It was a paradise in many ways.

I need the sea because it teaches me.
I don’t know if I learn music or awareness,
if it’s a single wave or its vast existence,
or only its harsh voice or its shining
suggestion of fishes and ships.
The fact is that until I fall asleep,
in some magnetic way I move in
the university of the waves. (Neruda, 2003, 3)
Long ago I taught in a school that was situated on acres of green, at the foot of the Andean mountains, with palms, parakeets, and geckos. We worked collaboratively as a faculty of international and Colombian teachers, developing interdisciplinary curricula, and many of the bilingual students were well read, well traveled, and interested in socio-political issues.

It was a paradise in many ways.

Even though the country was at civil war, and our days were interrupted with unrest, by preparations for evacuations, and punctuated by loud and low military fly-over, it was a place where Spanish-ness, Silence and the Sea became part of a larger language of inquiry.

In many ways, it was this teaching and learning experience that permitted me to explore, embody and experiment with poetry – the poetic – as a way of being and doing both within my English Language Arts classes, and beyond the secured perimeter of the school to student projects with literacy and ecology in outreaching neighborhoods.

I return now to a time when against adverse circumstances of road barricades, bombings, and guerilla activity, 60 grade ten students and seven teachers, flew to the coast, and sailed by fishing vessel to Gorgona – an isolated island, a nature preserve, in the Pacific Ocean.

Here lessons unfolded with the waves of the sea, silence and light, and transformed our relationships.

This poetic remembrance weaves memories and reflections of that time with images – photographs, philosophical musings, and pedagogical possibilities.

Stepping into the heart of poetic inquiry, it asks: what does this endeavour mean to our personal and communal responsibilities? In the spirit of Pablo Neruda, his life and poetry, this work addresses poetry as a moral and ethical act where the call beckons beyond the individual to the ancient and archetypal and back again.

If a poet’s investiture is to remember where we came from, to ask who we are, to ask who we are as a community and where we are headed, what does this mean for our poetic and pedagogic practices?

Translator William O’Daly (2002) writes:

[When Neruda composed his poems, he gave himself to the process as if he were still the small boy in his own dream, surrounded at the family feast by gunfire and smoke, guitars and wine. In that dream... he is dressed in black and holds a cup of still-warm lamb’s blood to his lips – terrified, dying like the lamb and toasting to joy, he drinks the blood. The imagery represented for Neruda a willingness to accept his investiture as a human being and as a poet, whose anguish and joy derive from his response to the world. (xi-xii)
Perhaps it was in my response to the world: the Colombian rhythm and life, the enduring spirit required in political crisis, or the late nights reading Neruda’s poetry, but I came to realize that a poet’s oeuvre lives not in any single deed or inspired turn of phrase, but in the fact that it is a chosen life.

Such a life is founded upon a “commitment to values and action inspired by the desire for truth and justice, an idea invented by the troubadours in the thirteenth century” (O’Daly, 2002, xvii).

. . . it was at that age. . . . Poetry arrived in search of me. I don’t know, I don’t know where it came from, from winter or a river. I don’t know how or when, no, they were not voices, they were not words, nor silence, but from a street I was summoned, from the branches of night, abruptly from the others, among violent fires or returning alone, there I was without a face and it touched me. (Neruda, 1969, 7)

For those of us who have chosen a poet’s life – what are our individual and collective responses to the world in these economic, political and ecological times? From where have we come? And where are we headed?

Neruda contends that it has been the privilege of our time – with its wars, revolutions, and tremendous social upheavals – to cultivate more ground for poetry than anyone had ever imagined. The common man has had to confront it, attacking or attacked, in solitude or with an enormous mass of people at public rallies. (1977, 253)

He passionately suggests: Perhaps the duties of the poet have been the same throughout history. Poetry was honoured to go out into the streets, to take part in combat after combat. When they called him rebel, the poet was not daunted. Poetry is rebellion. The poet is not offended if he is called subversive. Life is more important than societal structures, and there are new regulations for the soul. . . . (1984, 349)

Immersed in such thoughts, I turn, again, to the island of long ago. . . . I am sitting on the beach. . . . it’s as if the sound of the waves I hear now touched something inside me again and again. Taking lead from Neruda when reconstructing events, “I shall take up those images without attention to chronological order, just like these waves that come and go” (Neruda, 1977, 77).
Sitting quietly in half lotus, I open my eyes and turn to my right, then left. I count seven students sitting similarly.
I hear the low murmur of the waves, water gliding in to caress the shore, sink into the sand, then a slow reluctant move back out to the depths, gathering into itself, then again the sensuous glide forward, reaching out toward the other, a kind of longing and daring in that movement out from oneself.
In, out, withdrawing, meeting, risking, releasing.

