Writing as Inquiry:

How might the practice of writing poetry function as an epistemic tool for poets?

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Dedication

This work is dedicated in loving memory of my father, Dr. Joseph DeVito, and my brother, Gary DeVito. It was in coping with their deaths that I found that reading and writing poetry not only supported my emotional well being, but also helped me to gain personal insights and shape the ways in which I reconnected to the world. Through personal experience I had received glimpses into how writing poetry can advance one’s knowledge and understanding, and I wondered if others had similar experiences. This study was designed and conducted to answer that question.
Acknowledgments

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ABSTRACT

Like many creative endeavors, writing poetry is often considered an act of personal expression. Some have said that it is also an act of inquiry; that poets use their writing skills to make meaning. In order to study this claim empirically, I conducted an exploratory study to characterize the cognitive processes of poets as they go about their normal business of composing a poem. In this study, I ask: In what ways, if at all (and to what extent), has the process of writing a poem functioned as a process of inquiry for these poets? I also study how, if at all, the poets perceive that sustaining a practice of writing poetry has impacted their meaning making in other areas of their lives, and their perceptions on whether they have conducted inquiry through their writing practices. I examine the poet responses in light of trends found in other data from the study.

I recruited published poets and asked them to compose a poem using a think aloud protocol, and ended each session with a qualitative interview to gain a more complete sense of how the poem came into being, as well as to obtain the poets’ perceptions on how they normally go about the process of writing poetry. I developed analytic questions to support the research questions, and coded the data for these themes, looking for trends while richly describing the poets’ experiences in light of the research questions.

I found that it was common for poets to conduct inquiry on the content of their poems (including the subject matter, theme, and emotions). The poets also conducted inquiry on the manner of expression of their poems. There were a number of ways in which the poets perceived that sustaining a practice of writing poetry affects their meaning making in other areas of their lives. In addition, several of the poets related perceptions that suggest that they conduct inquiry during their usual writing practices.
Suggestions are given for applying these findings to aid novices in approaching the task of writing poetry, and directions for future study are discussed.
INTRODUCTION

In the human mind, prior knowledge influences the forming and organizing of new knowledge. This proposition is not controversial. The idea of *knowing with* (Broudy, 1977) alludes to how personal experiences as well as lessons learned in formal study are instrumental in shaping what we perceive and how we mediate our cognitive processes, such as to interpret new information. Broudy’s idea of *knowing with* has been used in studies of transfer of learning (e.g., Bransford & Schwartz, 1999) to explain ways in which knowledge of specific disciplines serves as a background for generating new knowledge in that discipline. For example, scientists use their disciplinary knowledge to investigate phenomena in the world around us, and philosophers use their disciplinary knowledge for epistemological inquiry.

My hypothesis is that while literature and the arts are often regarded primarily as a form of aesthetic expression rather than of investigation, writers and artists also use their disciplinary knowledge as a cognitive tool for inquiry, and often come to new understandings through the use of these tools. This hypothesis is a contentious proposition in some quarters. As cited below, classic authors addressing the creative process and even a well-known contemporary program for writers take a much more "inspirational" view of poetic creation. While an inquiry-oriented view may appear plausible from the perspective of contemporary cognitive science, to my knowledge the creation of poetry has not previously been investigated in this way. However, scholarly work the visual arts has offered theoretical justification for this position (e.g., Macleod & Holdridge, 2006; Sullivan, 2004, 2005).
This study investigates how the process of drafting and editing a poem can impact poets’ meaning making on the topic of their poem. I often use the broad term meaning making instead of a descriptor such as understanding to describe the phenomenon under investigation in agreement with an inclusive definition of cognition. I consider each of the following to fall under the umbrella term of meaning making: an understanding of an experience or idea, an emotional reaction, or sense of spirituality. In addition to arguments that emotion cannot be separated from cognition (e.g., Goleman, 1995), some researchers have shown that emotion is an important part of the creative process, and therefore should not be neglected in creativity studies (e.g., Lubart & Getz, 1997; Shaw & Runco, 1994). I use inquiry to mean conscious attention to concrete or abstract phenomena, either real or imagined, which can result in making meaning.

What elements of meaning making might a poet call upon in order to write a poem that conveys some type of meaning (that is, a poem other than nonsense verse)? A poet may select concrete details of a lived or imagined experience to highlight certain aspects that have importance in a symbolic sense and/or in a literal, cause and effect relationship. A poet may decide to express abstract aspects of his or her meaning making through direct address to the reader or dialogue that narrates ideas or emotional reactions to people, physical settings, or actions that are also described in the poem. These are just a sample of ways to illustrate the manner in which a poet may capture and display his or her meaning making using the form of poetry.
Importance of the Research:

This line of investigation has importance for administrative decision making concerning the appropriation of time and resources to creative writing and arts programs. In the same spirit as how Hetland and colleagues (2007, p. 6) have identified “Eight Studio Habits of Mind,” or important cognitive practices that are emphasized and practiced in good visual arts classes, this study investigates the cognitive acts that accompany successful poetry writing practices, with particular regard to the ways in which the poet’s creative processes might affect his or her meaning making.

This study was designed to open a new line of research whose impact is beyond a general recognition of the usefulness of the arts and literature in education. In this study, I have been able to reveal some of the ways in which poets develop new insights by detecting and identifying specific cognitive processes in the context of the everyday work of poets, through close inspection of the drafts of the poem and utterances produced during think aloud protocols, interviewing the poets upon completion of their poem, and close readings of the final versions of the poems created for this study. In short, this study examines whether and how cognitive processes that are practiced within the discipline of poetry support the generation of new knowledge for the poet (see Appendix A for how the published poem can affect others). Through an extension of related studies, this type of research may find that literary and artistic expression can and should be included in the pantheon of sanctioned epistemologies, and the knowledge that results from this type of pursuit may be placed more on par with that gained through other disciplinary means.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this line of research is to explore a hidden value in the process of the making of poetry—the theme of its potential to generate new understandings and meaning making. I offer a very brief argument to motivate the idea that purposeful attention to ideas and details that are considered for inclusion in a poem is a more active process than simply expressing understandings that have already been crystallized; in short, why the writing process constitutes inquiry.

Observation, an act that one might regard as the conscious effort to perceive, is routinely considered a kind of inquiry. It is the effort we put into perceiving that makes the subtle act of observation a form of investigation. In fact, we commonly say that we are studying something when we observe it in a purposeful manner or over a sustained amount of time. This point extends not only to the effort to perceive phenomena in the physical world but also to the effort to perceive intangible phenomena, such as ideas, emotions, or elements of one’s sense of spirituality. In the discipline of philosophy, it is taken for granted that the study of ideas is an act of inquiry.

In the same vein, making the effort to first perceive (often by recalling or imagining), and then select specific concrete details of an experience or statements of belief or emotions in order to express one’s own meaning making in the form of poetry is also reasonably considered an act of inquiry. Although this act of inquiry might involve ideas or feelings that the poet had previously taken to be fully understood, selecting and representing ideas to compose a poem poses an opportunity to reevaluate and revise one’s understanding (or make new connections to other knowledge). Therefore, I argue that the simple act of reflecting on one’s beliefs, experiences, and emotions is an act of inquiry.
In informal discussions with colleagues, I have found that some poets—and I count myself among them—readily acknowledge the ways in which their understanding of a topic has deepened due to their experiences in creating a poem on that topic. Likewise, several poets have published scholarly texts on how poets use the process of writing a poem to enhance their meaning making of a topic (e.g., Gibbons, 1996; Leggo, 2006; Orr, 2002). For the above reasons, I have chosen to investigate how the process of writing a poem can be an act of inquiry.

**Main Research Question:**

In what ways, if at all (and to what extent), has the process of writing a poem functioned as a process of inquiry for these poets? [Characteristics of participating poets are specified in the methods section.]

**Sub Questions:**

A. In what ways, if at all, does the process of writing a poem create new meanings or refine existing meanings in the poet’s mind, in contrast to simply expressing meanings that have already been crystallized?

B. In what ways, if at all, does the process of writing a poem involve challenging, unsettling, or making ambiguous meanings that had already been formed or settled upon in the poet’s mind?

C. How do the poets perceive that sustaining a practice of writing poetry has impacted their meaning making in other areas of their lives? And in specific, do the poets perceive that their practice of writing poetry has developed a mindset or skill set that they have applied to other areas of their lives, and if so, in what ways has this
occurred? In what ways do the poets’ perceptions reinforce, extend, or contrast with findings from the sample of writing sessions completed for this study?

**About the Research Questions:**

Recognizing that there are many ways to engage in the process of writing a poem, and that there are an infinite number of aspects of one’s personal experience, cultural background, academic knowledge and ideologies that can contribute to one’s meaning making at any given moment, the current study needs to be flexible enough to accommodate different types of influences on each poet’s thinking. However, it would be impossible to identify all of the influences that might come into play to shape one’s meaning making while composing and editing a poem. Accordingly, a variety of data collection strategies and qualitative analytic techniques were used in order to preserve the authenticity and complexity of the multifaceted nature of writing poetry.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE QUESTIONS

The role of conscious effort in creating poetry is in debate.

There is a long standing debate over the role of conscious thought in the act of creating art and literature. To characterize the debate using extreme ends of the spectrum of opinions held, some people believe that the creation of art or poetry is done without conscious direction. A popular example of practicing poets who hold this view is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who claimed that he created his famous poem “Kubla Kahn” in a dream, writing down the exact words from his dream upon waking (Perkins, 1981). A correlative of this view is that creative capacity is an innate talent, and therefore instruction on craft or technique is deemphasized in favor of simply identifying and encouraging those who are determined to be gifted in the area. (It should be noted that while these views often go hand in hand, their combination is not a logical necessity.) For example, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop describes the program’s official philosophy for its very highly regarded MFA program (The University of Iowa, 2007):

Though we agree in part with the popular insistence that writing cannot be taught, we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed, and we see our possibilities and limitations as a school in that light. If one can "learn" to play the violin or to paint, one can "learn" to write, though no processes of externally induced training can ensure that one will do it well. Accordingly, the fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us. We continue to look for the most promising talent in the country, in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged.

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1 Perkins (1981) also cites sources that show how Coleridge couldn't have created the poem in the exact manner that he described (including an earlier draft of the poem), but many proponents of the view that creative process occurs completely beyond conscious thought have cited Coleridge’s account in defense of their view.
As one can see in the statement above, this type of mentality encourages more of a “weeding out” of those who are not gifted in a given area, rather than focusing on new ways to better teach the subject.

