



Our Interview with Poet Thelma Petersen Leatherbarrow



**Poetry for me is absolutely a method
of expressing gratitude and praise...**

from all walks of life, at all levels of experience and ambition. Even if the poet writes only for pleasure, or to share with family and friends.

You've written a few nice notes to me, expressing how much you appreciate the Poetry Page. Poetry seems to mean a great deal to you, so I am excited to learn more about you, and the role poetry plays in your life! Thanks for being here!

Thelma: Thank you for having me, Sally!! It's an honor!! First, I was not aware that I had a poem in the 2019 booklet!!

Sally: I'm sorry, Thelma! I wrote you at the time, requesting a bio for the booklet, so I thought you knew! We had so many amazing submissions, we thought it only right to print a poem by each poet who wished to be included. It made for a truly lovely booklet!

Art & Text
Picture this...

At the Norwalk Public Library

A great way to really enjoy poetry is to create a visual representation of a poem by making a painting or other artwork that shows images of the poem and captures how you feel.

--Rachael Lebeter



SUNDAY 12/15/2019 2:00PM

Norwalk Public Library is thrilled to be joining the thirteen libraries across Fairfield County that are coming together to explore the relationship between art and text in their unique exhibits!

1 Belden Ave., Norwalk, CT 06850

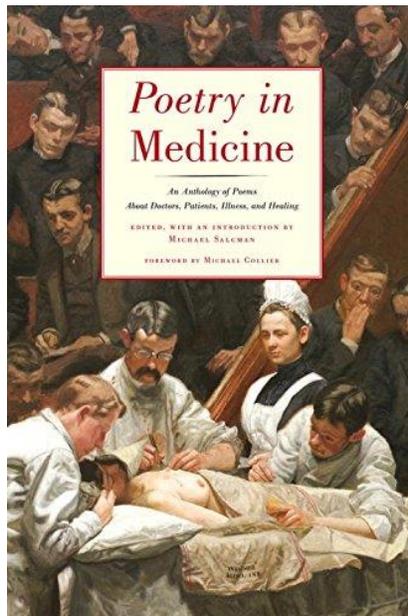
In your bio you state that you have ..”always viewed poetry as not only creative, but therapeutic; an outlet for traumatic times.” Could you explain what you mean?

Thelma: Yes, I consider poetry an emotional outlet, an alternative to seeing and speaking with a therapist. Negative emotions such as grief are best expressed on paper for me.

Sally: I think you are retired from a career in medicine? Could you share with us a little bit about what your area of focus was in medicine?

Thelma: My medical career was as a nurse. Though I graduated high school in 1973, I didn't enter college/university until years later.

Sally: Do you feel there is a connection between poetry and medicine? There have been a lot of physician/poets (Robert Bridges, William Carlos Williams, and currently Raphael Campo, to name just a few...our very own poet Divina Santos enjoys a career in medicine!). It's an often-discussed topic these days.



Thelma: In my opinion there may well be a connection between physicians and poetry. After all, we're all human beings with souls, aren't we? Intelligence is a factor in many good poets, too, and medicine requires a high degree of intelligence.

Sally: Do you think poetry makes a physician more empathetic toward his patients?

Thelma: Poetry likely would make a physician more empathetic to patients, yes! Poetry would allow a physician to be more sensitive to patients, especially if he/she had suffered any serious illness or had family members who had. And most especially if the physician considers his patients as genuine human beings who are suffering.

Sally: I read an article online from 2018 in which certain people were asked to quote why they are thankful. This is what you wrote:



Thanksgiving, a beautiful time of year! I am thankful for the miracle our Lord and Savior, and His Father, granted to me when I was 34. Right around my birthday, I was diagnosed with a terminal disease. The Lord led me to very compassionate, caring oncologists to care for me. Here I am now, 63, and alive and well, praise be to Him! I'm thankful in this season, and always, for the life He granted me twice! His blessings and miracles never cease to amaze.

Could you please share with us a little bit about your experience with illness and healing and gratitude? Is poetry a way for you to give thanks and praise?

Thelma: I remember that lovely article from 2018 where people were asked about what they were thankful for. A close friend made a copy of it for me.

Poetry for me is absolutely a method of expressing gratitude and praise to our Lord, always!!! Christian poetry is something I love!!!