In equal segments along the beach, we wait silently for the Earth to face the Sun. We wait, attending our breath, as it draws forth with the retreating waves, the pull of the moon, the quiet, clay Mother.
Like the breath moving through my body, bringing the other inside my body like water mingling with sand, two different elements mixing, borrowing, giving life to each other. . . . I send the spent breath out again, back into the ocean of air all around to be recharged,
just as the sea withdraws to its own depths
before again
gliding forward to caress and sink into the sand.
Together they glisten and shimmer in the morning sunshine; the constant low murmur of
their meeting and parting, meeting and parting.

Waking ahead of the others to greet the coming light had become a ritual for us, a quiet
bonding with the sea, the birth of day, and
the silence into which everything falls
and, finally, we fall. (Neruda, 2002, 69)

During the day we hike, snorkel, attend what normally would not be noticed: coconuts
audibly decomposing, a python curled in the sun, warm, satisfied – not to be disturbed,
cutter ants carrying puzzle pieces of green, marching in intricate, ordered lines, in and out, in and out, of their condominium entrances and exits.

After one particularly grueling hike, several miles through undulating, muddy, slippery
paths, when the roar and scent of the sea reached us, before it did, we quickened our pace
and poured from the jungle onto miles of beach. Dropping water bottles, boots, and what
clothes we still wore, we threw our bodies against the needle-edged waves, the unforgiving
undercurrents and surrendered to the Sea.

. . . here I shall be again the movement
of the water,
of its wild heart,
here I shall be both lost and found –
here I shall be perhaps both stone and silence.
(Neruda as cited in Poirot, 1990, 104)

Where are these students today?

Where are these students today? What lives have they chosen? Did the sea touch them as it
did me? Or Neruda? Has she tugged on their memories as something older and grander
than themselves? The sea, for me, represents the meeting place of image and instinct where
soul body and corporeal body meet, where the imaginal becomes poetry and life. This
meeting place of sea and shore symbolizes the borderland between the spiritual and natural
worlds and was transformative in who we were becoming, in who we are.
Like the breath moving through my body,
bringing the other inside my body like water mingling with sand,
two different elements mixing,
borrowing,
giving life to each other. . . .

In what ways did the sea, its movement, its sounds and silences tug on our choices,
responses and responsibilities, perhaps taking years to surface, and then surfacing in the
night, unnamed. Not unlike Neruda’s declaration:

. . . Poetry arrived
in search of me. I don’t know, I don’t know where
it came from, . . .
I don’t know how or when . . .
But...I was summoned. . . (Neruda, 1969, 7)
When we read, we are drawn to certain passages in the text. We seek to understand and make sense of those statements. Beyond the words, we ask: what does it mean to me? This engagement is the meaning making process between texts and our inner lives. What happens when the texts are living places or timeless images – the silence of “dawn breaking out of the shadow and the moon” or “the great resounding sway of sea”? How, then, do our inner lives shape and influence the ways in which we make sense of our lives, of our being in the world? How do we develop a deeper understanding of the ways to honour and give voice to this relationship within the context of both formal and informal learning? How might we provide for curricular and pedagogical experiences that more fully integrate the presence of this inner world with what we experience from without?

And some, some continue to linger in my memory.

Some evenings, we’d gather at the beach, swim with the phosphorescent plankton, gently cupping the glowing orbs, enchanted by their light. Eventually, small groups of students formed. Some broke off and trailed along the beach, others sat on the rocks, till curfew, while others plotted late night escapes. And some, some continue to linger in my memory.

They shared glimpses of their inner worlds, personal thoughts, beliefs, and values and that shadowy side often revealed as the seemingly disjointed, fragmentary, and the difficult to understand dreams and fantasies. We wondered about the ways of the living, and of the dead, pondered questions that I asked in my youth – these students who would inherit family fortunes and the terror of a country they called home. They, too, asked of their place in it all.

This is the kind of poetry we should be after, poetry worn away as if
by acid by the labor of hands, impregnated with sweat and smoke, smelling
of lilies and of urine, splashed by the variety of what we do, legally and
illegally.

A poetry as impure as old clothes, as a body, with its food stains and
its shame; with wrinkles, observations, dreams, wakefulness, prophecies,
declarations of love and hate, stupidity, shocks, idylls, political beliefs,
negations, doubts, affirmations, taxes. (Neruda as cited in Poirot, 1990, 38)

The inner world carries a force in one’s life that stands in quiet contrast to the public
acknowledgement of its presence in our individual and collective lives. It reveals its
presence through art, poetry, music, theatre, dance, film and images that linger and take
hold. In subtle ways, being and living on these shores mediated between our inner lives and
the outer world. In revisiting them, our engagement with silence and the sea through
memory and photographs, I am reminded that we dwell simultaneously in two worlds, the
familiar natural one, and an inner, spiritual one. The natural world, that which we see,
smell and touch, enfolds a spiritual one within it; the spiritual world, although seemingly
insubstantial to some, is far more potent than the natural one, enfolding it in turn, existing
before birth and after death.

