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Outlaw Girl: The Challenge of Designing Poetry Exercises for an Organizational Context

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Abstract

Those of us who seek to incorporate imaginative writing into a leadership or organizational context face some very practical — and significant — questions. In this context, the writing must serve a purpose, must have some demonstrable relation to the development of the individual or the organization, or why include it at all? But if one designs writing exercises that have a “point,” that address leadership directly, then what they evoke is something less than poetry, with its wild and impractical spirit. This paper proposes that metaphor is the best tool to bridge the worlds of practicality and poetry, to serve the needs of the organization and the demands of art. Specifically, metaphor-based exercises that entail **open-endedness**, **organizational content**, and **poetic craft** can respect the demands of poetry while also serving the needs of an organization.

Outlaw Girl: The Challenge of Designing Poetry Exercises for an Organizational Context

Outlaw girl: the independence of imagination

An exercise I sometimes use in leadership development contexts is called "Meeting Your Muse." It involves a series of questions that lead participants to come up with an image or an entity that captures the quality of their own creative energy. One participant who did the exercise reported (rather listlessly) that she loved children and felt most creative when working at the community child development center. The shape she chose for her Muse was a heart that is painted on the wall of the center. The image was easy, and weary; there had to be something more true, more enlivening, that represented her "Muse." After a little more questioning, another Muse emerged — this one was ready for her to go into work on Monday and quit her job. This Muse's name was Outlaw Girl.

Outlaw Girl is an irresponsible type. It's not even so much that she seeks to break laws; she just doesn't regard them. She is not subject to them, or to any human authority. She speaks her mind. She dresses how it pleases her. She can definitely ride a horse and she can probably handle a gun.

Poetry itself is a kind of Outlaw Girl.

It's the nature of poetry to be transgressive. It won't be told what to do. Poetry has its own mind and we with the pencils, if we're lucky and smart, run along behind, trying to keep up, trying to catch a few words of what it is saying. Poetry too stands outside of social convention. It may or may not subvert those conventions; it's not *necessarily* disruptive: sometimes poetry simply praises the daffodils, but if it does so, it does it because that is what poetry wants, not because that is what someone told it to do. It doesn't work on assignment; it sniffs out its own stories. It doesn't care about praise. It doesn't care about money.

So bringing poetry into an organizational setting, into management or leadership, is like inviting the bad kid into the classroom. You don't quite know what is going to happen.

Those of us who seek to incorporate imaginative writing into a leadership or organizational context face some very practical — and significant — questions. In this context, the poetry must serve some useful purpose, must have some demonstrable relation to the development of the individual or the organization, or why include it at all? But if one designs writing exercises that have a "point," that are purposeful, then what they evoke is often something less than poetry, with its wild and impractical spirit. I find that metaphor is the best tool to bridge the worlds of practicality and poetry, to serve the needs of the organization and the demands of art.¹ But the first challenge in an organizational context is to protect the autonomy of the imagination.

When I teach Creative Writing to college students, it's no problem. I say, *Take ten minutes, write about your mother's clothes. Go!* — and soon they are writing about their mother's orthopedic shoes or about glimpsing their father in the bathroom trying on their mother's lingerie, or they're off on a tangent about something else entirely, but that's fine. It doesn't matter where they end up, because the only purpose is to make art. If they find a subject that is vivid and full of energy, then they're on the right track. The writing need only meet one standard: Is it good writing? The question is whether they have written something that was *necessary* to them, as artists, to write, not whether it

¹ Palus and Horth (2002) demonstrate the ways that metaphor can bridge the worlds of poetry and leadership. In their groundbreaking book on arts-based leadership, they address "Making and Using Metaphor" (pp. 91-96) in the larger context of "imaging." They note that "by placing images in the middle of conversations . . . they can become the clay with which people build creative solutions to complex challenges" (p. 71).

teaches them something about themselves as leaders, or about how to handle conflict, or how to assemble a team.

When I tell executives in a leadership development program to write about their mother's clothes (and I do), they wonder, legitimately, why they are doing this. Couldn't they simply write about leadership? The answer is no. Not if I'm truly teaching them something about art, about poetry. If I make Poetry bow to the gods of Leadership, then I compromise my own deepest loyalties. In that case, I bring nothing to them as a poet. If that's what an organization wants, they could simply hire an executive management consultant and leave poetry — leave art — out of the picture entirely.