In a very different view, some people hold that creation is an orchestration of commonplace problem solving skills. This is the view that Edgar Allen Poe promoted, particularly in his description of the mostly logical, and occasionally trial-by-error ways in which he proceeded to write his poem “The Raven” (Perkins, 1981). ² Herbert Simon and other scientists have argued that even great discoveries are made through ordinary problem solving processes (Langley et al., 1987; see commentary in Perkins, 2000). A natural extension of this view is that almost anybody can become proficient in a creative skill, given the right education. For example, in Japan, writing poetry is not the special purview of poets. The average person is expected to have the skill to write in traditional forms such as tanka, haiku and senryu. This is evidenced by the estimated one million people who not only write, but also submit haiku for publication in Japan, where there are hundreds of literary journals that publish traditional forms such as haiku and tanka, and most newspapers have haiku columns where readers can send their work (Bowers, 1996; Higginson, 1985). In environments where such attitudes reign, the respective art (such as traditional forms of poetry) is covered in the basic curriculum, with an expectation that

² Perkins (1981) also provides evidence that Edgar Allen Poe’s account of his creation of “The Raven” is also skewed toward his beliefs about the mechanisms of creative process. One of the problems fueling misrepresentation in both Coleridge and Poe’s accounts is that they described their experiences years after their respective poems were written. In this study, while I value the poets’ observations of their experiences in creating poetry through qualitative interviewing, I also attempt to mitigate the concern of how memory can affect a poet’s beliefs about creative process by using a think aloud protocol during the process of creation to capture the fleeting, seemingly inconsequential thoughts that are likely to be soon forgotten.
the average student will gain proficiency in the creative skill, much as one would expect proficiency in any other subject area.

While I have selected certain facets of the debate to characterize key beliefs and how they affect education, questions regarding the creative process are multifaceted and stretch into many different areas of consciousness studies. This study was designed to identify and describe the ways that poets use conscious thinking while writing a poem. One of the major aims of this study is to identify aspects of conscious effort in the voiced musing of poets while they compose a poem, and then to describe how these efforts affect the creation of the final poem. Some existing research has shown that there are aspects of the creative writing process that are governed by deliberate, conscious effort (Perkins, 1977, 1981), but that research primarily sought to describe specific, predetermined behaviors rather than characterize the breadth of ways in which conscious effort might manifest itself in the various stages of writing a poem. Since I haven’t been able to locate existing studies that give a broad view of the role of conscious thinking in creating poetry, much of the flavor of this study is exploratory, in order to serve as a foundation for further research on how the creative process operates for writing poetry.

Despite calls for crossover studies between the fields of cognitive science and literary criticism (e.g., Simon, 1995) and the recent surge in professional interest in the link between cognition and literature (e.g., Richardson & Steen, 2002; Tucker, 2004; Turner, 2002), a large portion of those writings are theoretical. In the area of creativity studies, much of the research focuses on personality traits of creative individuals rather than on the creative process (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Feist, 1999; Helson, 1996). In a review of the literature, Kaufman (2002) has argued that more creativity research is
needed for the activity of writing. It is not surprising, therefore, that my search through the research literature has not identified any studies that reveal the moment to moment thoughts of poets as they compose their works. It follows, then, that this study will be the first to trace the cognitive processes of skilled poets as they perform their usual work, and relate specific information on how engaging in the process of writing a poem has impacted their meaning making.

**Poets have claimed that they use the writing process to make sense of their lives.**

Certainly, some poets have observed that they have had experiences where writing a poem has helped them to gain insight. Furthermore, this has been examined through academic essays by poets who believe that writing poetry is a method of inquiry (e.g., Gibbons, 1996), and by literary critics (Hipp, 2005). While these essays are very thought provoking, they tend to use historical sources such as published works and personal papers as their primary evidence, instead of gathering data on the process as it unfolds. In order to get a better sense of how the creative process works in order to ultimately inform educational practices, it is important to look deeper into the process—especially to gather data while a poem is being created instead of only relying on the poet’s memory.

While reviewing the creativity literature, I have been able to find only one study of creative process where poets have used a think aloud procedure while drafting poetry (Perkins, 1981), and although inquiry was not the focus of the study, the author relates that those data have shown that poets come to new realizations during this process.
However, many creativity studies that involve poem writing have been done using participants who don’t identify themselves as poets. For example, Amabile (1996) used college students taking an introductory psychology course as participants. And while Perkins (1977, p. 247) has taken a very close look at search strategies for appropriate words when editing a poem, the participants used in that study were also non-poets (some were amateur poets who presumably have not had their work published, and others “had no special interest in poetry but no special aversion to it either.”) As most studies of creative process have been conducted with participants who are not highly practiced writers of poetry, this study offers a glimpse into how creative process works for skilled poets, both from a real-time record of how their conscious attention shifts from one idea to the next, and as narratives from the poets’ perspectives.

**Defining “Inquiry” for This Study:**

What is inquiry? For the purposes of this study, it is not necessary to get into a nuanced philosophical discussion. Some good commonsense phrases will suffice to give a sense of what I mean. Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (Random House, 1998, p. 985) offers a suitable definition for these purposes: “a seeking or request for truth, information, or knowledge” it also lists the following synonyms for inquiry: “study, scrutiny, exploration.” It lists “answer, reply” as antonyms, which implies that the act of inquiry stops when one feels that an answer to a question—asked or unasked—has been reached.

In the introduction of this dissertation, I have also referred to the issue of whether any searching for (or construction of) knowledge or understanding in the service of
making art or literature represents a valid epistemology. An important question along those lines is: if we find that new insights are obtained through the skilled use of knowledge and craft of a creative discipline, should methods of meaning making in the arts be put on par with those of philosophy or the sciences? The answer to such a question is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, seeing how the above definition of *inquiry* overlaps with definitions of *epistemology* would be useful for conceiving of future research that could address whether and how the means of attaining knowledge in the arts should be elevated from their current low position relative to more academic ways of investigating matters that are important to humanity.

In order to see how issues of inquiry from this empirical study may coincide with the more theoretical issues of epistemology, we must first call up an accepted definition of epistemology. Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (Random House, 1998, p. 654) defines epistemology very broadly as “a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge.” The ways in which the inquiry referred to in this study apply to this definition of epistemology is in the “methods” by which we go about obtaining “human knowledge.” In language that is more characteristic of this study, I would say that the way in which the empirical research on inquiry in this study applies to epistemology is through the processes by which we make meaning, such as when we obtain new knowledge or understanding.

The focus above is the on process of inquiry, rather than its goal. In the Overall Findings Summary for Sub Questions A & B, I identify three main categories of evidence through which the *process* of inquiry became apparent in the data. It is those parts of the
findings that are relevant to the questions of how inquiry in this study might relate to issues regarding methods of inquiry in the field of epistemology.

In addition to processes of inquiry, some of the ways in which inquiry was evident in the data was through attainment of the goal of inquiry: insight, which might take the form of: new knowledge or understanding, or the resolution of an emotion. Insights gained during the writing sessions were sometimes on the content (subject matter, theme or emotions) of a poem, and sometimes in terms of how the content of the poem was expressed. For a more detailed distinction between inquiry on the content of a poem and inquiry on its expression, see the Introduction and Summary sections of the Findings to Sub Questions A and B.
METHODS

Participant Selection:

In keeping with qualitative studies, I have chosen to keep the number of participants small in order to gather hours of data in the form of think aloud protocols and interviews from each one. The study includes seven poets from the Northeast who have published poems written in a form of poetry known as tanka (described below in the data sources section). I recruited participants through letters of invitation that I sent to members of the Tanka Society of America (TSA), a national organization for people who are interested in tanka poetry. I have been a member of this organization since 2004, and I regularly subscribe to a number of journals that publish tanka and related forms.

I did not personally know any of the participants I recruited for the study. However, I did recognize many of their names from having seen their work appear regularly in the prominent journals of the genre. In fact, the purposeful sampling I conducted was based on my familiarity with the names that regularly appeared in print publications. While my stated criterion for participating in the study was that the poet would need to have at least one tanka in publication, my preference was to recruit a number of poets who were more experienced in using their craft than those who simply met the criterion, in order to study the expert behavior of well practiced poets. Practical considerations led me to limit the area of my recruitment to an area with a few hours’ radius from my home so that any traveling to collect data could be done within a day. Therefore, I sent invitations to participate to sixteen poets from the Northeast whose names looked familiar from the TSA membership list. I did not select participants by any
subjective evaluation of the quality of their poetry; for most of the poets, I would not have been able to say which poems they had written, only that the name looked familiar. This strategy effectively eliminated my own biases of taste from the study, but does reinforce the biases of several journal editors, the collective judgment of whom shapes the body of contemporary tanka written in English. Seven of the sixteen poets I recruited were willing and able to participate in the study, a late responder to my invitation was on standby in case any of the poets chose to drop out of the study (although none did), and another couple of poets were unable to participate but expressed interest in the study and a desire to communicate with me about the work and/or poetry on an informal basis.

The writing session and interviews were conducted at a location of each poet’s choice. Most poets chose to conduct the session in their own homes, while two poets (Sam and John) met with me in a study room at their respective local libraries, and Elizabeth met with me in a small classroom I had reserved on a university campus. For a detailed description of how the sessions were conducted, see Appendix B.

**Participant Characteristics:**

My recruitment strategy was successful in amassing a group of experienced poets. The participants of the study are: Elaine, Miriam, Sam, Frank, Elizabeth, Pearl, and John. Four of the poets chose to use pseudonyms for the study, and three preferred to be known by their real names: Elaine Mokhtefi, Miriam Chaikin, and John Stevenson. I asked the poets questions about their background and interests during the interviews in order to broadly characterize the group. The range in number of poems published (approximate numbers were given by participants) was from about 15 or 20 (Elaine) to 1400 (John),
with most of the poets estimating that they had between one hundred and three hundred poems in print. The numbers are quite high due to the very short nature of these types of poems, but many of the poets counted free verse poems among their published works. All of the poets in the study are also published in other genres, such as other forms of poetry, short stories, journalism, fiction and nonfiction books, and children’s books (also fiction and nonfiction). Six of the seven poets are also published in other haikai (haiku-related) forms such as haiku, senryu, haibun (a combination of prose and poetry), and haiga (haiku that is artfully arranged within an image such as a painting or photograph). Five of the poets are also published in free verse. Many of the poets also expressed that they were practiced in the visual arts, as well. See Appendix C for a more detailed discussion of how this particular group of participants is unique, and how it is likely representative of the larger population of contemporary poets who write tanka in English. Appendix C also contains a discussion on the age distribution of the participating poets compared to other haikai poets, and some thoughts on how a person’s age might affect how he or she approaches the creative writing process.

**Data Sources:**

Sources of data for the study included: voice recordings and verbatim transcripts of think aloud protocols and qualitative interviews, drafts and final version of the poem created during the study. Including the writing session, interview and follow up phone
interview\textsuperscript{3} for each participant, just over 26 hours of recorded data were gathered for the study, which yielded a total of 455 pages of transcripts.

The participants were asked to write a tanka, which is a short poem of Japanese origin that is comprised of five lines totaling 31 or fewer syllables. A pragmatic advantage of this form is it is short enough to allow the poem to be written in its entirety in a single session. Another important factor in choosing this genre is the tanka style is similar to free verse, so it can inform studies on the dominant type of poetry being written in the English-speaking world today. Additionally, among traditional Japanese forms, although it is currently not as popular as haiku, it allows for freer expression than haiku, including a wider range of poetic devices which are also used in Western poetry, such as metaphor and subjective perspective (McClintock et al., 2003). Another reason the tanka form has been chosen as a vehicle for the creative process is because I understand the form well, so I anticipated that I would be able to appreciate subtleties in the poems. I have over a hundred poems in publication, and over fifty of these are in tanka form (see Appendix D).

