

Reprinted from the Journal of Poetry Therapy, Vol. 9 No. 1, 1995

The Use of Poetry in Identifying and Coping with the Emotional Tasks of Moving

Cynthia Blomquist Gustavson, M.S.W.

This narrative perspective explores the author's use of poetry as therapy to cope with the numerous geographical moves she has made in her adult life. She identifies six tasks involved in moving from one home and community to another, and cites examples of poetry written during each of those transitions.

Moving has been identified as a major stressor and quantified in terms of life exchange units (LEU's) in several widely used stress surveys (Coddington, 1972; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978.) I am now preparing for the stress of my fourteenth move in twenty-five years of marriage, moves which have included living in eight states, buying and selling eleven houses, negotiating rental agreements, moving and packing tons of household goods, relocating children in their teen-age years, and finally, always having to create new community.

Through the early years of dislocation I was not employed outside of the home, and I could use all my energy and resources toward the moving process. However, in the last ten years I have been working as a social worker and therapist. It has meant less time and energy for the moves, as well as dealing with my own feelings regarding the loss of my practice and coworker camaraderie.

Writing poetry during these transition periods has enabled me to identify my feelings and to then creatively struggle with the issues involved. An examination of six of my poems which I wrote during moves between 1985 and 1994 reveals major psychological tasks involved in the moving process. The first task of moving is owning the move. Even though my moves were work-related to my husband's profession, I needed to find a personal reason to make a change. That

search is illustrated in the poem "Alice Grows Red Raspberries" (Gustavson, 1995).

Alice Grows Red Raspberries

Alice grows red raspberries
 on a small plot in town, hybrids,
 the size of strawberries,
 holding deep, wine-hued pockets
 bulging with nectar.
 She cultivates them, fertilizes.
 pesticides, hoes, rakes and talks to them.
 They respond by growing in neat rows,
 bugless, and bulbous.

Wild raspberries appear each year
 in the swamp next to my garage,
 they form only a cap, dusty rose or black,
 orderless, their briars entwine
 to catch my bare legs;
 stingweed grows sheltered there.

While collecting for breakfast I scare
 a baby Wilson's warbler from its nest,
 then gently set it back, leaving remaining berries
 for the bird's sweet tasting balm;

Fruit no poisons have touched, washed gently in rain,
 I share freely with snake, bug and bird,
 whose fertilized droppings of pink splashes
 form Hansel and Gretel paths between laden bushes.

I live on the cliff of a wild river;
 eagles speak to me and nest
 in high white pine arms facing open space;
 osprey feed me with their laser dives;
 but I need other nourishment,
 I cannot sail in the air—

I have no straight path to the city,
 briars scratch me as I follow pink splashes to wild bushes,
 and yearn for cultivation, pruning,
 a bulbous raspberry in a straight row

So I am moving in September, after the bushes have been stripped;
 when the berries are gone and I have shelves full of jam
 I will join the other vulnerable birds who follow this river south
 searching for food following the receding light longing for the flock.

For much of the poem, the writer (myself) appears to be content with her life in the country:

"Osprey feed me with their laser dives." In the very next line, however, a shift occurs: "but I need other nourishment." This move clearly becomes rationalized as a need for the culture and cultivation of city life, a move that becomes my own, separate from my husband's job move.

A second task in the process of moving is the enormity of buying and selling a home, not just any home, but one in which the seller has invested tremendous emotional, financial, and creative capital. The poem, "For Sale and Waiting for a Buyer" (Gustavson, 1995) was written immediately after showing one of my houses to a potential buyer who was less than complimentary about its features.

For Sale and Waiting for a Buyer

A hummingbird hit my window,
twirled down, recovered,
then flew backwards escaping;
Perhaps she saw the pink peony bouquet
or smelled the wild roses I'd placed in crystal
next to my wedding photograph.

My house smells of flowers, meant to fill
stale air with the fragrance of memories;
I've removed cobwebs, changed dead light
bulbs, oiled kitchen wood,
just in case someone sees the "for sale" sign
and appears with no warning.

They come as weekend recreation,
Musee Gustavson, open to the public,
Oh, wherever did you get that loveseat?
What a clever idea for curtains!
Always with hope at hand
I show the special faucet, the cedar window seat,
convinced they are buyers
until no one calls back;

Or they are lookers
who come to convince themselves
that their own kitchen is larger
their own house has central air,
and there are no box elder bugs in the city;
Why did I ever think I could live out here?

With each new prospect I flutter my wings
pointing out the peony and wild rose bushes,
raising my hopes as I fly into the dream,
smashing my reflection, twirling down,
recovering, escaping into patience, waiting,
waiting, for the real one.