Which, until relatively recently, is what most organizations have done.²

So how and why can we engage people in poetry in organizational settings? What kinds of exercises and approaches can actually please both the gods of Poetry and of Organizational Development?

The fundamental principle is that Outlaw Girl must be respected. If we place constraints on the liberty of the imagination, nothing truly transformative will result; the power of imagination is that it can lead to change by opening up unfamiliar territory, including ideas, directions and solutions that would not have been discovered using logical methods. The challenge is to protect Outlaw Girl's autonomy and ferocious freedom, while still engaging in a process that will be of value to the individual in the organization and to the organization itself. Asking participants to sit down and write directly about leadership will not work; it doesn't give onto the rich and strange landscape of poetry. The approaches to leadership through imaginative writing in organizational settings must be more oblique, like looking at the Pleiades, that elusive group of stars that can be perceived only in peripheral vision.

I want to suggest a provisional approach to this dilemma, and to propose that metaphor provides a key to producing writing that has artistic integrity and that is instrumental in addressing leadership issues. The metaphor-based process to be described here involves three key stages: cultivating **open-endedness**; introducing **leadership or organizational content**; and finally turning to matters of **poetic craft** to shape an artful expression of the issue at hand. Using metaphor allows the facilitator to respect the demands of poetry as an art form, but the creation of poetry or poetic writing is not the ultimate goal. Using metaphor produces writing that has aesthetic properties *and* facilitates problem solving within a leadership context. Participants who engage in the process of metaphor-making described here walk away with a piece of creative writing of which they can rightly be proud, but also with concrete and novel solutions to leadership issues with which they have been struggling.

I use the process described here in the context of the Banff Centre's leadership development program "The Art of Leadership: Leveraging the Power of Story." My work with creative writing and metaphor is woven into two other facilitators' theater-based

² David Whyte was among the first to bring poetry into the corporate landscape. He draws upon the work of well-known poets, as well as his own poetry, to address issues in organizational life; he is often concerned with helping individuals stay connected with their passions in the midst of external forces that militate against personal growth and vitality. His book *The Heart Aroused: Poetry & the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* (1994) was the first of three books in this vein. Other arts-based practitioners have incorporated poetry into organizational development work for several decades now; John Cimino, for example, uses poetry, among other media, in a format called the "Concert of Ideas," designed to facilitate reframing of issues and to promote creative associations—or, as Cimino puts it, to set the mind "in curious motion." Palus and Horth (2002) include poetry and metaphor-making in their approach to leadership development. Most recently, Clare Morgan's (2010) book *What Poetry Brings to Business* explores in depth how the study of poetry can enhance the capacity for strategic thinking. Per Darmer and Louise Grisoni recently compiled new thinking about the role of poetry in organizational life in a special issue of *Tamara* dedicated to "The Opportunity of Poetry." Two anthologies, by Windle (1994) and Intrator and Scribner (2007), bridge poetry and business or leadership as well.

exercises; together, we work with participants to uncover, explore, and fashion into an artful form the elements of their own leadership narratives. In the process, they generate novel solutions to leadership issues that they have identified.

In order to preserve the wildness of poetry, exercises used in organizational contexts must be **open-ended**, i.e. there must not be a specific desired outcome or agenda. Artists do not know what will happen when they embark on creative work. As Langer (2005) states about art making, "We can't and shouldn't know before we begin something where it will end up" (146). To establish the practice of open-ended writing, I find it most useful to begin with simple freewrites in the mode Natalie Goldberg (1986) developed. Goldberg's method involves starting with a specific topic and writing for ten minutes without lifting the pen from the page. The idea is not to execute an essay on the topic or to produce a fine piece of writing, but to allow the mind to move freely and associatively, recording whatever thoughts arise. Each freewrite starts with a topic, e.g. "describe your mother's clothes," "write about a kitchen from childhood," or "write everything you'll miss when you die." It can be very powerful to introduce topics that evoke childhood. Connecting with childhood — whatever a person's particular experience might have been — often opens up the emotional realm, which gives access to material that has urgency or necessity for the writer. A few exercises like these, ten-minute freewrites on topics entirely unrelated to leadership, get participants comfortable with the practice of open-ended writing and begin to stir the creative juices.