\textbf{Valuing the Poet’s Perspective: Narrative Accounts and Interviews}

If one wants to study what happens in a poet’s mind during the creation of a poem, why not just ask him or her? Obtaining narrative accounts from the poets on their experience of writing the specific poem they have created for the study was an important aspect of the data collection. Soliciting narratives is a natural way to get the participants

\textsuperscript{3} The follow up phone interview was conducted with all participants except Sam, who was not available for this final round of data collection. I was able to communicate key questions to Sam through email exchanges, but I do not have answers to all of the follow up questions for him.
to create a coherent account of their experience on their own terms. As Reissman (1993, p. 4) notes, “A primary way individuals make sense of experience is by casting it in narrative form.” By telling the story of how their poem was created, the poets revealed aspects of the creation of the poem that are linked to knowledge and past experiences that are not otherwise visible to others (see The Poet’s Narrative and Questions to Elicit a Narrative in Appendix B). Their accounts present the poet’s perspective, highlighting the process of creating a poem according to how the poet views the discipline, and will necessarily be infused with the poet’s artistic values. The poets’ narratives gave glimpses into the poets’ initial sources of inspiration as well as what the poets’ motivations were for creating a particular poem. Asking the poets to describe their creative process and the important aspects of their poems was a way to gain additional perspectives to help address the validity threat of researcher bias that was introduced by my own interpretation of the writing process and poems (e.g., Maxwell, 1996).

Since poetry is a discipline with such little monetary reward (an incredibly small percentage of poets who are regularly published are able to make a living with their poetry), the question of what the poet stands to gain from the experience of writing is certainly not trivial. Poets’ reasons for writing poetry is another complex topic that cannot be examined fully in the current study, but whatever cognitive, emotional or spiritual understanding or release that they believe they gain from writing a single poem may be indicative of some of the benefits that poets perceive as coming from their practice of writing. Therefore, I asked participants to recount the story of how their poem was created upon completion of their poem. Recognizing that the experience of creating poetry varies from poem to poem within the same individual, the poets’ narratives were
followed by qualitative interviewing not only about the significance of the poem that was just created, but also of the poet’s more general sense of how sustaining a writing practice might influence his or her meaning making (see Appendix B for interview questions).

Additionally, I conducted follow up interviews by phone a few months after the writing sessions, after I had transcribed the writing sessions and initial interviews. This data collection strategy enabled me to perform individual member checks on interpretations I was making of each participant’s data, and also allowed me to ask the poets to weigh in with their own experiences on topics that were covered by others but that they themselves hadn’t brought up during their session or interview. (For details, see the interview guide in Appendix E).

**Capturing Ephemeral and Seemingly Inconsequential Thoughts**

While important, poets’ stories of how their poem developed were likely to provide only part of the answer to what was going on during their process of creation. When one is using a well-practiced skill, the weaving together of previous knowledge with perceptions and judgments of the moment can be so seamless and/or commonplace that it is not registered consciously. Couple the invisibility of the ordinary with the common belief that creativity can’t be taught, and many poets claim that a certain poem wrote itself, or that it came not from them, but wholly from inspiration (e.g., Perkins, 1981). However, previous studies have found that even though poets often claim that they are not able to say how a poem was written, their behavior when writing a poem is necessarily craft-like, involving many specific decisions that reveal their knowledge of the genre (Perkins, 1981). In fact, there is a “tendency for people to forget goals and
subgoals once they have been accomplished,” which is known as the Zeigarnik effect, as described by Hayes and Flower (1983, p. 215). If poets exhibit craft-like behavior when they engage in the task of completing a line of poetry as in Perkins’ study, but do not usually report the reasoning that accompanies their decisions, perhaps it is due to the Zeignarnik effect. Such information as why one word was chosen over another option is no longer necessary for the task at hand once the decision has been made, and furthermore, releasing the decision from conscious attention then allows one to refocus on the next subgoal related to the larger goal of editing the poem. A more immediate means of gathering data is likely to reveal the fine grained texture of second-to-second decision making than using retrospective accounts.

Therefore, I asked poets to use a think aloud protocol while drafting and editing their work, a technique that has allowed previous investigations of poetry writing to capture the ephemeral, seemingly inconsequential thoughts of individuals as they compose, with surprisingly little disruption to the creative process (Perkins, 1981, 1977). Other researchers (Ericsson & Simon, 1980, p. 215) have also found that the act of thinking aloud need not interrupt the task at hand: “Verbalizing information is shown to affect cognitive processes only if the instructions require verbalization of information that would not otherwise be attended to.” Since the participants were asked to simply give voice to thoughts already occurring in their heads, this method of collecting data should have been relatively unobtrusive to the creative process.

To determine the extent to which the poets seemed to have been affected by using this protocol, as well as other ways in which participating in the study may have affected the poet’s experience of writing the poem, I asked a few interview questions regarding
the poet’s process and the poem that resulted from it in comparison to their other experiences and works of poetry. I created a vignette (similar to a profile, but shorter in length; Seidman, 1998) for each poet, which was comprised of their answers to these questions in order to give a thorough summary to address the question of how disruptive the think aloud protocol was, according to the perspective of each participant, along with any ways in which the participants indicated that their session poem was characteristic or uncharacteristic of their usual work. A detailed view of the questions I asked and the participant responses are given in the section on Validity.

The Paper Trail: Evidence in the Work Itself

A third source of data for the study was the poets’ writings. This includes both the final version of the poem as well as all drafts and edits that were made in the process of creating the poem. Fortunately, a natural record of the evolution of a poem exists in the drafts that are created and reworked, a veritable paper trail that leads to the end product of the poem itself. According to theories of distributed cognition (Salomon, 1993; for an account of writing through the compatible lens of cognitive integration, see Menary, 2007), we often perform physical, symbolic, or social acts to aid our mental processes. Even in the seemingly solitary act of writing a poem, one relies on physical (e.g., paper and pen or computers) and symbolic devices (written words, editing and proofreading marks) as aids to cognition. When writing a poem, these include the physical act of writing our thoughts down in order to take the burden of large amounts of information from our memory or to allow us to symbolically represent ideas in another way which makes them available to visual inspection and allows us to physically
rearrange them on the page. Therefore, according to the well established theory of
distributed cognition, the drafts of the poem constitute the poet’s thinking on paper—a
source of data that complements the think aloud protocol in tracing the development of
the poet’s ideas and intentions for the poem.

It is also important to recognize that, within the literary disciplines, many would
consider the final version of the poem to be the most authentic and important source of
data for such a study. The poem itself is considered a storehouse of information on the
insights and intentions (conscious or otherwise) that the poet has crystallized in his or her
work, and the way to make this knowledge visible is by directly inspecting the work. (In
Appendix F I briefly describe how a close reading of a literary work for the purposes of
aesthetic criticism is similar to qualitative methods.) Therefore, I have also done a close
reading of the drafts and final version of each poem with the objective of seeing how the
specific literary choices made by the poet relate to the spontaneous utterances captured
during the think aloud protocol and narrative accounts of the participants. The insights I
have gained through these various sources have been woven together in a description and
discussion of the writing process of each poet in the Findings to Sub Questions A and B.

**Data Analysis:**

Reducing large amounts of data into manageable units for analysis that address
the research questions is an important concern for completing qualitative research (e.g.,
Wolcott, 2001). As a practical means toward focusing the analyses sufficiently to be able
to answer Sub Questions A-C, I devised the following analytic questions (AQs) during
the planning stages of the study. The analytic questions are also labeled A-C, to indicate
which Sub Question each addresses. I have used the analytic questions to code for themes in the data, and created profiles and vignettes of relevant material for each participant, writing analytic memos to explore how these themes vary among the participants. I present the Analytic Questions here alongside the research questions they pertain to in order to show how the analysis was designed to directly align with the research questions.

**Main Research Question:** In what ways, if at all (and to what extent), has the process of writing a poem functioned as a process of inquiry for these poets?

**Sub Question A:** In what ways, if at all, does the process of writing a poem create new meanings or refine existing meanings in the poet’s mind, in contrast to simply expressing meanings that have already been crystallized?

**Analytic Question A1:** How, if at all, do the poet’s spontaneous utterances while composing and reviewing the poem suggest that he or she is actively seeking to gain knowledge or understanding (rather than expressing an idea or emotion that is already fixed)?

**Analytic Question A2:** How, if at all, do the poet’s spontaneous utterances during composing and reviewing the poem suggest that he or she has gained insight?

**Analytic Question A3:** What, if any, new understandings or emotions does the poet identify as having occurred during the process of composing the poem?
Sub Question B: In what ways, if at all, does the process of writing a poem involve challenging, unsettling, or making ambiguous meanings that had already been formed or settled upon in the poet’s mind?

Analytic Question B1: Which of the poet’s ideas or feelings have changed noticeably during the writing session?

Analytic Question B2: In what ways, if at all, has the poet reported that any of his or her ideas or feelings has changed or become unclear during the process of writing the poem?

Sub Question C: How do the poets perceive that sustaining a practice of writing poetry has impacted their meaning making in other areas of their lives? And in specific, do the poets perceive that their practice of writing poetry has developed a mindset or skill set that they have applied to other areas of their lives, and if so, in what ways has this occurred? In what ways do the poets’ perceptions reinforce, extend, or contrast with findings from the sample of writing sessions completed for this study?

Analytic Question C1: What do the poets report as being the benefits and drawbacks of sustaining their practice of writing poetry?

Analytic Question C2: How, if at all, do the poets perceive that their poetry knowledge and skills have been useful in other areas of their lives?

Analytic Question C3: In what ways do the poets’ characterizations of the poetry writing process align with findings from the poem writing sessions, and in what ways do they go beyond and/or directly conflict with these findings?
Given that I needed to combine data from different sources for each participant, I chose to use the above analytic questions to organize thematic coding of the various data sources. Once the data have been coded according to relevancy with the different analytic questions, I used these themes to create profiles and vignettes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 1998) for each participant. For example, using a different color to represent each analytic question, I highlighted text in each participant’s writing session and interviews that appeared to be relevant to addressing that analytic question. I then copied and pasted all highlighted material, along with relevant information to contextualize these key sections, for each sub group of AQS (A, B, and C) into a set of two profiles for each participant. (There was very little material pertaining to AQ B, so a single profile contained material relevant to the AQ groups A and B, and the other contained material for AQS C1, C2 and C3.)

**Analyzing the Profiles for Analytic Questions A and B**

The profiles for each participant were created by excerpting and collating the participant’s words from the various sources in order to obtain a fuller understanding of each participant’s experiences as they relate to the analytic questions. I used these sources, along with the participants’ drafts and final poems (and, when appropriate, any updates on how their poems continued to develop after their sessions) to write analytic memos and create a description and discussion of each poet’s experience. After I had fully described the various experiences of each poet, I created a table to summarize the most basic characteristics of how each poet’s session contributed to the findings (see
Findings to Sub Questions A and B for descriptions of each poet’s writing experience and the summary table).

**A Closer Look at the Analysis of Sub Questions A and B: Identifying Inquiry Regarding the Content of a Poem**

*Insight*

When a person comes to a new insight, how do we recognize this? We have so many different thoughts in the course of a single day, and a truly staggering amount over the course of our lifetimes. For the reason of quantity alone, it is difficult to distinguish which thoughts are new and which are really mostly a recurrence of a thought we’ve had before. If we rephrase a thought we’ve already had, how different do we have to make the words for the thought to seem new to us again? When looking through think aloud data that spans the specific time frame of a poet’s recorded writing session, it might help to describe the very ends of the spectrum: when an idea is decidedly not new, and when it clearly is.

