world. I agree with Denise Levertov that at the root of good poetry is a reverence for life.

Jane Hirschfield notes that, to fully appreciate poetry, one must travel inward as well as outward in imaging. She writes “provoking the imagination, on the inward journey, is at the heart of change”.¹³ Levertov notes that both the meditative and the socially active are interrelated. Similarly, making peace is a process of both inward discernment and outward action.

A poem of Levertov’s, *About Political Action in Which Each Individual Acts from the Heart*, evokes in the reader/hearer the vision of the interplay between contemplation and action.

*When solitaries draw close, releasing,
each solitude into its blossoming,*

*when we give to each other the roses
of our communion-*

*a culture of gardens, horticulture not agribusiness,
arbors among the lettuce, small terrains-*

*when we taste in small victories sometimes
the small, ephemeral yet joyful
harvest of our striving*

*great power flows from us,
luminous, a promise. Yes!...Then
great energy flows from solitude,
and great power from communion¹⁴*

¹³ Ayers, *Teaching toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom*, 106.

¹⁴ Michael True, *To Construct Peace: 30 More Justice Seekers, Peace Makers* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992).

Michael True, in his short biography of Denise Levertov, makes the point that the activities of making a new language (here he is referring to peace poetry) and making a new social order are parallel activities.¹⁵ In Levertov's poem *Making Peace* (from *Breathing the Water*, 1984), we read

*a line of peace might appear
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,
questioned our need, allowed
long pauses...*

Peace, according to Levertov, is more than the absence of war, echoing the conceptual definition of peace researchers such as Johan Galtung and Elise and Kenneth Boulding and others who have focused on structural peace as opposed to negative peace. Levertov believed that it is the duty of the artist (and here I add the peace educator) to reflect the value of the importance of individuals taking responsibility for society.

Poets must give us their (and ours to claim) *imagination*, the images of peace, to replace those of disaster and war, in order to foster hope for a better world. The Japanese Buddhist philosopher and peace educator Daisaku Ikeda writes that the poet creates "portals of hope and entranceways for exchange in the massive walls that divide us".¹⁶ Good peace pedagogy must do the same, with the power to evoke our imagination toward the deepest possibilities for human existence. All too often we can despair at the hope for change if we see only our present world and the structural violence in which we are embedded. Elise Boulding began in the 1980s, with Warren Ziegler, to create imaging workshops in which participants, through a series of imaginary steps both backwards and forwards in their own personal sense of time, communally designed the world they wished to see and, at the end of the workshop each participant created action steps to move into the world he/she wished to see. Boulding's ideas were based, in part, on the work of the Dutch futurist, Fred Polak, who believed that educators and activists cannot work for a world they cannot imagine. So it is with the artists, who, by their trade, are closer than many of us to the imaginings of both inner truths and outer good. It is important to give credence to where we have been as much as where we hope to go. Boulding uses the term "the 200-year present" to depict the long view of history. If we use this approach, we see that, in many ways, there is cause for hope for the future as human progress has, in actuality, been

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Daisaku Ikeda, "On the Occasion of the Publication of *Creating Waldens*: Report on the Occasion of Publication," (Ikeda Center, Cambridge, MA, September, 2009).

occurring through the millennia.¹⁷ Good poetry captures the essence of this hope and, in Ikeda's words, creates a sense of "spiritual openness" to new possibilities. Thus we can see that both poets and peace educators can contribute to the deepening of this spiritual essence within each of us so that we can create possibilities for new ways of thinking and acting.

Levertov takes this concept further by telling us, in *Making Peace*, that we must go beyond even static imagining and that, in the writing and speaking of the very words themselves, poems and the poet, and, in turn, we the readers and listeners, become the makers of peace.

*A Voice from the dark called out,
"The poets much give us
Imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
'imagination of disaster'. Peace, not only
The absence of war"*
*But peace, like a poem
is not there ahead of itself,
can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be known except
in the words of its making,
grammar of justice
syntax of mutual aid.*

Peace educators believe, as does William Ayers, that "teaching at its best, is an enterprise that helps human beings to reach the full measure of their humanity. Education helps teachers and students become more self-consciously alive".¹⁸ Good poetry and good peace pedagogy both ask the deepest questions of our human existence. Betty Reardon has written that peace learning is linked to the processes of *internalized change*, "through which individuals and societies become who and what we are".¹⁹ Peace pedagogy is dialogic, reflective and integrates new knowledge within the structures of existing experiences. All of these descriptions are also true of good poetry. Good poetry, just as good teaching, seeks to *draw out* the "inner learner" of both student and teacher (hearer and reader/writer) toward a process of *humanization*.²⁰ If we believe that poetry can touch the heart of the human condition, can engage the listener, writer, reader in dialogue, can help us with the spiritual transformation and vital imaging necessary, we conclude that poetry is a form of peace pedagogy. Indeed, we might consider it is one of the

¹⁷ Elise Boulding, "Building a Global Civic Culture," in *Twentieth Century Thought*, ed. R.P. and King Cuzzort, Edith (New York: Harcourt, Brace College Publishers, 1989).

¹⁸ Ayers, *Teaching toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom*, 1.

¹⁹ Betty Reardon, "Human Rights Learning: Pedagogies and Politics of Peace," in *UNESCO Chair for Education for a Culture of Peace* (University of Puerto Rico: 2008).

²⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2000).

highest forms of peace pedagogy if we believe, as does Hirschfield, that great poetry is “a bird of prey, tearing open whatever needs to be opened”.²¹ As peace educators, we can agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed that poets are “seers”, better equipped than most, because of temperament and training, to give expression to the world and beyond it. We can teach our students to be such “seers”, through the values we model, the conversations we hold and the honor we give to the spiritual and temporal selves of each of those with whom we come in contact. We can help our students to “become themselves”, as the poet May Sarton so eloquently expresses

*Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
“Hurry, you will be dead before—“
(What? Before you reach the morning;
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!
The black shadow on paper
Is my hand, the shadow of a word
As thought shapes the shaper
Falls heavily on the page, is heard
All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.
As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give,
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted so by love.
Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued, who madly ran,*

²¹ Ayers, *Teaching toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom*, ix.

*Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!*²²

Conclusion-Some Comments on Language and Unlanguage

Rumi claimed that all language is a longing for *home*. Home is, as I define it, that which we can, both physically and metaphorically, claim is rightfully ours. Coleman Barks, well known Rumi biographer, writes that Rumi was less interested in language itself and “more attuned to the sources of it”.²³ For Rumi, words themselves were only resonators for a *center* (my italics). Rumi wrote that “there is a way between voice and presence where information flows”.²⁴

Peace pedagogy is, in good part, working, through educational processes, for our “human home”, claiming those rights which we, as humans, universally own. It would seem that to educate for and to claim these rights that we need powerful language as a vehicle for social change, such as that produced by poetry. If, however, as Rumi believed, language is not enough, what more is needed? Despite the claim of some poets, such as Levertov, that language is the most potent vehicle for change, I conclude that language is not enough for both the “tearing open” and the potential for transformation. It is not just in the hearing of the words, the reading or writing of the words, but in that space between the words and the “unwords”, between the *language and the unlanguage*, as we hear a poem, or write a poem or read a poem, it is in that space during which the reflective processes of moving inward and outward occur, as we both hear the words and “still the words”, that the transformative educational process begins. Here, also, is the heart of educating for peace.

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²² Source unknown.

²³ Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

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