Such exercises can bring individual members of an organization back in touch with their own sources of creative energy and delight and disruption. That can be risky — once summoned, Outlaw Girl may in fact urge her creator to tender her resignation — but it can be worth the risk, since organizations can have a tendency toward enervation, toward squelching the impulses that could invigorate them and potentially invite innovation. Poetry's wildness can be salutary.

"My sister is a skein of red yarn": the power of metaphor

Any number of exercises can reconnect participants with the freedom of their imaginations. But what we want is to draw upon the wildness of the imagination to renew individuals and organizations, to provide access to ways of thinking and acting that might not have been arrived at by other means. For that purpose, metaphor proves to be the key, the means to link the energy of the Outlaw Girl with the practical world of the organization, and ultimately, with the craft of poetry. Metaphor exercises can serve poetry well because they can be structured to be open-ended and because metaphor is one of poetry's most central modes.

Palus and Horth (2002) sum up Morgan's (1993) approach to metaphor with the following equation: metaphoric thinking = new possibilities = creative action (92). The equation parallels a common poetic process: a poet's engagement with *metaphor* generates *new material* — a rough draft — which results in the "action" of crafting a finished poem. The poet moves from creative exploration to the production of a finished poem, a "finished product," which is intended to be of value to its readers. And so the poet ultimately seeks to create something designed for "use," not a mere exercise in the imagination, but something that will be of value to others (even if that value may be hard to quantify).

Before bringing metaphor to bear on specific practical issues — a process to be described in the last section of this paper — it is useful to engage participants in organizational development settings in a simple exercise that demonstrates the power of metaphorical thinking.³ At the very beginning of a session, I ask participants to write down the name

³ The metaphor-making process described here is adapted from an exercise by Roger Mitchell, "Getting at Metaphor," included in Behn's *The Practice of Poetry* (1992).

of someone they know well (someone not known to others in the room). I turn to other business before returning to the exercise so that, ideally, the act of writing down a person's name will be forgotten by the time the actual exercise begins: this preserves the randomness of the metaphor that each participant will develop. Each person then chooses an item from a collection of objects, such as a comb, a pottery shard, a plastic soldier, a bungee cord, a skein of fuzzy red yarn, a pinecone—it doesn't matter much what the objects are. After selecting an object, each person spends five minutes writing a strictly literal description of the object. For example, "this is a skein of yarn held together by a printed paper band around the middle of it. The yarn is thick in some places and thin in others and the color is bright red ..." The idea here is to bring some focused attention to bear on the object and to begin to discern, through literal description, the difference between literal and metaphorical levels.

In the next step, each participant uses the chosen object as a metaphor for the person whose name was written down earlier. "My mother is a bungee cord." "Joe is a piece of bark." "My sister Gertrude is a skein of red yarn." Each person then writes for ten minutes, without stopping to ponder, making as many connections as possible between the object and the person.

The results are dramatic. When polled, almost every participant will say that the object did in fact describe the person in question in a meaningful way. The results are surprising because they are so unlikely. Why should mother be like a bungee cord? How could Joe turn out to be so much like a piece of bark? It's an interesting question: How can a random object capture so accurately the qualities of a particular person?

This is the magical property of metaphor.

Of course, it is the mind that works the magic. Metaphor works by asserting a relationship between two unlike things. The comparison is structured around two levels of meaning, the literal and the metaphorical. "My sister is a skein of red yarn." In this instance, "my sister" would be the literal item (or the "source" domain) and "a skein of red yarn" would be the metaphorical (or the "target" domain).⁴ Because we are seeking open-endedness, the most productive metaphors here involve the greatest disparity between source and target domains, i.e. they have the greatest degree of randomness. Why? Because the fruitful territory for the metaphor-maker is the space, the gap, between the two points of the comparison. The wider the gap, the more the mind must stretch to create an imaginative connection and the more the thinker is pulled away from habitual modes of thought.⁵