If a poet were to say: the other day, I was thinking about how “[insert previous thought here]” and then actually writes down that statement verbatim and identifies it as a poem, most reasonable people would agree that the poet did not gain any new insight during that writing session. The idea may be an unconventional one to the reader, but if it has occurred before in the poet’s mind, it does not represent new insight to that poet. Similarly, if the wording of the poem does not represent a departure from an initial
thought in a way that is meaningful to the poet, we would say that the process of expressing that initial idea did not contribute to gaining insight, either.

On the other hand, if during the writing session or immediately afterward, a poet were to say that he or she was thinking something that he or she had never thought before, we would have to count such an occurrence as an instance where new insight was achieved for that poet. Intrinsic to our trust in the poet’s honesty regarding such a claim is a trust that the poet remembers his or her previous thoughts well enough to accurately conclude that the new thought is indeed new to him or her. In addition, I cannot find any compelling reason for the poet to not be candid, particularly considering that none of the poets knew of the researcher’s interest in the relationship between inquiry and the writing process until the poet was debriefed after all interviews had taken place.

One of the gray areas involves a thought that fits within the general scope of thoughts that have occurred to the poet before—for example, a thought that could readily be reduced to a proverb or other generalized observation that seems universal to many people. However, this particular observation seems new to the poet because it has been articulated in a way that highlights a given feature to yield an unexpected or unintended perspective, or to evoke different emotions in the poet than the more general or conventional representation does. Another way a well worn theme or topic might appear new to a person is if it is presented in a context that highlights novelty in some meaningful way because of an unusual juxtaposition of words or sounds, unusual imagery or an unexpected sequence of events. In such cases, it seems reasonable to conclude that unique insight of a more specific nature has occurred.
The Search for Insight

Would certain behaviors in searching for new ideas count as conducting inquiry, even if no identifiable new insight has been attained? After all, the search itself is the most distinguishing feature of inquiry, even though the search is often overshadowed once its prize has been found. For this reason, establishing that there has been a search for insight is even more important to identifying whether inquiry has taken place than showing that insight has been attained. What types of behaviors would one reasonably attribute to a search for meaning? Or, using constructivist language, what types of behaviors indicate that one is engaging in the act of making meaning? I coded the transcripts using the analytic questions I had developed in advance of collecting the data as a guide, but did not have a more specific set of criteria for identifying signs of inquiry. For this reason, I used the technique known as open coding the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which means I looked for any signs of inquiry that I could find, including emic cues that might emerge from the data as well as any type of behaviors or attitudes that appeared to align with thinking or problem solving strategies, or methods of scientific investigation with which I was familiar.

Does the act of brainstorming multiple ideas and then selecting one for further development count as inquiry? Would a deliberate strategy to piece together disparate ideas or images into a cohesive whole count as conducting inquiry? Does the abandonment of early ideas for those that have come later count as inquiry, as a search for better meaning? As the Findings to Sub Questions A and B Section will show, these are just a few types of thinking patterns that became evident in the data.
How Coding for the Search for Insight has Led to Additional Findings

The research questions were designed to investigate whether and how the poets conducted inquiry on the content of their poems, such as the subject matter, theme or emotions that were incorporated into the poem. In the course of taking a closer look at data I had coded as signifying that the poet was demonstrating a sense of unknowing or specific behaviors that indicated that the poet was searching for a new or better option, I discovered that not all of the examples I had highlighted applied to inquiry regarding the content of the poem. Some of the examples used the same types of processes of inquiry, but in the service of finding a better mode of expression.

I discovered that I needed to distinguish the more difficult to establish inquiry on content from the ubiquitous inquiry on expression. I found that it was important to show how they interact, and to give direct evidence that poets often do consciously use their poetry knowledge and skills to develop a suitable method of expression for the ideas of their poems (see the summary for the Findings to Sub Questions A and B). Therefore, I have made space to briefly comment on the phenomenon of inquiry on expression to directly address the assertion that poems are often completely written in the subconscious, or the claim that instruction on poetry is unnecessary because writing poetry is an innate skill. At various points in the writing session descriptions, as well as in the overall summary, I have given a few examples of inquiry on expression and discussed how it might interact with inquiry on content. However, my treatment of inquiry on expression is limited in this study, as it is more of an ancillary issue to me and I didn’t want to split the focus away from the more surprising level of inquiry that was being done on the content of the poems.
Analyzing the Profiles for Analytic Questions C1, C2, and C3

While I was careful to search for and acknowledge discrepant evidence and negative cases in the data whenever I made a claim (Maxwell, 1996), I had also designed AQs C1, C2 and C3 to help focus my efforts in dealing with likely sources of ambiguity in the data which should be dealt with explicitly to support the validity of the findings.

As mentioned above, I had assembled a profile for each participant from all of the material that was pertinent to any of the analytic questions that address Sub Question C. So, for example, I included any comments the participants made regarding ways in which the perceived connections between writing and thinking, and ways in which writing affected their meaning making (such as through ways they used their poetry to engage meaningfully with others or with their environments). In addition to spontaneous comments of these types made throughout the writing sessions and interviews (and in some follow up correspondence by email), I included all participant answers to key interview questions, such as the following:

- What are the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry for you?
- What are the drawbacks of sustaining a practice of writing poetry for you?
- Some poets have described writing poetry as personally beneficial or therapeutic. Has that ever been your experience?
- Have you ever found your understanding or emotion about the topic of one of your poems to change in any way through the process of writing the poem? Can you describe some of the times that this has happened?
- Are there any ways in which your poetry knowledge and skills have been useful in other areas of your life? Can you describe any times when this has happened?

Given the breadth of topics covered in the profile that covered all of the analytic questions for Sub Questions C1, C2, and C3 for each participant, these profiles were lengthy. Therefore, I divided each profile into three smaller profiles: one included remarks that either implicitly or explicitly explored the relationship between writing and
thinking (pertaining to AQ C3), one that listed the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry (including applications of poetry knowledge or skills to other areas of one’s life, pertaining to AQs C1 and C2), and a profile that listed the drawbacks of writing poetry (in support of finding negative cases, where a poet might have found his or her engagement with writing poetry to be detrimental in some way).

I then created analytic memos that combined data from all of the participants on a given topic (such as the topic of the relationship between writing and thinking), organizing the participants’ data according to themes and categories (such as the emic theme of how five of the poets perceive of their writing practices as a means to keep their minds alert and active, and the etic theme of how some of the poets perceive that they have gained insight through writing poetry, a category which was created in order to directly address the findings that were generated from observing the poets’ writing sessions). The Findings to Sub Question C section is organized according to the categories and themes of the analytic memos. There are some statements that the participants made that fit into more than one category, and in these cases the relevant data is primarily presented and discussed in one section, and cross-referenced in the other relevant section.
VALIDITY

Joseph Maxwell (1996) developed a typology of the different levels of abstractness at which a researcher engages with the data of his or her qualitative study. He argues that validity must be attended to at each level, from describing and interpreting the data, to the theoretical level of establishing trends in the data, to specifying the participant characteristics and delineating groups and/or circumstances to which the findings might be reasonably generalized. Below I explain how I have minimized threats to validity at the descriptive, interpretative, and theoretical levels. I describe the ways in which the participants represent larger communities in Appendix C and some of the ways in which the writing session is similar to real world writing situations in Appendix G.

Descriptive Validity

The voice recordings of the writing session and interviews, and the verbatim transcripts that were derived from them serve to ensure that the data accurately represent the participants’ responses. When quoting the participants, I have strived to preserve the exact words of the participants, and it is understood that the quotes represent oral discourse. Quoted statements therefore contain colloquialisms and such that the participants likely would not include in written discourse. In the interest of accuracy, I have preserved the informal nature of the participants’ speech. However, I note that some of my participants prefer to be known by their real names, and all of the participants care deeply about how their thoughts are presented. Therefore, I have occasionally made very slight edits to the quotes. The only cases in which I have made any changes to the participants’ words is to occasionally omit false starts to sentences and
some verbal placeholders, such as “um,” and “you know,” when these phrases do not appear to contribute to the meaning of the statement in any way. In this manner, I believe I have successfully balanced the need for accuracy with the considered and ethical treatment of the participants.

Furthermore, the use of a think aloud protocol allows access to thoughts as they transpired in the immediate context of their origin. Although data gathered by this means are limited to types of thoughts that can be articulated and number that can voiced without prolonging the writing process unduly, these glimpses into the poets’ thought processes would otherwise have remained unobservable and details would likely have been soon forgotten by the participants.

**Interpretive Validity**

I have addressed interpretive validity within the data collection methods by asking the participants to narrate the story of how their poem was created in their own words, before any interview questions are asked. This data collection strategy encourages the participants to make sense of their writing session on their own terms, before my own questions, particular to the specific interests of the study, have been posed. Another key way in which interpretive validity was addressed was by framing the interview questions in as open-ended a manner as possible. For example, many of the participants gave testimony of ways in which they believe writing poetry affects their meaning making in response to the questions: *Why do you write poetry? And what would you say has kept you writing poetry, over the years?* While asking specific questions became necessary in order to be able to answer specific research questions (such as *Have you ever found your*
understanding or emotion about the topic of one of your poems to change in any way through the process of writing the poem?), these questions had been placed later in the interview in order to make sure that as much of the interview as possible would garner participant responses that were independent and uninfluenced by the focus of such specific questions.

While analyzing and presenting the data, I examined my reflexivity along with the participant responses, and I have made every attempt to make issues of reflexivity apparent in the text of the findings. When relevant, I have reported the participant statements in the context of what questions they were responding to, and I have described when I have made interpretations during the course of the interview and performed member checks to clarify the participants’ statements and to confirm my interpretations. For a discussion that ties together the various ways in which I have demonstrated care in dealing with issues of reflexivity and reported on it throughout the thesis, see Appendix H.

Theoretical Validity

I have consistently searched for negative cases (such as Miriam’s apparent lack of inquiry on the content of her poem for the vast majority of her writing session, and the consistency of her reports that she does not believe that she engages in inquiry on the content of her poems), and when I have found them, I have described them as extensively as the data record would allow. I also have searched for discrepant data, and when I have found that participant accounts differ unexplainably from each other or from my expectations, I have revealed such occurrences in the findings, favoring a strategy of
presenting the findings in all of their complexity rather than oversimplifying them for clarity. One of the key ways of addressing theoretical validity is by ensuring that negative cases and discrepant data are examined (Maxwell, 1996).

I have thoroughly examined the data generated by all participants, even though some participants are quoted more often than others in the findings. There are a few reasons that contribute to what on the surface may appear to be an imbalance in the findings. Some participants gave very succinct answers to the interview questions and any subsequent follow up questions or questions of clarification. Another reason is that I am trying to characterize the phenomenon of the various ways in which poets do or do not engage in inquiry in a richly detailed manner, so I included as much evidence as was present in the data record both for and against such a phenomenon. Some of the poets had more opinions or anecdotes on the subject than others, but I have taken care to note the stance of each participant. Also, in the spirit of an exploratory study, my primary aim is to note the range of poet experiences in order to alert researchers to the possibilities of the types of findings future studies might encounter, rather than concentrate on the commonalities among participants.

