

**“Clear Thinking about Mixed Feelings”:
What Poetry Can Do for You...Even If You’re Not a Poet**

One morning, I woke up with the phrase “*Potato chips don't go with coffee*” in my head.

What a ridiculous, trivial idea.

So, of course, I reached for my pen and notebook and wrote it down. Then I wrote another line. And a few more. Until I “accidentally” wrote this poem:

Potato chips don't go with coffee
My alarm alarmed me with those words.

I told you this, exactly---
and you said:

Led Zeppelin doesn't go with mashed potatoes
and I said:

that's not the same thing!
And you said:

you're alarming me, my sweet, raw potato.

That may not be the most amazing poem I've ever written, but I like it. Why?

Because it speaks to how and why we might approach poetry.

We write poetry in response to the things that set off alarms inside us. The moments when we are vibrating with wonder, or fear, or heartbreak. Poetry is most definitely FEELING.

But we also write poetry to examine things more closely; to cry out: *that's not the same thing!* To logically parse a silly thought until it reveals something we didn't understand when first we were alarmed. Poetry is most definitely THOUGHT.

Perhaps that's why I love Auden's definition of poetry as "clear thinking about mixed feelings."

So, can writing poetry help you think more clearly about your mixed feelings--- whether or not you consider yourself a poet? Can it help you write fiction? Non-fiction? Memoir? I think so.

Let me give you an example.

I grew up Catholic, so I know what a credo is. Literally, it means "I believe" and it's a statement of those things you believe in. Many writers earnestly think that this is where they should begin: with what they believe, with what they know for certain, with just the facts, please. I know I did. I wrote many a persuasive essay in school, and I was damn good at it. I could argue the leg off a table, as they say.

But one day, I heard several people toss off the phrase "I don't believe in..." and they weren't talking about theology. They were discussing topics like wearing synthetic socks, or eating a big breakfast, or buying things online, or giving a child a binky.

When I did a Google search on the phrase, some things that turned up after "I don't believe in..." were: polls, the death penalty, failure, God, love, atheists, first grade, hell and walled gardens. (Hmmm. That last one intrigues me.)

Then, for my own amusement, I began to riff on the phrase, "I don't believe in..."

I wound up writing a poem ([you can see it here](#)) not so much about particular beliefs or non-beliefs, but about how complicated our personal creeds are. How and why did we draw those lines we won't cross? What are our exceptions? If we had to explain ourselves, could we do it?

Those last three questions---which I never would've stumbled across without writing this poem---could, if well tended, grow into a variety of writing projects: a memoir about my Catholic upbringing; a young adult novel about a particular moral line the main character has crossed (Sara Zarr's stunning [Story of a Girl](#), for example); or even a biography of a person whose logical discoveries are at odds with his beloved's faith. (I'm thinking of Deborah Heiligman's non-fiction book, [Charles and Emma](#), about the Darwins.)

In Madeleine L'Engle's book, [Walking On Water](#), she talks about belief this way:

"The artist, like the child, is a good believer. The depth and strength of the belief is reflected in the the work; if the artist does not believe, then no one else will; no amount of technique will make the responder see truth in something the artist knows to be phony."

Ferretting out the phony is exactly what poetry is designed to do.

Poetry allows you to explore anything you've left unexamined up until now, to go to the core of yourself---and to honor both your irrational thoughts and your mixed feelings about what you find.

This is true whether you write poetry for publication---or just because you can. Or even if you'd rather *read* poetry than write it. That's okay. (May I suggest two great books? Jeannine Atkins' novel in verse, [Borrowed Names](#), in which there is some amazingly beautiful and clear thinking about mothers and daughters, history, and choices. And Joyce Sidman's poetry book for younger ages, [This is Just to Say](#), which explores mixed feelings with humor and grace.)

Finally, I'd like to draw your attention to someone who's not a poet, or even a writer, but a visual artist: Claudia Tennyson, who carries on the traditional Japanese practice of repairing cracked ceramic vessels---not with invisible glue or carefully matched paint---but with gold filigree, which makes the cracks "visible instead of hiding them." She believes the mending process "increases rather than depreciates the value of the vessel."

Could there be a more perfect metaphor for writing? We are not covering up the cracks that we find; not even truly fixing them, because, often, that's beyond our power. But we can say: Look. Look right here. I believe *this* is important.

Today's fun stuff:

- 1) Tell me about a time you didn't reject the first silly thought or phrase that came to you---and what happened afterwards. Write a poem about it if you wish.
- 2) When you have a free evening, find the recent documentary, [Louder Than a Bomb](#), which follows four teams of students as they prepare for and compete in a Chicago poetry slam. Need a quick jolt immediately? Here's seventeen-year-old Adam Gottlieb performing "[Poet, Breathe Now.](#)"
- 3) Begin a "[commonplace book](#)." This is simply a notebook into which you copy poems you want to keep nearby. You can do this by hand, inking in the lines, or do what I often do: print or make a copy with your computer, and paste it in. Or

do both---no rules! Try reading from this commonplace book before you approach your regular writing time, and see if it puts you in the right frame of mind to be both open and clear.

4) To explore your mixed feelings, write a credo. But do it slant, as Emily Dickinson would advise. Start with "I don't believe in..." and see where your intrepid words take you.