

## How Poetry Shaped and Saved My Life

~Diana Raab

*"We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are."*

~Anais Nin

Poetry has saved my life more than once. At the age of ten, I wrote my first poem in a Khalil Gibran journal that my mother gave me the day after my grandmother committed suicide in my childhood home. It was Labor Day weekend 1964, and my parents were both at work. My grandmother, who lived with us, was babysitting for me. I knocked on her door to ask if I could go play at a friend's house. She did not answer. After cracking the door open, I saw my grandmother lying completely still in her bed with a Graham Greene book and a pair of glasses resting on her chest. The sheer curtains swayed in the fall breeze as if waving good-bye. I phoned my parents at work, and before long they pulled in the driveway along with the ambulances and paramedics.

Only when I turned 16 and found her death certificate, did I learn that she committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. Losing my grandmother penetrated me like a deeply seated bullet. My grandmother had nurtured and cared for me since my very first push into the world. My true healing only began days later, when my mother handed me that Khalil Gibran journal. I poured my grief onto its pages. Little did my mother know that her seemingly benign gesture set the platform for my life's work as a poet and writer.

Since that day, I have turned to poetry to help me navigate through difficult times, such as a turbulent adolescence, three pregnancies laden with bed rest, my daughter's drug addiction, and my breast cancer diagnosis. Most of my poems are born on the pages of my journals. Over the years, I have learned that when in distress, many writers and poets turn to writing to heal. We can say that life takes an unexpected turn, journals can become our best friends. Poet Langston Hughes said, "When I feel bad, I write in order to keep from feeling worse." Writing to feel better is probably the most common reason people crack open their journals. Therapists often suggest journaling as a part of the healing process to help channel problems. Poet Kim Stafford says that the journal lets him wallow, if that's what he needs. "But," he says, "The act of writing lifts me out."

The challenges surrounding illness can also become a catalyst for poetry journaling. "When it hurts write harder," one writing instructor once shared. During the years of my breast cancer journey, my journal became the forum for venting my fears and frustrations and eventually parts of my journal entries ended up in my second memoir, *Healing with Words: a Writer's Cancer Journey* which is packed with poems about my cancer journey.

For me, creating poems has been a healthy habit like brushing my teeth. For the poet, the journal or notebook is not only a place to play around with words and voice, but it is a place to foster a more intimate relationship with who we are. The journal is also a place to gather momentum and excitement about writing, akin to the artist's sketchbook.