Another way in which I have addressed theoretical validity in planning and conducting this study is through the formulation of the Sub Questions, which were designed to contribute a multifaceted perspective on the poets’ engagement or non-engagement in inquiry. Sub Questions A and B were designed to complement each other in focusing on opposite results of inquiry that might appear in the writing sessions, which can be broadly characterized as either creating or refining specific meanings, or challenging or making ambiguous meanings.
I designed Sub Questions C1, C2 and C3 to help focus my efforts in dealing with likely sources of ambiguity in the data which should be dealt with explicitly to support the validity of the findings. Specifically, by posing Sub Question C3, the question of what the participants’ perceptions were regarding whether they conducted inquiry through their writing processes, I had built a value for the participants’ perspectives and for an additional means of determining the extent and characteristics of inquiry, above and beyond whatever might occur in the writing sessions. By designing analytic questions and interview questions to address Sub Question C3, I had built mechanisms to directly investigate this question into the data collection and analysis stages of the study.

The Big Picture: The Overall Design of How the Methods Work Together

In an effort to give the participants full opportunity to interpret their own thought trajectories and artistic work, I asked each poet to tell the story of how his or her poem was created before asking specific interview questions about their process. I used qualitative analytic methods to examine the varied and rich sources of data: the poets’ accounts of the poem that was just created as well as their general observations about sustaining their practice of writing poetry, their utterances from the think aloud protocol, progressive edits in the drafts, and the final poem. I cross referenced the poets’ stories with the other sources of data collected, in order to see how their interpretations might be supported or questioned by their earlier utterances and editing choices. The drafts and final version of the poem as well as spontaneous utterances while the poem was being created should offer evidence that is somewhat less subject to the participants’ beliefs about creative process than his or her narratives and answers to interview questions.
Therefore, the combination of these sources offers a method of triangulation that should increase the validity of the findings of this study (Maxwell, 1996). For a discussion of how the current study addresses Steinar Kvale’s (1995, 1996) postmodern characterization of validity, see Appendix I.

**The Phenomenon of Interest: How is the poet’s thinking made visible?**

Trying to discern when a person is developing a new idea from when they’re attempting to express an idea that already exists for them is a difficult task, even when that person is constantly voicing what they’re thinking. Sometimes it is impossible, but I have found in these data that there are many times when one can make a reasonable conclusion that the poet has had a new idea during his or her writing session. My conclusions have often stemmed from taking a subtle cue and examining it within the immediate context of what had been voiced in the few seconds that preceded the statement of interest, as well as within the larger context of the sequence of comments the poet had made over the course of the writing session and during his or her interview.

There is plenty of room and motivation for a researcher to find what he or she expects to see in an exploratory study. Given that my focus is on attempting to identify and characterize an extremely subtle process of cognition, it becomes necessary for me to be as transparent as possible in my interpretation of the data, offering my conclusions with the evidence and its context in order to allow the reader to decide if my subtle distinctions are warranted by the data. Furthermore, to my knowledge, this is the first
research study to have poets write an entire poem using a think aloud protocol,\(^4\) so it is important to show the texture of the data to aid others in conceptualizing the possibilities for future study of this kind. Therefore, I have included a much more finely grained view of the relevant data in the findings than is customary. I have done so not to belabor the point, but to genuinely offer the reader a chance to examine my conclusions in light of the data they came from to enhance the face validity of the study.

**How representative of the poets’ usual writing processes and poetry are these data?**

As mentioned in the Methods chapter, in order to determine the extent to which the poets’ writing processes may have been affected by participating in the study, I asked a number of interview questions regarding the poets’ writing processes and resultant poems, both for the poem they composed during the writing session and from their various experiences of writing poetry apart from the study. The answers to these questions were included in the writing process vignette created for each participant (see Appendix G for the list of the interview questions on writing process). I analyzed these vignettes to determine in what ways the poets’ poems that were written for the study are characteristic of their usual work, and in what ways participating in the study might have affected their writing process or the poems they wrote.

Each of the poets testified that the poems they had written for the study fit into the larger collection of poems they have written, as well as into their lives more generally.

\(^4\) As mentioned in a previous chapter, pioneering studies have had non poets write a poem (Amabile, 1996; Perkins, 1977), or have had published poets complete missing phrases in existing poems (Perkins, 1981), but have not used a think aloud protocol in the more natural and holistic task of writing an entire draft of a poem on a topic of the poet’s choice.
Each of the poets could list occasions where they chose to write a poem on the spot, rather than waiting for inspiration to initiate the writing process (for descriptions of reasons and contexts for this type of writing in the real world, see Appendix G).

Therefore, this aspect of the poet writing sessions was not unfamiliar to any of the poets.

Elizabeth and Pearl reported that the think aloud protocol interfered with their need for an internal state of “silence” when they felt they needed to sit quietly in order to overcome an obstacle in finishing their poems. However, in the end, both poets created poems that they were satisfied with. A detailed description of these two poets’ characterization of how the requirement that they verbalize their thoughts impacted their writing sessions is included in Appendix G. The other five poets did not remark on the think aloud protocol as impeding the progress they made on their poems in any way.

Overall, the consensus was that the poets regarded the poems they wrote for the study as being characteristic of the tanka that they would usually write in terms of style and subject matter, as well as in terms of writing process, with the above caveat noted.
FINDINGS TO SUB QUESTIONS A & B

Introduction

In order to preserve the integrity of each unique session, I have decided to present the findings on a case by case basis, relating the story of how each poem was created, and how that experience ties in to Sub Questions A and B for each participant. The evidence that I use to support claims that the poet was engaging in inquiry came from the data that I had coded as pertinent to answering the analytic questions I had posed (see the section on analysis in the Methods chapter for details). The analytic questions are answered in the course of describing the writing sessions, narrative and interview responses for each poet. Brief summaries of how each poet’s session relates to Sub Questions A and B are constructed in terms of whichever analytic questions could be addressed by the data from that poet’s session. Not all analytic questions could be answered by each poet’s session, largely because Sub Questions A and B were designed to complement each other to account for two different types of inquiry that I anticipated might occur (also, as one might expect, it was rare for a poet to spontaneously claim to have gained insight during the writing process, which is the focus of Analytic Question A2; I have commented on such occurrences when they did happen, but they are a very minor source of evidence for these findings). The summary table at the end of the chapter offers an at-a-glance orientation to direct the reader to the poet sessions that offer pertinent answers to the various analytic questions. I will discuss how the data address Sub Question C in a following chapter.

It has been quite informative during the analysis to view the development of the poet’s imagery, theme, or attitude at different times during the course of the writing
session, and so I present to the reader a summary of each poet’s writing session from beginning to end, drawing upon data from the poet’s spontaneous utterances while writing the poem, the poet’s narrative, and the interview as necessary to paint as complete a picture as possible. While presenting this much data for each of the seven participants is a lengthy process, I find that it is crucial to show the manner in which each poet’s unique experience has had bearing on the findings for this study.

I present much detail to show the texture of the rich data that I have collected. Some of the signifiers of inquiry are obvious, such as when Pearl said “that’s an idea.” However, many more of the signifiers for inquiry are quite subtle, and the context of the utterance is of crucial importance for interpreting its significance toward whether inquiry was being performed. Additionally, at times, some of the poets switched into a mode where they were focused more on expressing an idea they had fixed upon earlier in the process, so it is important to characterize when the poets appeared to be searching for new material (such as ideas or images to represent ideas that had not yet been expressed) to include in their poems, and when they appeared to have fixed upon an idea and were searching for the best way to express it.

Furthermore, each poet had a unique experience in writing his or her poem, so I have included the findings and their context for each poet rather than choosing a few representative sessions to illustrate the tenor of the findings. Therefore, in the course of sketching the trajectory of each writing session from start to finish, I have included many details from each session in order to show the subtle cues of inquiry (or expression) in context.
Most of the description of the writing sessions focuses on the conscious thoughts and emotions of the poets, particularly as they are directly verbalized. On occasion, interesting connections can be made between the poets’ backgrounds and voiced concerns and the content of their poems. In order to offer as full a discussion of the data as possible, I comment on cases where it seems likely that the subconscious has had a key role in shaping the poem. These comments are of a speculative nature, and are meant to bring up promising questions that may point the way toward future studies. None of the commentary on possible subconscious influences given in this study is to be taken as a hard and fast claim, as the subconscious mind is outside the scope of this study. However, it seems appropriate to point out ideas or connections that the poets make that may not be fully attributed to conscious thought in an effort to demark the limits of what can be inferred from these data and to suggest likely alternative influences that may have had bearing on a particular element of a poem.

The understandings that the poets gained from writing the poems for this study were limited in scope; they are best characterized as small, specific insights rather than life-changing epiphanies. This is not surprising, given that the poets were put on the spot to think of something to write about and complete their poem while being observed. Most of the writing sessions lasted between twenty minutes and an hour. Also, the very short nature of the tanka form—five short lines—does not allow much room for a poet to elaborate, so the form itself encouraged specific imagery and limited the amount of material that could be included.

“Inquiry” is a very broad term, and it is helpful to orient the reader to different ways that I found the poets to engage in inquiry to make the findings more readily
comprehensible. I found that the poets engaged in two main kinds of inquiry: regarding the content of their poem, and regarding the expression of their poem. Inquiry on the content of the poem could often be further specified according to whether the poet was focused on issues related to the topic (subject matter) of the poem, the theme (prominent, unifying idea), or the emotions (either the poet’s own emotions or emotions that are evoked by the poem).

I identified instances where the poet appeared to be focused on optimally expressing an idea they had already conceived as inquiry on expression. These two major distinctions are important, as inquiry regarding the content of a poem has the potential to generate knowledge or understanding that belongs to non-literary disciplines (in addition to literary disciplines, if they are implicated in the content of the poem), while inquiry on expression appeared to be focused on bringing about knowledge within the more limited scope of semiotics, rhetoric, and literary studies.

While I have separated inquiry on the content of a poem from inquiry on expression in order to describe two important, yet different phenomena that I found in the data, it must also be stressed that these two categories are not always separable as an “either/or” type of option. Given that writing poetry is a creative pursuit, it is not surprising that a poet’s focus on the content of his or her poem may yield an insight that greatly enhances the expression of the poem, or that a poet’s focus on choosing just the right word to express an idea might lead the poet to have another, newer idea. In the summary at the end of the findings for Sub Questions A and B, I discuss the ways in which inquiry on expression has led to insight regarding the content of the poem. In the descriptions of the poets’ writing sessions I identify which type of inquiry is being
conducted whenever there is sufficient evidence from the data to make a distinction. Because even a constant stream of think aloud utterances cannot capture every possible intention or understanding that a poet has at that particular moment, there are instances when it is unclear whether the poet’s primary focus was on generating new insights on the content of the poem, or on finding a better mode of expression. I have attempted to clearly mark occasions where it is impossible to distinguish between the two types of inquiry (or where both are likely happening simultaneously), but the reader should assume that any description where the type of inquiry is not labeled has been left as such because there wasn’t enough evidence to distinguish between the two.