When I return to images of the sea, Neruda’s poetry, and to our experiences on that Pacific
island, I understand that for some, this place enabled a richer sort of learning, one that was
transformative where consciousness expanded through significant shifts of world views and
the specific capacities of the self. Not unlike the chosen life of a poet, this kind of learning
is inner work, soul work. This view suggests a more integrated understanding of who we
are, one that reflects the intellectual, emotional, ethical and spiritual dimensions of our being in the world. It, too, seeks to account for the ways in which the social, cultural and embodied as well as the deeply personal and spiritual aspects of our being potentially play out in the process of deep learning.

Curricula and instructional processes have traditionally focused on using textbooks and others’ knowledge to develop our intellectual or cognitive capacities. To recognize the life of the inner world “directs our attention to the imaginative and emotional dimensions of our being, of relating to and integrating the rich feelings and images that often arise within the context of our pursuit of intellectual growth” (Dirkz & Mezirow, 2006, 128). In doing so, we are inevitably drawn to the spiritual implications of our learning, life, and work.

What I could not articulate then, I know now as an experience that touched upon the imaginal – the mythic – where the subtle, inner world guides and interfuses events in the natural world, especially events that become timeless, luminous, or intensely meaningful. While the territory of myth and symbol, for many, has become taboo, and “where local mythic images are interpreted, not as metaphors, but as facts” dedicated to social control, wars have been waged (Campbell, 2002, 30). Indeed, the foreclosing of images, the imaginal and the poetic marks our time “with its wars, revolutions and tremendous social upheavals”; yet, those who have chosen a poet’s life may agree that these times cry out “to cultivate more ground for poetry.” As “myths are productions of the human imagination” (Campbell, 2002, 29), they need to breathe and become. But like dogmatic belief systems, religious or political, secular myths can be used to “reinforce a certain moral order and shape a people or individual to it” especially when critical and ethical thinking are forbidden (Williams as cited in Merskin, 2007, 14). When the spiritual, pedagogical, and sociological functions of myth become tools for social control, we relinquish our mythic capacity; we relinquish the guiding power of poetry, dreams and images in our lives. Poetry, then, is no longer rebellion, and there is no longer a giving of oneself to the process as

when Neruda composed his poems, he gave himself to the process as if he were still the small boy in his own dream, surrounded at the family feast by gunfire and smoke, guitars and wine. (O’Daly, 2002, xi)

The “life of mythology” rises from, and depends on, “a metaphoric vigor of its symbols. The symbol, energized by metaphor, conveys some realization of the infinite” (Campbell, 2001, p. 6). To solidify a symbol into any single interpretation or vision deadens the energy that would have gone into imagining possibilities – and so the symbol dies (Merskin, 2007). The experiences of our biology field trip to the island opened up relationships, dynamics, learning, dreaming, and our senses. We lost our edges, so to speak. Bodies and souls lost their borders to each other, where at times we became both immaterial spirit and physical reality, a “meaningful system of body living within the flesh” (Hillman, 1967, 121). While I cannot speak for others’ inner workings, for me, the presence of silence and the sea have continued to activate my imagination and has become the energy behind much that is pedagogic, philosophic and poetic.

Oh dawn, breaking out of
the shadow and the moon in the sea,
I always come back to your burning salt.
It is your solitude always which moves me
And, back once more, I don’t know who I am. (Neruda, 2003b, 25)
To ignore the realm of the mythic, the ancient pull of the Sea, is to ignore human imagination...

What is lost when mythic imagination and poetry are viewed with grave suspicion is the realization that spiritual experience offers a “‘hint’ that human life has a link to transcendence and that the individual is a ‘soul’ with potential to come into relation with the spirit in a wholly natural way that does not tip over into madness” (Stein, 2007, 49).

To ignore the realm of the mythic, the ancient pull of the Sea, is to ignore human imagination and its key role in psychic life. It is through myth, archetypal symbol and story, that we are able to address soul-making ispoesis – a return to the imaginal and poetic basis of consciousness. To “return” to something suggests that we have “left” something. In a way, we have left the imagination in much of our teaching, learning, and living. In another, it is not “we” who have left the imagination (nor was it the imagination that left us). Rather, the imagination was left. And so we have to re-learn. . .

. . . I have to learn
to swim inside my dreams
in case the sea should come
and visit me in my sleep.
And if that happens, all will be well,
and when tomorrow stirs
on the wet stones, the sand
and the great resounding sway of sea
will know who I am and why I return,
will accept me into their school.

And I can be content again
in the solitude of the sand,
graduated by the wind
and respected by the sea-world. (Neruda, 2003c, 31)

References


About the Author

Alexandra Fidyk is a core faculty member in the Department of Depth Psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute, CA. In keeping with her interest in the movement of the psyche, she continues to attend the realm of ontological splendor, the poetic and the imaginal.