Presented with such an assertion, "my sister is like a skein of red yarn," our minds, seemingly involuntarily⁶, set about to find a way to make sense of the statement. It's an irresistible invitation to the imagination, which sets immediately to work. "Ok, my sister is very bright and flamboyant, like red yarn. That's true. Oh! and if you take away the structure that holds her together (that paper band), she completely unravels. She IS like that red yarn." The possibilities for "solving" the equation of red yarn with sister are virtually unlimited. As Morgan (1993) notes, "There is nothing self-evident in the meaning of metaphor; meaning has to be created by those involved" (290). Each person would find a different way to justify the association between sister and red yarn. Someone else might say, "My sister is fuzzy and warm like yarn, but sometimes she can

⁴ In conceptual linguistics, the two levels of a metaphor are referred to as the "source" domain and the "target" domain (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Grant and Osrick, following Tsoukas (1993) and Gentner (1983) present a hierarchy of types of metaphors, based on how close the source domain is to the target domain. For Tsoukas' purposes, the metaphors with the most value are those in which source and target domain share the most attributes. For my purposes here, the most productive metaphors are those with greatest disparity between the source and target domains.

⁵ Morgan (1993) notes that metaphor "involves the generation of a 'constructive falsehood' (p. 290) that helps to break the bounds of normal discourse. This process plays a crucial role in creating space for change.

⁶ Grant and Osrick (1996) discuss the "inevitability" of metaphor (p. 1).

get itchy if I hold her too close.” Because there’s not a right answer, because the process is open-ended, Outlaw Girl is not hemmed in by such an exercise. She can see and say whatever she likes.⁷

“Lean left. Lean right”: bridging opposites

So far, we have used exercises — freewriting and a simple metaphor exercise — to explore poetry’s open-endedness. We are now ready, with a little sleight-of-hand, and drawing upon the magic of metaphorical thinking, to bring **leadership or organizational content** into imaginative writing without doing violence to the principles of poetry.

In this final exercise, the creative product will sometimes be a poem and sometimes a short piece of prose; it is not important at this point that the writing be in lines and strictly in the form of a poem. But the piece must have the properties of poetry, i.e. it will use concrete, sensory detail, it will employ metaphoric language, it will use language in a conscious and concise way, attending to sound and rhythm, and it will be designed to affect the audience in a particular way. And in fact, all participants read or perform their pieces to the rest of the group at the end of the program.

Each participant now defines a leadership issue — it could be a matter of personal leadership, or a managerial challenge, or a question of direction within the organization — anything with which the participant is struggling and over which he or she has some control (i.e. it won’t be fruitful if the issue is that their coworkers are not intelligent enough.)

To take one example, Scott Hillier, a participant in “The Art of Leadership” at The Banff Centre, described his leadership issue in terms of

the challenge that executive leaders may face trying to balance profits and people. I genuinely care for my staff and want them to succeed well beyond their current positions in our organization — I believe this is a good measure of leadership in itself. Yet to achieve this often requires an investment in professional development courses, seminars and workshops. All which cost time and money. In our traditionally corporate drive for profits, especially in a challenging economy, these benefits can be easily dismissed. I am guilty of this myself but deep down feel the staff deserve more. I find these competing objectives to be a leadership challenge.

To write directly about the leadership issue at this point would be deadly: the writing would be uninspired and the ideas mere recycling of what the participant already knows. Instead, we can turn to metaphor to generate possibilities and provisional answers, following methods derived from Palus and Horth (2001) and using the images in their Visual Explorer™.⁸ As with the earlier metaphor exercise, it is best to have participants define their leadership issues, turn to another activity, and return to the selection of images later in order to preserve the randomness of the selection. From among the several hundred images laid out on tables, each person chooses an image that appeals to him or her.

Scott had grown up playing hockey (his Muse was the Stanley Cup), was very fit as an adult, and had a strong athletic orientation. The Visual Explorer™ image he chose was of a boy skateboarding in a large circular concrete pipe.

⁷ This is a very different use of metaphor than much of the work Morgan (1993) describes, which involves uncovering or inventing metaphors that govern an entire organization, rather than generating metaphors as individuals to address specific issues.

⁸ Any set of images can be used (magazine photos, postcards), as long as they have some variety.

The visual image can now be used as a metaphor for the leadership issue. What is important here is the randomness of the image: again, the more distant the image from the leadership question, the better, because that gap is what engages the imagination.

First, participants write for five minutes simply describing the image. Then I ask them to accept the premise that ***this image holds the answer to my leadership question.*** They freewrite for ten minutes exploring this premise. If a participant truly accepts the premise, then almost without exception, an apt and unexpected insight emerges. It's often quite astonishing the way answers (which must have been lurking somewhere in the unconscious) will surface in the metaphor.