**Elaine’s Writing Session: Description and Discussion**

*Composing the First Draft*

Elaine began her writing session thinking about three images she had seen over the summer that had a common theme and that also had the potential to serve as inspiration for her visual artwork. She explained that when she writes poetry, “I usually start with an image.” She described elements of the scenes that had inspired her:

> All three [images] had to do with groups of people towards the end of the day, sitting somewhere—large groups of people, with varied colors of heads moving and talking, and nice light landing on these people’s heads…so I want to try to put that into some kind of verbal framework.

With this statement given at the very beginning of her session, Elaine had set a task for herself: to translate a scene she had found visually appealing into the “verbal framework” of a poem. Elaine had described scenes from her memory that appear to carry a tranquil,
positive mood. However, at this point in the process, Elaine’s description of what she wanted to capture in her poem was not particularly specific; there are many elements of the above scenes that could take the main focus of such a short poem. Additionally, she had not yet chosen which scene she wanted to use as her main source of inspiration from which to write the poem, so we can see that she was still in the formative process of choosing a focus for her poem.

Following that statement, Elaine quickly chose one of the three images to concentrate on (only one of her scenes included a river):

And so the first thing that occurs to me is that I have to somehow write down that; one of those images of heads turning and sunlight and the river behind…how will I manage to do something with this very ideal kind of image? Maybe compare it to the lousy world we live in, or what the world could be like. I think I would want to note those heads bobbing and turning and gesticulating and this gorgeous light on the glasses. How will I start?

After Elaine had picked a specific scene from her memory, she deliberately guided her development of the topic by asking herself how she would deal with “this very ideal kind of image” that she was about to describe. She answered her own question with a couple of possible themes that she could develop using this imagery. She then returned to determining which specific aspects she would select from her memory to create the scene in her poem. Elaine had been jotting down key phrases about the scenes that she had described, but she began to compose a draft of the poem when she asked herself “How will I start?” In the above statement, we can see that key aspects of Elaine’s progress toward developing an idea for her poem were consciously made.

Elaine drafted each of the first four lines as she thought of the new phrase, proceeding from the first line to the fourth without interruption: “Twilight along the river
/ Heads turning with glasses clicking / Shining in light / Where are they going.” She then repeated the fourth line, asking herself: “Where are they going? Where do I want them to go, and how do I bring in an idea of the world’s more perfect light?” She then wrote “World’s more perfect light” as the fifth line. Although she had written five lines, it is not clear whether Elaine considered what she had on paper at that point as a complete draft. I will interpret that she didn’t consider this to be a complete draft because she crossed out this section with a large “x”, but did not cross out any subsequent drafts of the poem in this manner. She also didn’t pause to evaluate how the poem held together, but instead continued concentrating on her description of the scene. She said: “So how can I describe those heads and the colors?”

Elaine continued writing, this time drafting the first two lines before pausing: “Heads tip to the right the left / Primary colors spin off the glasses.” She then said: “for the moment I haven’t got any real direction. We don’t know what’s happening or where we are. So I have the light from the Hudson.” When Elaine said “for the moment I haven’t got any real direction,” she was showing that she was working out her ideas as she thought of them. She used this observation to return to drafting the poem, writing each new line as she thought of it: “The Hudson provides the scintillation / Is this the perfect world / Only when we don’t think of the morning newspaper.” She had returned to using a theme she had suggested earlier by contrasting the idyllic image of people relaxing in beautiful light with a grittier acknowledgement of reality. She paused to evaluate what she had written: “Okay. Now, I think I’ve got some ideas there, but this isn’t going to be a poem yet. So (pause) oh, let me think it over.” By referring to the
need to “think it over,” Elaine was showing us the conscious nature of how she would engage in editing and revising the poem (see Table 1 for her first complete draft).

**Table 1: Elaine’s poem at two different stages.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>first complete draft</th>
<th>end of writing session &amp; at time of follow up interview*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heads tip to the right the left</td>
<td>strong sounds of jazz in the park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary colors spin off the glasses,</td>
<td>bodies sway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hudson provides the scintillation</td>
<td>as the mood connects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this the perfect world</td>
<td>all so upbeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only when we don’t think of the morning newspaper.</td>
<td>despite the morning news</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that Elaine didn’t make any changes to her poem after her writing session.

**Revising the Poem**

Elaine redrafted the description of the scene a couple of times and remarked: “I don’t know that I’m getting any place now. Let me see whether I can get at least one line that I’m happy with.” She continued rewording her description, focusing on “how do I get the idea of movement and light…[and] an idyllic way to end the day…Now how do I get all that? That’s my problem.” Elaine’s formulation of questions to guide her focus in developing the poem show that she was not only conscious of her thinking, but directing her efforts to include aspects of the scene that were important to her. When she noted “That’s my problem,” Elaine had identified to herself the key hurdle her writing would have to overcome at that point to create a poem that satisfied her. Later, in her narrative, Elaine explained: “I started off by thinking I was going to write about a group of people
sitting at a café in front of the Hudson River, but as I started getting into it, I realized that it was too complicated to express in five lines.”

Deciding that she had reached a dead end since she wouldn’t be able to incorporate all of her ideas into a five line poem, Elaine refocused her attention to her memory of one of the other scenes she had initially thought about. She said: “Let me try a different tack. Let’s see. There’s music in the air—the sound of music—let’s be simple: sounds of jazz in the park.” That phrase became the opening line for her poem.

She went on to draft and redraft the next two lines, with her goal to express the vivid colors people were dressed in, along with a sense of movement as the audience swayed to the music. At one point, she had decided to use “bodies swaying / colors rushing” as her second and third lines. She then noted, “there’s a kind of emotion too,” and began to work in the idea of emotions connecting the audience together. Elaine’s decision to incorporate her perception of the emotional connection of the audience after she had already spent time describing other aspects of the audience without reference to emotion shows that she hadn’t originally planned on highlighting this aspect of her experience. She then ended her draft with the lines: “Early evening’s invitation to life / Despite the morning news.” Although she had switched to describing a different memory, she tied the idyllic image of the jazz concert to the theme that she had initially considered for the scene of people having evening cocktails near the Hudson River.

Elaine continued to rework her description of the audience, with special attention to conveying the vivid colors that the people were wearing. She reworded the second and third lines of the poem several times, but was not satisfied with her description. At one point, she asked herself: “Do I want the colors? Maybe I’m going to have to forget
color.” She then returned to redrafting the lines, focusing only on the movement and emotion of the scene. Elaine decided to drop her pursuit of describing the vivid colors at this point in the writing process, even though the light and color within the scenes of her memory had been a focal point for imagery of the poem from the very beginning of her writing process. This change of focus showed that Elaine’s poem gained its focus as well as form as she worked on it and made conscious decisions on what to keep and what to leave out. Because Elaine was striving to describe positive emotions, it is reasonable to conclude that although she shifted from focusing on light and color to sound and emotion, her description of the scene still appears to be in service to the theme of contrasting an ideal scene with a harsher perspective on reality. Accordingly, it seems that Elaine’s search for appropriate sensory imagery of her poem may have represented a different type and/or scope of inquiry than the way in which she went about developing the theme of her poem. We might refer to the former as inquiry for optimal expression, and the latter as inquiry concerning the topic (subject matter) and theme (prominent, unifying idea) of the poem.

Elaine continued to tweak the wording of her poem, zeroing in on different lines at different times. She alternated her focus between reworking a given line and shifting back to the wider view of reading the whole draft from start to finish, presumably to acquire a sense of how it all worked together. At one point, she brushed up her closing lines, writing “our early evening is upbeat / despite the morning news.” She laughed and observed: “I can’t get rid of that idea, can I?” Now that Elaine’s poem was near the end of the writing process, as she made adjustments to the wording rather than changing the
focus of the poem, her efforts appeared to be fixed on expressing imagery and ideas that had formed in her mind earlier in the process.

**Elaine’s Testimony: Not “a nothing poem”**

Toward the end of her writing session, Elaine read through her draft, evaluating it using a new level of criteria that she had not previously addressed:

Strong sounds of jazz in the park / bodies sway / as the mood connects / the world is upbeat / despite the morning news. Yeah, that works. Okay, now let me see whether I’ve got anything here, or is this just a nothing poem?

The phrase “a nothing poem” sounded like an emic concept that held specific meaning for Elaine. Later, during the interview, I asked her what she had meant by “a nothing poem.” She answered:

A nothing poem is a kind of poem that you get so involved in because you’ve worked on it…you think you’re writing something, and you show it to somebody else and they say to you: “What do you mean by that?” (laughs) And that it has no particular meaning, maybe, or no particular oomph, or it’s not incisive, it doesn’t capture one’s imagination, and I know especially when I first started writing tanka, I wrote a lot of poems that now when I look back at them, I would say are “nothing poems.” But I thought at the time that I’d said something or that I had been either audacious or moving, but they weren’t.

Elaine’s elaboration of her term “nothing poem” illustrates how she believes a poem can fail: if it lacks meaning, imagination, or emotional impact. Without any prompting from me, Elaine continued on with regard to whether the poem she wrote for her session could be considered a “nothing poem:”

So when I was trying to write about people who were having drinks on the river, I had the feeling that that was using words. I was using words and trying to make them
into little phrases, but I really wasn’t into it with my own emotions, and that it was just like saying nothing. And I do believe that when I started doing this exercise…I was just conscious of myself and my emotions weren’t involved. And maybe they weren’t involved because I hadn’t really worked out the idea. I was only starting to work it out. But when I finally got to the jazz concert and started getting some of those things down, some emotion got into it.

In her explanation, Elaine showed how the poem she wrote during her session felt like a “nothing poem” until she started making meaning while writing the poem by allowing her emotions to get into the poem as she worked out an idea. Elaine has very clearly stated that she “worked out the idea” of her poem as she worked on it. In essence, she engaged in the process of inquiry in order to make her poem successful.

Although Elaine very clearly made a claim that she “worked out the idea” of her poem as she worked on it, particularly referring to the period in which “some emotion got into it,” there are a number of interpretations of her testimony that have various implications for the research findings. An important question revolves around whether the idea she was working out while she allowed her emotions to get involved was a refining of the theme she had come up with early in the writing process, or some other type of insight of which emotion was a key component. We can only speculate what precisely she referred to when she “worked out the idea” of her poem, other than that the idea she refers to in some way was aided by her allowing her emotions to get “involved” in her writing process and/or into the poem itself. One way to interpret her reflection is that allowing her emotions to get involved enhanced her understanding of the emotional impact that was inherent in her theme: she may have been referring to a more nuanced awareness of the emotional impact of her experience, which was highlighted in the poem by establishing a communal emotional high at the concert immediately before bringing it
to a low with the morning news. Another, more conservative interpretation would be that she spent some time reliving the emotions of the evening and that experience in itself held meaning for her—a sort of emotional resolution, given that she was re-experiencing the emotions of the jazz concert in the context of expressing a theme she had newly identified. In any case, Elaine reported that allowing her emotions to get involved aided the development of some central cognitive element—“the idea”—of her poem.