Now facing my fourteenth move I can still relate to that hummingbird smashing itself against my picture window. It describes the surprise, anger, despair, and also the perseverance required in this transitional process.

There exists in the midst of moving a certain unreal feeling that takes over, a kind of numbness. The third task of moving involves letting go, living with the uncertainty of the moment, and trusting the future. The mover knows what she is leaving, but must rely on trust to carry her through the transition, not knowing what the future home, community, friends, job, and climate will be.

Haiku

The blue-faced river
exhales into white rapids
after holding breath

I wrote the poem "Haiku" (Gustavson, 1987) after having moved into a new home in a new state. At that point the breath holding was finished, and I was ready to tackle the rapids. It's easier to face a challenge when it can be seen and touched. During the breath-holding phase everything seems more difficult.

The fourth task of moving is to become part of the new community, or in simple terms, make new friends. With age, this is becoming more difficult. If young children are in the family it is much easier to meet other families, but not so easy if there are only two adults who each work long hours, or who have the wrong accent, or go to the wrong church.

Newcomer

Everyone knows a rose belongs in a sculpture garden.
 Pardon my asking, but why the gate? I know I'm late; Is there no room?
 Each bloom basking in its territory of sun
 runs its root to stretch its space then smiles through the pansy's face.

I'll set my root outside the gate, enjoy the beauty and relate,
 play the game of wither and wait until the sucker goes under.

I was feeling angry and lonely when I wrote "Newcomer." Its tone reflects my sarcasm. But at the same time the writer of this poem knows that she won't be a newcomer forever, and acknowledges that someday her roots will be inside the gate.

The fifth task of moving is to grieve the death of your dream, and create a modified or completely new dream. My entire childhood had been spent in one place—the home where my mother still lives. I always felt that I would grow up, marry, have children, and live in my dreamhouse until I died. That was my expectation, but not my reality.

Catbird 1609C

The science man waits.
 He says Catbird 1609C
 will fly into the net
 at the center left of the right quadrant
 at half past four today
 just as it does every year in its migration north.
 I laugh,
 not because I don't believe
 but because I have always known.
 My grandma has walked
 into the vestibule of Cannon Valley Church
 every Sunday at nine for ninety-six years,
 always knelt in the soil of her rose bed
 on the first, crisp days of May,
 rocked in her porch swing
 every sultry summer eve.
 Mother, too, knows her place under the trees she planted fifty years ago,
 trees that shade spring fiddle heads of fern,
 white wooden shutters and a patio of memories.

The science man waits.
 Could this be the year
 the catbird does not fly north—
 will not follow the river
 to the same meadows and nest?
 Grandmother prunes roses; Mother waters rare, red peonies;
 The science man records birds and quadrants and time;
 while I laugh—
 and move to the city
 with a car full of cardboard boxes
 leaking black soil from slips of lily
 and tiny plants of strawberry
 that will grow to be everbearing.

In "Catbird 1609C" (Gustavson, 1995) I describe the security and predictability of my mother's and grandmother's lives. It's a comfortable, understandable life. My own will never be that way, but I can grab some of theirs to carry with me.

Finally, for those whose lives seem always to be in transition, there is the task of keeping open the possibility that changes may still be coming—that this may or may not be the final move. I wrote the poem "End of the Retreat" a few months ago, not realizing that within a few weeks I would again realize that I would be making a thousand mile move south.

Sometimes trumpeting from the sky
 signals the coming of angels or the voice of God;

I can only say I heard the trumpeter swan issue its warning as it circled a flock of migrating hawks— I heard no other awesome voice nor flapping of celestial wings, but change was in the unsettled air.

I am both the trumpeter swan and the migrating hawk traversing the unsettled air, nourished and directed in my flight by the words and sounds of poetry. It is a fact that there will be transitions in the future. I will meet them with pen and paper in hand.

REFERENCES

Coddington, R. D. (1972) The significance of life events as etiologic factors in the diseases of children—II. A study of a normal population. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 16*, 205-213.

Gustavson, C. B. (1987) *Scents of Place: Seasons of the St. Croix Valley*. Marine, MN: Country Messenger Press.

Gustavson, C. B. (1995) *In-Versing your life: A poetry workbook for self-discovery and healing*. Milwaukee, WI: Families International, Inc.

Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, R. H., (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 11*, 213-218.

Sarason, I. G., Johnson, J. H., & Siegel, J. M. (1978). Assessing the impact of life changes: development of the life experiences survey. *Journal of Consulting Clinical Psychology, 46*, 932-946.