But something else has happened here, without any particular effort and without calling attention to itself: the participant is now working in the realm of metaphor, that is, in the realm of poetry and imaginative writing. Because whatever answers the participant has generated are metaphorical, they can easily be rendered in poetic form. Now the spirit of poetry and the concrete issues of the individual within the organization are in proximity to one another.

In Scott's case, what emerged from writing about the image of the skateboard was a metaphor for how to move (literally) between the seemingly opposing demands for staff development and budgetary restraint. We'll return in a moment to the final step in the process, the question of crafting a piece of writing, but in order to show how the image can generate insight, we'll skip ahead to Scott's finished piece:

Ohhh. I remember that day. The day after my 14th birthday. My parents had bought me that Voolong 7000 skateboard — it had the whisper quiet wheels. And how fitting. It was 7 a.m., June 11th, and a crystal clear Saturday.

I sprang out of bed, slurped down some juice and raced to this industrial park near our neighborhood. I had scoped out that round cement vessel one day and KNEW it was made for boarding. Of course! What else could it be?

I spent HOURS at that thing, going back and forth, up and down, trying different moves. I did my first FRONTSIDE 180 that day and almost broke my back trying to do a FAKIE CROOK. As the day grew hot I could smell my wheels burning. IT WAS AWESOME.

I remember trying to skateboard for the very first time. There I was, standing on the board, stiff-legged, uncertain, nervously aware of my delicate standing, staring at my shoes, hoping they would magically know what to do.

Impatient, I jerked my body in an attempt to generate some forward motion. Only to come crashing down on my ass as if a team of people had pulled the board out from under me.

So you had to learn quickly. Quickly or it hurts.

After a while you learn to settle on the board.

Broad stanced; loose limbed; relaxed seat; aware of your feet, upper body, surroundings and what direction you want to go.

You eventually learn how to move forward. You do it, not by jerking straight ahead, but by leaning to one side. It puts pressure on those wheels and you arc in that direction. But you can't lean in that direction long, or you just end up going in circles. You need to slowly lean back the other way, the pressure on wheels changes, and you start to go the other way. You adjust back the other way, and so

on. You eventually develop a rhythm, a flow. Balancing the shifts between each side. If you found that balance, you could go far and fast with very little effort.

It was FUN.

Today, I lead a local charity with dedicated but underpaid staff. Like everyone, they want (and deserve) Professional Development, Personal Growth, and to Experience New Things.

But we have a small and flat organization, and these opportunities, as we know, often cost time and money.

Now more than ever, we need to focus on organizational Goals, Results, and Generating Impact.

Perhaps some of you may be dealing with this as well at your organization.

DEVELOPMENT – GROWTH – EXPERIENCE
versus
GOALS – RESULTS – IMPACT

[At this point in his delivery, Scott uses his body to demonstrate the slight leaning to one side, then the other, of the skateboard rider, as he reads the words in the two columns, back and forth.]

(leaning left)	(leaning right)
DEVELOPMENT	GOALS
GROWTH	RESULTS
EXPERIENCE	IMPACT

What Scott's image has told him — among other things — is that he can't choose between the two alternatives; he has to steer a course between them. It also suggests that such navigation may require abilities he doesn't yet have; that he may have to figure it out himself through trial and error; that he is fully capable of mastering the skill required to perform this feat successfully; and that the challenge could actually be fun. The issue — and its solution — are also now, for Scott, embodied rather than abstract: the skateboard metaphor has given him a physical, kinesthetic sense of how to balance those competing needs.

Scott's skateboard piece is in fact a successful piece of imaginative writing, as well as a source of practical insight for his work life. Here we have the delicate balance that we too have been seeking: lively imaginative writing (leaning left) vs. practical insight (leaning right).

What makes this piece successful as imaginative writing is that Scott has ***crafted*** it to create maximum impact on his audience. I have argued to this point that the energy of poetry — the source of inspiration and ideas from which writing emerges — is unruly and unpredictable; it arises from the poet's inner necessity and it refuses to conform to anyone's demands but its own. But poems themselves are not unruly. Imaginative writing, when it is successful, marries the wild energy of the outlaw with the sober craft of the artist. A poem is not a loose, disordered set of inspired ideas; paradoxically, in order to have an inspiring and moving effect on others, imaginative writing must be carefully constructed and consciously crafted. Writing a finished piece entails countless

choices about the handling of image, rhythm, sound, diction, form, and so on. Scott's piece is carefully crafted.