At the end of her writing session, Elaine remarked: “I didn’t get down what I really intended to, but this might be okay.” She then read through her draft again and made a final edit before deciding that the poem was complete (see Table 1). Elaine had made an observation that she had ended up writing about something other than what she had originally envisioned. Specifically, I would interpret her statement with regard to using imagery other than what she had originally envisioned; she hadn’t exactly chosen a topic at the very beginning of her session. This shows that the act of writing the poem ended up changing her thoughts from the focus on color and visual images to the sounds of music and the emotions that it brought out in the crowd. Her shift of focus appeared to indicate that Elaine was conducting inquiry with regard to the expression of her theme, once she had identified it. However, noting that a single ideal event cannot eclipse the bad news of the world for very long is an idea that also came to her while writing the poem, and represents insight gained from her inquiry on the theme of her poem.

When I asked Elaine whether she had “any thoughts or emotions that seemed particularly new” to her while she was “creating the poem or reading the completed version,” she didn’t identify anything as being out of the ordinary. She explained: “This is pretty typical of what I do. So I don’t think there is anything especially new.” I then
asked her if the last line of her poem was something that she thought of new, as she was writing the poem, or if it is an impression that she gets when she thinks about these types of experiences. She replied:

Oh, yeah...very early on, about my third try, I started talking about: this is all beautiful, if we don’t think about what’s in the morning’s paper...and I didn’t think of that in advance... it was only the image. I hadn’t then decided that I was going to put a hammer onto it.

With this statement, Elaine had confirmed that she developed the idea that became the theme of her poem as she composed it, and not before she started writing. Elaine’s inquiry was focused on how a specific memory fits into her world view, and the answer she came to was: even though the memory was important to her, it can be quickly eclipsed by her more critical view of the state of world affairs.

During her interview, Elaine read through the final version of her poem and noted her approval: “I have the feeling I said something. And so, I’m rather satisfied. I don’t know whether tomorrow I will be, but for today I am.” In her follow up interview, Elaine confirmed that she was still pleased with her poem and so had decided not to make any changes to it. Considering that Elaine started her writing session feeling like she was “saying nothing,” and then came up with a theme that she was able to develop in a way that carried the emotion not only of her ideal experience but of the more critical way that she views it now, it appears that she found a way use the writing process to obtain insight about a specific memory and then express it successfully in her poem.
Summary of the Bearing of Elaine’s Writing Session on Sub Questions A & B

The data from Elaine’s writing session and interview answer Sub Question B in the negative, as there were no clear instances where Elaine challenged, unsettled, or made ambiguous any meanings that had already been settled in her mind. Therefore, the remainder of this summary addresses Sub Question A: it will outline how Elaine’s meaning making developed, in contrast to expressing meanings that had already crystallized in her mind. In a nutshell, the insight that Elaine developed while working on the poem was: there are moments of human experience that can be completely characterized with beauty and harmonious interactions, “but on the other hand, it’s all not ideal.” The most prominent signs that this insight was new for her were: articulating this theme after asking herself a strategic question, and identifying the theme as an idea that came to her as she was working on the poem and not before.

Further evidence of inquiry in Elaine’s writing session is evident in her spontaneous utterances while composing the poem. The sequencing of Elaine’s spontaneous utterances while writing the poem showed how her intent for the poem shifted from focusing on the imagery of light and color to that of sound and emotion. Such a shift may be attributable to either a shift in focus or simply a shift in the vehicle that delivers the main theme. The distinction between the two is the difference in whether Elaine’s shift in imagery denotes inquiry on the topic (subject matter) of her poem, or inquiry on expression, which is conducted in the service of the poem and is limited in scope to the disciplinary knowledge and skills of poetry). Regardless of which type of inquiry this shift was in service to, it shows that Elaine was not simply transcribing an immediately formed poem onto paper, but was actively searching for
images that seemed appropriate to convey memories from scenes that left her with “a very nice feeling. I went away buoyed up.” Elaine’s remarks while composing the poem also show how she used strategic questions, such as “how will I manage to do something with this very ideal kind of image?” to guide the development of her poem. The context of this question shows that it was a genuine inquiry rather than a rhetorical device or known-answer question. Notably, answering this particular question led to the development of her theme, which she later acknowledged as a new idea that had occurred to her while working on the poem, and not beforehand.

Even though her idea for a theme developed relatively early in the process, Elaine felt like her efforts to express it were “just like saying nothing” as she worked on her draft, and she suggested that this may have been because she “hadn’t really worked out the idea.” She then implied that she was able to further work out her idea by focusing on the emotions she remembered from an outdoor jazz concert. It appears that she was able to fully develop the meaning of her poem by tapping into those emotions as she continued to revise her poem draft, because when she decided that her poem was complete she remarked: “I have the feeling I said something. And so, I’m rather satisfied.” These remarks show that Elaine had a sense that she gained emotional insight of some sort (possibly resolution, understanding, or catharsis) even after she had come up with the idea that became her theme. Elaine’s spontaneous utterances while writing and her description of how she believed her work had progressed over the course of her writing session strongly support a conclusion that she had gained emotional insight or resolution due to her efforts to write a good poem, in addition to the insight she had gained regarding her theme.
Miriam’s Writing Session: Description and Discussion

Composing the First Draft

While most of the poets appeared to come up with new observations or emotions in either subtle or obvious ways as they worked on their poems, one of the poets quickly fixed upon an idea for her poem, and the time spent honing the poem appeared to be devoted to expressing her original idea, rather than to generating new perspectives.

Miriam began her session by looking around the room for inspiration for her poem. She rejected a few ideas before she identified an object that she felt she could develop into a poem: “I can use that freesia that I bought yesterday, whose scent I love, I think it’s like the Garden of Eden.” She noted that she had already written a haiku centered on the scent of freesia, so she quickly decided to find a new focus for this poem:

Okay, I’m going to maybe write about (pause): sitting there on my little table I have some old plants, flowers—and that’s my little garden. My little garden in my one room apartment is in pots. And some of it is old and wilted, but I don’t like to dismiss it on account of its age or its vulnerability. So I hold onto the older things as well, even though they’re quite limp looking there. So maybe I’ll try that… I’ll start there and see if it takes me any place.

After writing a couple of lines, Miriam said: “I’m going to work on this idea but I don’t like my beginning. I’m trapping myself.” By making this statement, Miriam showed that her approach to finding the right wording to express her idea was a conscious effort. Specifically, by claiming she was “trapping” herself, she was using her knowledge or experience of engaging in the craft of writing poetry to determine that she needed to redraft the beginning lines in order to develop the rest of the poem in a satisfactory way. She did stay with the same overall idea that she had articulated at the beginning, but
rephrased her initial lines, and then added an ending to create the first draft of a complete poem: “I’ll try: the little garden (pause) of pots (pause) on my little table (pause) sniffing the new freesia (pause) preserving the wilted basil. It’s not very good but that’s sort of the idea....” During each pause above she wrote the line that she had just verbalized.

See Table 2 for three stages of the development of her poem.

**Table 2: Miriam’s poem at four different stages.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Draft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first complete draft</td>
<td>the little garden of pots on my little table sniffing the new freesia preserving the wilted basil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>end of writing session</td>
<td>on my little table my garden of pots i sniff the fragrant new and coddle the old my green life cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at time of follow up interview</td>
<td>in five small pots five plants from pert to droop watering my green doppelganger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one year after follow up interview*</td>
<td>on a low table in my living room a colorful garden in five pots i sniff the fragrant new and mollycoddle the old my green doppelganger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that when I contacted Miriam approximately a year after her follow up interview, she had made more changes. She explained that she wanted to “make the table and garden more visible by punching up the nouns.” Also note that the personal pronoun “I” is not capitalized in the drafts, per Miriam’s preference.*
Revising the Poem

Miriam repeated the first three lines of her draft a couple of times, and then rephrased the last two, deciding: “Now, I have to work this into a tanka now.” By using the word “work,” Miriam subtly acknowledged the conscious effort she would be putting into shaping her idea into a poem. She continued:

This idea I’m going to stay with, for want of a place to be, instead of searching around for a subject. I don’t mind doing it this way because I do have a feeling about that little garden. Now really, as I said, I like to start with a feeling or an observation. So I have both a feeling and an observation. And now to make it come alive for somebody else….

With this statement, Miriam acknowledged that she had gained adequate inspiration to write a poem, and that her idea was pretty fixed; she perceived that the task ahead of her was one of expression.

Miriam then continued to read the most recent draft of the poem aloud, redrafting different versions of the last two lines:

a little garden (pause) of pots on my little table. I sniff the new (pause) coddle the old (pause) and wilted. I need to say why it’s old. I think it will be my little garden life cycle. Life cycle, I have to work that in.

In this statement, Miriam was deliberate in her attempt to communicate why she has included old plants in her poem. Her solution was to emphasize that “the old” is worth being cared for as it is a (necessary) part of a larger process: a life cycle. Note also that a life cycle governs not only plants, but humans as well, so this may be Miriam’s first step toward broadening the focus of her poem from not only caring for her plants, but to eventually include a human focus, as well.
While reworking the poem, Miriam said: “On my little table (pause) a garden of life. No, I want to end with that. On my little table (pause) of—of greenery, I’ll say. I sniff a freesia.” In this statement, Miriam shows that she is purposeful in organizing the order in which the elements of the poem are presented, showing that, at this moment, she prefers starting with the phrase “on my little table,” and ending with the idea of “a garden of life.”

While Miriam worked on her poem in much the same way as the other poets, creating a first draft of the poem and changing different parts of it at different times, below I chronicle how the beginning, middle, and ending of her poem changed over the course of her session (and over various subsequent revisions that she emailed me), discussing each part of the poem separately to showcase how the different versions of her poem never seemed to stray from her original inspiration. The remainder of Miriam’s writing session offers the clearest example out of all seven poets participating in the study of what the poet’s subtle behaviors look like in the scenario where a poet’s focus is primarily devoted to the effort of expressing rather than originating the meaning of the poem. The discussion that follows incorporates additional testimony from the poet in order to gain a wider perspective on whether and when the poet may have gained insight during the process of writing this poem.

Miriam tinkered with the specific imagery used in her poem, changing the setting from “on my little table” to: “a garden of pots,” and, eventually, “in five small pots.” During her writing session, she even briefly considered a fictionalized setting: “maybe my backyard? No.” She rejected this idea, repeating her original phrase: “on my little table. I need the garden of pots there. Otherwise, the thought will get lost.” While we
will never know exactly how Miriam’s subconscious contributed to inspiring and shaping the poem, it is clear that her conscious mind also played an important role, such as by restricting the setting to a small area—her little table, which eventually became five small pots, rather than a backyard—because she was worried that “Otherwise, the thought will get lost.”

Miriam also considered different options for conveying youth and age, and how one might show acceptance and care for both. Early in her process, she used very specific imagery: “I sniff the new freesia / honor the wilted basil.” At one point, she briefly considered replacing the freesia with lavender. In her interview after the writing session, Miriam explained: “I didn’t know whether to use the freesia. A lot of people don’t know what freesia is. And they don’t know its scent. So I changed it to ‘the fragrant new,’ which covers a number of possibilities, so it kind of says the same thing, I believe.” According to her own testimony, Miriam’s decision to remove the word “freesia” from her poem was a conscious one based on how the reader might interpret the poem. In the course of experimenting with imagery to convey her attitude toward the aging plants, she changed “honor the wilted basil” to such images as “coddle the limp plants,” “and let stand the wilted,” and “still keep the limp leaves.” In subsequent revisions, she also changed the ways in which she contrasted the new and old plants, using phrases such as “radiant new to propped up,” and finally choosing “from pert to droop.” All of her choices reflected her central idea to show her acceptance of both the healthy and unhealthy parts of her garden.

