

“Where I’m From”:
Poetry

Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

“Where I’m From” is a poem by George Ella Lyon. Ms. Lyon encourages readers to create their own personal poems using her poem as a guidepost. This activity will involve collecting very specific personal information from the participants and then creating a poem that tells where they are from, as well as what is most important in their lives. This activity usually is done with the individual participants each creating a poem. With reluctant “poets,” this activity may be done as a group effort resulting in a single collaborative poem. A writer, teacher, activities coordinator, or volunteer could all direct this activity.

TIME:

Three one-hour sessions will be necessary to complete this activity. Introducing George Ella Lyon’s poem and a discussion of its details will take the first fifteen to thirty minutes of the first session. Then allow at least half an hour for each participant to collect his or her own information. The second session will be a time for writing and organizing the participants’ poems. The third session will be a sharing session.

MATERIALS:

- Copy of the George Ella Lyon poem “Where I’m From”
- Poem “I am From Wonderbread” by Bonnie Tressler (provided herein)
- Pens and pencils
- “Where I’m From” Template (provided herein)
- Discussion List worksheet (provided herein)
- Microphone (for sharing and reading poems)
- Computer and printer
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity is done by individuals or as part of a group. The poem is introduced and discussed in a group setting. Participants are encouraged to contribute and interact with the group as a means of addressing loneliness. Engaging the participants’ senses, and having them imagine what the poem is describing, is an effective way to alleviate boredom. Furthermore, when the participants start gathering their own information, the uses of the senses again will be addressed . . . what did your childhood smell like? Taste like? Sound like? Helplessness is addressed by making even the smallest contribution important, by having volunteers serve as scribes to help those who can’t write their own thoughts, by making sure everyone ends up with a poem of his or her “life” if he or she wants one. Helplessness is addressed also by providing a structure within which to create a poem that is at once accessible, creative, and personal.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDIES:

“We aimed to explore the effect of a poetry writing program for people who had experienced a serious illness. For this study we randomly assigned 28 volunteer participants with a history of serious illness, usually cancer, to one of two poetry writing workshops. Each group met weekly for 2 hours for 8 weeks. The second group was wait-listed to enable comparison between the two groups. We used the Kessler-10, a measure of wellbeing, before and after the workshops, and also interviewed the participants at these times. Participants responded enthusiastically and each group demonstrated an increase in wellbeing over the course of their workshop, moving

them from medium to low risk on the K10. Participants enjoyed the challenge of writing and the companionship of other group members. Psychiatrists, especially those working in liaison psychiatry, are in a position to encourage patients who have experienced a serious illness to explore writing as a way of coming to terms with their experiences.” [Abstract]

--Rickett, C., C. Greive, and J. Gordon. “Something to Hang My Life On: The Health Benefits of Writing Poetry for People with Serious Illnesses.” Australasian Psychiatry: Bulletin of Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists 19, no. 3 (June 2011): 265–268.

“Reminiscence enabled staff to see and know the person beneath the dementia. It acted as . . . a key revealing the person to staff, enabling them to engage with the person with dementia in a different way. Knowing the person enabled staff to understand (through the lens of the person’s past) and sometimes to accommodate the person’s current behavior [sic].” [Abstract]

--Cooney, A., A. Hunter, K. Murphy, D. Casey, D. Devane, S. Smyth, L. Dempsey, E. Murphy, F. Jordan, and E. O’Shea. “Seeing Me through My Memories’: A Grounded Theory Study on Using Reminiscence with People with Dementia Living in Long-Term Care.” Journal of Clinical Nursing 23, no. 23–24 (December 2014): 3564–74. doi: 10.1111/jocn.12645

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (45 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR):

(Introduction to the poem by George Ella Lyon, fifteen to thirty minutes; for the participants to work on their own personal lists, thirty minutes.)

1. Introduce the activity to the group by reading the George Ella Lyon poem “Where I’m From.” Discuss the meaning of the poem. Ask the participants, “What do you know about the writer by reading her poem?” Have a volunteer make a list of everything that is said.
2. Distribute copies of the Discussion List worksheet to each participant, afterwards explaining that it is for them to list specific things about their lives that will be used to write their own “Where I’m From” poems. Ask participants to write their names on their Discussion List worksheets.