The most surprising discovery I have made in this work at the intersection of art and leadership is about the transformative power of craft. Seeing the creative process through, as an artist does, to produce a final, polished piece and to offer it to others is a crucial step. Without it, the writing exercises remain at the level of exploration, or play; they don't rise to the level of art, which offers the possibility of transformation and transcendence.⁹

After completing the freewrite, what the participants have are drafts, i.e. some rough writing that uses an image or metaphor to explore a work-related or organizational issue. While this process may have been surprising or pleasing and may have yielded insights, it is not complete. The writing at this stage is analogous to journal writing: interesting to the writer, perhaps, but not necessarily to anyone else. It still needs to be crafted into an artful piece of writing.

Although everything up to this point could probably be facilitated by any person with a little training, now it is critical to have a facilitator who is a practicing artist, a writer, who can sit down with each participant and help move the writing from a draft into a poem or polished piece of prose, by doing what poets know how to do: revise, craft, shape, polish. One must cut the discursive language, develop the images, know where to start the piece (usually later than you think) and where to end it (usually earlier than you think), find the right form, edit for sound, cut every word that isn't absolutely necessary, and so on.

One of the strengths of Scott's piece, from a poet's perspective, is his use of concrete detail. He doesn't just get a skateboard for his birthday; he gets a "Voolong 7000 skateboard," one that has "whisper quiet wheels." The naming of the specific moves, the "frontside 180" and the "fakie crook," also make the story vivid, immediate and believable. He uses sensory detail to evoke the experience for his listeners: "As the day grew hot I could smell my wheels burning." These are the tools that poets employ, the writing skills that distinguish a poem from more ordinary forms of language.

After a few rounds of revision, of crafting the piece as imaginative writing, each participant ends up, as Scott did, with a piece that is ready for performance. And those pieces, read aloud to the rest of the group, are nothing less than art. The room fills with images of manatees and the inner workings of clocks and bowling pins and fathers and kitchens. The pieces are funny, moving, surprising, skillful, intelligent. And all of them resonate with meaning for the lives and work of the participants — now poets — who wrote them.

Let me include one more example here, a final piece of writing that in this case took the form of a poem. Gerard Gibbs, a musician working in Canada, came into the program having just accepted a new job in London, but having some trepidation about leaving his current position. As context for his piece, it is important to know that he grew up without knowing his father, who had fought in WWII, and that his father's family was from England — a connection Gerard himself didn't make until he began working with his Visual Explorer™ image. He chose a picture of a white-bearded man and a younger man,

⁹ In organizational contexts, poetry written by others is most often used as the basis of discussion or study; participants engage in what Nick Nissley (2002) describes as "art-perceiving." Engaging in writing poetry—or "art-making"—seems to be relatively rare in organizational contexts. Palus and Horth (2002) include a lovely account of engineering managers at a coal-fired power plant using haiku as an economical way to report on daily events, but having participants generate and craft a sustained poem does not seem to be well documented as a common practice among arts-based leadership practitioners.

both formally dressed, seated in front of a shuttered brick house. The young man, in a wicker chair, is leaning over to listen to the older man. Speaking of his leadership challenge, Gerard writes that:

My question was "to begin a conversation about my upcoming transition," and to be honest I had put it out of my mind when I saw the picture and began working on the poem. Since my parents were older I've always felt comfortable around older people and had more patience than most listening to them. That and my interest in the threads of tradition maybe drew me into the drawing at first. I thought it might lead to a conversation with 'the past' and it did, but an unexpected one, my father.

Here is Gerard's poem:

In Between the Notes

You never once read to me as a fat happy child
From your piles of old worn letters
And now I want to know the stories
Of the lonely trenches, the wine commandos and the women.
Was it all those missing years
That turned your frothy whiskers white?
Here, I'll lean in a little closer
Keep a twisting grip on the old brick house
With its eyes held tightly shut.
The Saturday morning sun
Feels so much warmer where you're sitting
I feel caught here in the teeth of this wicker chair.
Just speak to me a word, one word
Of the heart and soul of this place
And I'll come right over
To your old country, father.