In 1989 I was diagnosed with a cancer that should've taken my life. It was a very late stage cancer, and I was thirty-four at the time. The oncologist who initially treated me at Yale CCC, Dr. Joseph Chambers, was not hopeful, but he was compassionate, kind, and gave some encouragement. Since I lived in Stamford at that time, my care was continued there at Stamford Hospital with two incredibly compassionate and kind oncologists: Dr. Frank Masino and Dr. Paul Weinstein. Throughout all the grueling treatments and days and nights of worry, He was there, preparing to bestow a miracle; though, of course, at the time none of us knew this. I've written a poem illustrating what it was like in-patient.

My personal poetry concentrates on a few aspects of that experience.

Sally: In your bio that I spoke of earlier, you state that you wrote your first poems at age five! Do you remember any of them?

Thelma: Age five, wow!!!! That was the first time I started writing my emotional journey (though I'm sure it was child-like!)! Sadly, I can't recall any poems from that time.

Sally: Did you continue to write poetry throughout your years in medical school, or university?

Thelma: Yes, every year of my life I've written something, no matter the subject. Studies always took precedence in school/college, but in off hours I always found something worth a few thoughts or lines.

Sally: Do you belong to any writers workshops?

Thelma: I've never joined or been associated with any workshops or anything of that nature, for whatever reason. At one time I had joined a poetry group with a former friend who also writes, but it seemed the participants were more interested in criticizing each others' work, and I don't mean in a constructive manner. It was more like sniping than constructive criticism.

Sally: Have you had formal training in poetry, or does it just come naturally to you?

Thelma: I haven't had any formal training in any type of writing.

Sally: Please explain poetry's role in your daily life (even when you are not writing). A poet isn't only a poet when she or he writes, after all. They carry it within them. Can you share with us your experience with this?

Thelma: In daily life, I notice nature— especially in a poetic sense. Instead of thinking "what a pretty flower," my thoughts turn to "the colors of those lovely blooms are a rainbow palette." It carries over to anything I happen to light my eyes upon!!

Sally: Do you publish poems in journals, or desire to have a collection?

Thelma: Over the previous thirty years or so I've had a few poems published in an anthology or two. I rarely submit anything for publication. A few people have encouraged me to do so, but, for whatever reason, I don't.

I do have a collection of my work, but it isn't for public viewing!
It's here at home!!

Sally: Who are a few of your favorite poets?

Thelma: Oddly enough I have no favorite poets, though at one time I favored Helen Steiner Rice.

The most beautiful creations are for me about nature, the Lord, and my friends.

We had a group of close friends at one point, and we always celebrated our birthdays together!! Those parties were fantastic!! If it happened to be your birthday, I would write a special custom poem celebrating you!!! Loved doing this for them!!!!

Sally: Since retiring, do you write more than you used to?

Thelma: I pretty much write as much, maybe more, after retiring. Due to the cancer, my career was short. After recovery I was able to work again but it took some time. Close to eighteen months before I felt better!!

Sally: Do you have a set schedule for writing, or do you simply allow inspiration to catch you?

Thelma: I generally have no set schedule for writing, I just get an idea whenever it pops into my head. Nights after 11:00 are great for writing— when the world quiets down!

Sally: I think you also write non-fiction? Please tell us a little about that!

Thelma: I do write non-fiction. I have had an article or two published in the past, mainly on the subject of anti-bullying. I am a huge advocate of anti-bullying!!!

My current work is in narrative nonfiction, similar to a memoir. It's quite different!!!

From a very young age I was harassed and bullied at school and at home, and that's likely where my poetic sense was nurtured. Being able to write about it was a blessing, quite therapeutic!!

Sally: What things outside of writing do you enjoy? Gardening, family, reading? Dancing?

Thelma: My other interests?? Sure we have time?!

I am a voracious reader, everything, especially if it will teach me something new!!! I also love reading for pleasure!!!

Photography too, though not as much as in earlier years.

Dancing!!!! YES!!!!!! Once I learned to dance and became passionate about music, there was no holding me back!!!

My life partner Slim was an accomplished musician and he taught me tons about it!!!!
And he was quite the dancer himself!!!

Sally: That's wonderful! Please share with us anything I may have left out!

Thelma: You've covered most of it, Sally!!! Again I want to thank you so very much for having me on the Poetry Page!! Blessings and safety and good health to you and yours!!!!

A Little Ode to Dancing

Lost in rhythm, feeling the beat
the notes, moving my feet
hair

Hearing
Shaking shoulders, swinging my
Having good times my friends can share

Get up, boogie, sliding my shoes
the dance floor who needs the booze?

on

Thelma Leatherbarrow