The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* should be used to prompt memories of activities and customs the participants may have taken part in or that were important to their families. This prompting can be accomplished by reading various folklore items from the publication while participants are responding to the themes included in the Discussion List worksheet.

There are a number of themes in the Discussion List worksheet that could be prompted by reading related examples from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. These themes and related folklore readings include

family stories (pages 273-276), names or nicknames (pages 271-272), family foods (pages 277-287), a saying from childhood (pages 116-122), and family traditions (pages 196-221).

To set an example, the activity director should give an idea of what he or she would put on his or her list (e.g., “my family ground fresh horseradish every Good Friday, so I would include that under family traditions”).

3. Allow at least a half hour for the participants to work on their lists.
4. At the end of the half hour, lead a short discussion on what the participants included in their lists. Many will be shy about sharing. Sharing is not mandatory, but once they hear others they may be more willing to contribute. The person leading the discussion should write a poem as well and share it first with the group. It is important for the person leading the activity to be a part of the discussion and to serve as an example by opening up to the group. Before ending the session, allow the participants a few more moments to add any additional thoughts to their lists as discussion often jars new memories.
5. Collect the participants’ Discussion List worksheets.

Note: If the writing of a group poem is pursued, assign a note taker. The activity director should ask the note taker to include the names of all the participants. The activity director should also be sure to ask all the participants for contributions. Don't allow one or two participants to dominate the entire group. All areas of the worksheet should be covered and at least one comment from each participant should be included in the final poem, so be sure to notate who contributed which item(s).

SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

(Using the Discussion List worksheets from the first session, the participants will create their own personal “Where I’m From” poems.)

1. Introduce today’s activity to the group. The lists that were created at the last session along with the “Where I am From” template will be used to write personal “Where I’m From” poems that are similar in format to the poem by George Ella Lyon.

2. Read the George Ella Lyon poem again. Also read the poem “I am From Wonderbread” by Bonnie Tressler. Ask the participants to think about the writer of the second poem. Do they feel like they know the writer from reading the poem?

3. Distribute a copy of the “Where I’m From” Template to each participant. Now it is the participants’ turn to write their own personal poems. Demonstrate how to take information from the list and turn it into a poem. (The best examples are the ones that are the most personal. It is recommended that the activity director create

his or her own personal list and personal poem prior to teaching this lesson, and then use them to lead by example.) For every two to three participants, a volunteer familiar with the process should be made available to assist. (A local high school may be willing to have a writing or English class create their own poems and then go to the care facility to assist others in writing theirs.)

4. Allow at least thirty minutes for the participants to work on their poems. Gather the group together to see how things are going and ask for volunteers to share what they have so far. Then allow another fifteen to twenty minutes for the participants to finish.

5. Staple the Discussion List documents to their respective poems and then collect them. (If possible, have volunteers type up the poems, using the attached list to fill in any gaps, before the third session.)

SESSION 3 (1 HOUR):

(Sharing of the participants’ written “Where I’m From” poems.)

1. This activity is devoted to sharing the poems written by the participants, as well as to celebrate their lives.

2. Distribute the completed poems. Allow a few minutes for participants to read through their poems and make any corrections.

3. The activity director should then ask individuals to share their poems. Participants often are reluctant at first. They may read it themselves or wish to have the activity director or volunteer read it

for them. A cordless microphone is often very helpful, so that people with hearing loss are more fully able to participate.

Note: If a group poem was written, it can be read as a “performance piece.” Assign certain lines (his or her contributions) to certain participants. The activity director can walk the microphone from one reader to the next.

4. Celebrate everyone’s uniqueness. Suggest ways the participants may want to share their poems. For example, the poems can be framed and hung in the participants’ rooms. The poems also can be copied and sent to loved ones as an enclosure in a card.

Note: This last session is a perfect time to invite friends and family members to hear the poems and to enjoy refreshments. I have had family members read the poems of their loved one. There were many tears in the room. Some of the poems were even read as eulogies.