Gerard's poem is beautiful in strictly aesthetic terms — it is emotional yet restrained, it uses images skillfully, it has a carefully controlled rhythm and a lyrical ending — and it also had significant bearing on his leadership question, affirming his choice to take the job in London.

Gerard's poem and Scott's piece both demonstrate that poetry can speak to leadership, that successful imaginative writing and significant, practical insights are not mutually exclusive. *Lean left. Lean right.* When participants follow the processes — when they develop the skills — to balance the imaginative and the practical, then, as Scott's piece says, "you could go far and fast with very little effort." This is not art for art's sake: Scott and Gerard's writings helped each of them move toward the resolution of a pressing issue in their lives as leaders. But the work they created is *also* art: the poetry of the metaphor allowed them to gain insight into a pragmatic issue *and* to remain true to the demands of the imagination.

It is the nature of metaphor to bridge worlds, to bring together entities that would not customarily be found in each other's presence. Perhaps for that reason, metaphor is the perfect vehicle for bridging the seemingly disparate worlds of poetry and organizational development, the perfect tool for uncovering the rich and surprising territory that is available to those who look for answers to practical organizational questions in the seemingly unrelated realm of poetry.

Just as the tool of metaphor can bridge the worlds of poetry and organizational development, so poetry itself involves navigation between disparate poles, a marriage of wildness and craft, of the raw energy of Outlaw Girl and the deliberate craft of the artist. Those who achieve that marriage have the experience of truly making art, which is deeply satisfying, powerful, and liberating. Art belongs precisely because it is disruptive, because it shows us truths we didn't know we knew, because (when undertaken honestly) it won't lie. In addition to the insights an artistic process can generate, making art is an inherently freeing and joyful act. Surely we could use more of that in our organizations.

The use of metaphor and its crafting into a poetic form facilitates transformation. It can take the raw materials of our lives, including our work lives, and transform them into something startling and beautiful — into art. At the same time, because metaphor shows us new practical possibilities, new solutions to leadership challenges, it also points the way to powerful transformation in our organizational lives.

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About the Author(s)

Jane Hilberry's book *Body Painting* (Red Hen Press 2005) was awarded the Colorado Book Award for Poetry. Her most recent book of poems, a collaboration with her father Conrad Hilberry, is titled *This Awkward Art: Poems by a Father and Daughter* (Mayapple Press 2009). Her poems have appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Women's Review of Books*, *Denver Quarterly* and many other journals. She has edited a volume titled *The Burden of the Beholder: Dave Armstrong and the Art of Collage* (The Press at Colorado College 2010); written a volume of art biography / criticism called *The Erotic Art of Edgar Britton* (Ocean View Books 2001); and, with Mary Lynn Pulley, co-authored a guide called *Get Smart! How Email Can Make or Break Your Career—And Your Organization* (Get Smart Publishing 2007). Hilberry teaches Creative Writing at Colorado College and facilitates in a variety of Banff Centre Leadership Development programs.

Appendix: exercises

Formulating a leadership question

Write down a leadership question that you want to explore. It might be:

- "How can I foster more innovation in my company?"
- "How can I speak so that I will be heard?"
- "Where do I want to go next with my leadership?"
- "How do my I align my personal values with my role in the organization?"
- "How can I respond when I'm given poor direction?"

Visual Explorer™ metaphor exercise (adapted from Palus and Horth)

The exercise below is designed to help you generate material to be crafted later into a finished piece.

Follow these steps:

- A. Choose an image that appeals to you, one that has energy for you. You don't need to know why it appeals to you. Or choose randomly—that works too.
- B. Do a five-minute freewrite (keep your pen moving!) in which you simply describe the image in literal terms. Describe everything you see in the photo. "I see a couple of cows and the grass around their hooves is turning brown and one of them has a kind of scruffy coat and the sun is low in the sky. One cow has its head turned away . . ." etc. Make it all literal description.

- C. Accept this premise: *The image I've chosen holds the answer to my leadership question.* Then, with full confidence in the power of the image to give you answers, do a ten-minute freewrite about how this image answers your leadership question.
- D. This process may be repeated with different images.