AUTHOR • BONNIE TRESSLER:

Bonnie is a teaching artist who lives in Jamestown, North Dakota. Her artistic interests and skills are centered on book and box making, decorative Polish Easter eggs, willow basketry, poetry, writing, and collage. She is very active with the Jamestown Fine Arts Center. She works with the *Art for Life Program*, where she coordinates a pen pal letter exchange between the elders at Ave Maria Village, a skilled care facility, and local schoolchildren. Poetry became a part of her grade school residencies while working with professional poet Becca Barniskis. Bonnie found that poetry was a natural extension of bookmaking and now often includes it in her activities. Bonnie has done art residencies and “Where I’m From” activities with elementary schools, senior citizen groups, the Sons of Norway, and numerous other organizations.

“WHERE I’M FROM”

by George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I’m from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I’m from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I’m from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I’m from Artemus and Billie’s Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments—
snapped before I budded—
leaf-fall from the family tree.

(Reprinted with permission, Absey & Co., *Where I’m From*. ©1999)

“I AM FROM WONDERBREAD”

by Bonnie Tressler

I am from Wonderbread
From turquoise and white '55 Olds
and Melmac plates.

I am from *Little House on the Prairie*,
read aloud
(Impatience, wanting more,
another chapter, PLEASSSSE).

I am from knobby horseradish roots,
garlic bulbs and poppy seeds
whose flavors I remember
as if just tasted.

I'm from Aunt Pat's car accident.
I'm from green eyes and hats that never fit,
From Clarence and Bernadine, Bobby and Bena.

I'm from the farm and the city,
From grow it and preserve it.

I'm from Sunday mass,
triangles of lace on my head,
family lined up in the pew.

I'm from Peter, Angeline, Walter, and Mary,
From fried side pork, boiled potatoes
and tender kohlrabi.

From the legs my grandmother and aunt lost
to sugar,
my father's heart dependent on Medtronic.

I'm from “Sit down and Shut up”
From “Go out and Play”
From cold beer after a hard day's work.

I am from those moments captured in Aunt Helen's 5,000 slides,
Two brothers and two sisters,
A tiny leaf on a huge family tree.

DISCUSSION LIST

To create the poem, participants first should jot down their thoughts and responses to each item below. These responses are then placed within the “Where I’m From” Template provided.

- an everyday item from your home
- products from your home
- description of your home
- a detail about your home/your home’s smell, taste, feel
- a plant, flower, or natural item
- a tree or plant near your home, and a description of how or why the tree or plant is important
- a family tradition and a family trait
- family members’ first names or nicknames (e.g., siblings, parents, etc.)
- family habits
- things you were told as a child
- a song/saying from your childhood
- a family tradition
- your place of birth
- family ancestry or ethnicity
- family foods
- a story about a family member and detail about the story or person
- a description of family mementos, pictures, or treasures
- location of mementos—(e.g., under my bed, on the wall, in my heart)

“WHERE I’M FROM” TEMPLATE

To create the poem, participants should include their responses from their Discussion List worksheets in the corresponding blank spaces.

Adapted by Bonnie Tressler

Inspired by “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon

I am from _____, (an everyday item from your home)
from _____ and _____. (products from your home)
I am from the _____. (description of your home)
_____. (a detail about your home’s smell, taste, feel)
I am from the _____ (a plant, flower, natural item)
the _____ (a tree or plant near your home)
_____. (a description of how or why the tree is important)

I’m from _____ and _____, (a family tradition and a family trait)
from _____ and _____. (family members’ first names)
I’m from _____ and _____ (family habits)
and from _____. (family habit)
I’m from _____ and _____ (things you were told as a child)
and _____. (a song or saying from your childhood)
I’m from _____. (a family tradition)

I’m from _____ (your place of birth) and _____, (family ancestry or ethnicity)
_____ and _____. (family foods)
From _____, (a story about a family member)
_____. (detail about the story or person)

_____ (description of family mementos, pictures, or treasures.)
_____. (location of mementos—under my bed, on the wall, in my heart)

_____ (more description if needed)
_____.