Miriam also experimented with different endings for the poem, all of which explicitly broadened her theme from that of her garden plants to the greater cycle of life.
Her first drafts were more subtle in linking this scene to herself, but her imagery in progressive drafts made the connection between her garden and her own identity more explicit. During her writing session, she used such phrases as “my garden life cycle” and “my green life cycle.” In subsequent revisions, she made the connection to her own life more explicit by identifying the garden as “my green doppelganger” (see Table 2 for the final draft of her poem). It is unclear from her earlier statements whether Miriam had originally consciously intended to broaden the theme of her poem to go beyond her care for the plant world (such as “preserving the wilted basil” in her first draft), to the wider process of a life cycle, and eventually, to an explicitly human embodiment in the final draft. Miriam’s desire to express the care she has for the aging part of her identity may have been conscious from the beginning but not articulated aloud, or it may have been guided by her subconscious. Either way, the human connection is likely to bring a rich emotional quality that would help a poet to recognize a promising topic of inspiration.

While the specific imagery changed slightly over the course of revising the poem, Miriam’s initial intention for the poem was preserved. She never strayed from her purpose, which was to convey her acceptance and even caring for all the plants in her small garden despite their age or condition. She then showed explicitly that this image is a metaphor for accepting and caring for the various aspects of herself. When I asked Miriam to tell the story of how she created her poem, she reconfirmed the intentions she had related before drafting the poem:

I was looking for a theme, and found my little garden there on the table, and I’m often urged to throw out the old plants, but I like them. I mean, they’re part of life for me. But I keep replenishing the new ones, so it’s a combination of old and new, just like me, I suppose. It’s
autobiographical in a way. I keep the new—I sniff the new, and have a sentimental regard for the old.

Later, when I asked if there was a mood or an emotion that she was trying to capture, she replied: “I was trying to capture a thought, a mood, all of it at once, actually: the old and the new, and drawing pleasure from the scent of the new and honoring and respecting the old.” I then asked if there were any other possible directions that she considered taking the poem in, and she replied: “No, I did not. No.” It seems clear that—at least while writing this one poem—Miriam followed through with her initial inspiration, and did not explore developing the poem in ways that would challenge or change that inspiration.

Although the vast majority of Miriam’s spontaneous utterances and perceptions about her own writing process support the idea that, from the initial spark of inspiration onward, Miriam was working to express a fully formed idea, there are a few statements that she made that may illustrate that she was engaging in inquiry at a very subtle level as she worked on her poem. During her interview, I asked the same point-blank question that I asked all participants: “While you were creating the poem or reading the completed version, did you have any thoughts or emotions that seemed particularly new to you?” Miriam’s reply was not surprising: “No, I didn’t. I mean, I’ve been around a long time. There are very few new emotions for me. You know, I’m familiar with a lot of roadways.” I then asked if she had “written about this theme before—of coddling the old,” and she answered:

No. Not in that sense, not in so many words. I’ve written a couple of tanka on the subject of “old,” I just wrote one a few days ago: on trains and busses / the young / leap up / offering my age a seat / I am no longer me. So yes, I have touched on that idea before, but in a very different way. Always a different way.
This follow up answer suggested that perhaps she was speaking in very broad terms when she said that “very few emotions are new to me.” It can be argued that the focus on the poem about other people’s behaviors on busses and trains seems to be on how others perceive Miriam’s age rather than her true identity, while the focus on the poem she wrote for the study was on her own acceptance of her age, with no explicit reference to the perceptions of others. To me, it seems that while Miriam has written more than one poem in which she focuses on the aging aspects within her identity, the specific messages of the two poems she related are distinct; that she approached the topic of aging in “a very different way” than she had previously. At a different point in the interview, when I asked what made this poem unique to her, Miriam answered: “Well, I haven’t written it before (laughing). Sometimes a poem is an aspect of another poem, but I haven’t written this one before.” It is possible that while Miriam didn’t have any emotions or ideas that stood out as being new to her, she may have had new insights of a finer grain, such as during the few seconds of her initial moment of inspiration.

_Ambiguous Data_

Some of the data from Miriam’s session couldn’t clearly be placed in support of either an interpretation of engaging in inquiry or of expression. Here I include an example to give a sense of the complexity of some of the data. In the interview, I related to Miriam that I noticed that, while drafting the poem, she had said the word “coddle” a couple of times, and then changed the word to “let stand the limp and old.” Then she went back to using the phrase “coddle the old.” I asked her why she used this wording. She replied:
Because I didn’t think that “let stand” or “keep” gave the same meaning to it. “Coddle” meant I really cared for it, to my mind. I really took care of it. I care for it. I maybe flicked off one dead leaf, but I left the dying plant. So, yes, I kept “coddled.”

As she explored these more nuanced decisions of how strongly she should show her acceptance and care of the old, it is not clear whether Miriam was testing what she herself believed about the level of acceptance and care she has for the old; a subtle act of inquiry—or how intensely her level of care was communicated to the reader; an issue of expression.

_Miriam’s Testimony: Her “sort of revelatory” Experience_

The clearest evidence that Miriam may have gained new insight from the act of writing her poem during the session came as a surprise while she was answering a different set of questions. I was asking a series of questions to determine whether the poem she wrote for the session was characteristic of the poems she normally writes, and her responses were very informative. They revealed her perceptions of her usual writing processes, and also indicated that she believes she gained some type of insight while writing her poem for the study.

I asked Miriam how her experience of writing this poem compares to others that she has written. She answered:

It’s a little different, because I started with a commission. Sometimes we do, we go to the magazines on the Internet and they give you a word [in some cases to be used in the poem, and in others to define a theme that should appear in the poem], and I don’t care for doing that so much, but I do do it. And (slight pause) it doesn’t start from inside, it starts from outside.
Miriam was relating her belief that the experience of writing a poem differs whether the source of inspiration comes spontaneously (“from inside”) or from a purposeful search for something to write a poem about (when “it starts from the outside”). Since she implied a preference for writing poetry when it comes from spontaneous inspiration, I asked her what her experience of writing a poem was when it starts from the inside. She answered:

It’s more intimate, I believe. It’s more revelatory (slight pause), although this, curiously enough, became sort of revelatory to me.

This was the only time during her interview that Miriam indicated that, at times, she has gained new insight while writing a poem, but she had stated it in unequivocal terms. Miriam didn’t elaborate on how the process of writing became “sort of revelatory” during her session, so it seems that her claim is due to a sense that she had gained insight from the experience, rather than being able to point to a specific thought or understanding that was new to her.

Miriam then went on to explain how sometimes the process can become revelatory, even in the cases when the process “starts from outside.” It appears that the speed with which an idea for a poem comes to her is a large factor in determining the quality of her poem.

… But (slight pause) sometimes I’m very surprised, though, being given a word from the outside. There’s something on the Internet, one of those monthly [invitations to] write a haiku…and they give you a word each month, and I stay with it because I like to keep it alive. I don’t like to work that way, so if nothing comes to me in the first few seconds, I don’t do it. If something comes, I add it; I submit it. And something came, and which to my surprise, it got the first prize…. It came
exactly the way I’m explaining it to you—quickly. Sometimes when it comes quickly it’s better.

Miriam’s explanation for the importance of inspiration coming quickly for her has led me to conclude that it is possible that perhaps any inquiry that she was performing in the poem for this study happened in the first few seconds, when she fixed upon the specific idea that she wanted to write about.

Once she had articulated the importance to her of whether she can quickly come up with an idea to write about, I thought it would be helpful to know how she would describe the case of her writing session, using those terms. I asked whether she would characterize her idea of what to write about as coming quickly or slowly in the case of her writing session, and she answered:

Reasonably quickly, yes. I didn’t have to search and take up and discard, I just fixed on that image as the only possibility. I mean, I quickly arrived at that because I didn’t see anything else.

It appeared to me that Miriam was limiting her discussion of the difference between the writing process starting from within and without in terms of whether she came up with an idea to write about in the first few seconds or not. I wondered if there were any other differences that she had perceived between her experience of the writing process during her writing session and at other times. The question and answer exchange between us went as follows:

BD: From that point [of your writing session when you had an idea of what to write about] onward, how might this be similar to or different from your other experiences, that might have started from within?

Miriam: You know, now that I’m looking at it, maybe not all that different. Because I didn’t choose the couch, or the figures, or the pillows, or whatever it is, I chose that. In a
way, so that, I suppose, can be thought of as coming from within. So maybe it’s more similar than I thought, actually. There are a lot of things within that are just lying dormant there until somebody says the right word, or I see something, or smell something or touch something. So maybe they’re in the same place for all I know. That’s interesting to me.

In her response, Miriam confirmed that once the inspiration for the poem has been found, her process of writing the poem is the same, whether she “started with a commission” or not. She implied that no matter what initially sparks the inspiration for a poem, she believes that it comes from “within,” where it (along with many other potential poem topics) is “lying dormant.” It appears that, for Miriam, the subconscious is a wellspring for poems, regardless of how the writing process is initiated. Given that she had made the above remarks in reference to the poem she had written for the study when she explained how she “didn’t choose the couch, or the [pottery] figures…I chose that,” it is reasonable to infer that Miriam was also referring to how her theme of caring for the old parts of herself in the way that she cares for her plants was “just lying dormant there until…I see something or smell something,” such as when she noticed the freesia on her table and began to think of how she might incorporate her potted plants into a poem. Because she referred to the idea of her poem as “lying dormant” until she started working on her poem, we can conclude that the “sort of revelatory” experience she reported having while working on the poem likely refers to insight she gained about how caring for her various plants mirrors how she cares for the different aspects of herself.
Summary of the Bearing of Miriam’s Writing Session on Sub Questions A & B

None of the data from Miriam’s writing session appeared to be relevant to answering Sub Question B, so the following discussion is with regard to Sub Question A. While the bulk of Miriam’s writing session appears to have been devoted toward an effort to express an idea that had crystallized very early in her writing process rather than to seek out new ideas or images, there is evidence that suggests that Miriam’s writing session led her to gain insight on the topic of her poem. Miriam directly expressed her surprise that her writing session “became sort of revelatory” to her. Additionally, she testified that she had not written on the specific theme of her poem before. It appears that Miriam’s insight may have developed very quickly, soon after she spotted her potted freesia plant on the table. She immediately dismissed writing a poem centered only on the scent of the freesia (because she had already written such a poem), but then rapidly incorporated the imagery of some of the other plants nearby, which were important to her despite their less vibrant condition. Such an interpretation of the data is supported by Miriam’s testimony that her idea of what to write about developed “reasonably quickly.”

While Miriam may have gained insight about the ways in which she cares for the aging part of her identity in the same way that she cares for her plants during her writing session, we cannot say for absolute certain that this idea was new to her; only that she hadn’t written about it before, and that some aspect of her poem was “lying dormant” until she observed her table of plants while she was searching for a topic to write about. Although Miriam did not identify a specific insight that she had gained while writing this poem, she very likely engaged in meaning making of some sort, as she claimed that the process of writing this poem “became sort of revelatory” for her.
Sam’s Writing Session: Description and Discussion

Composing the First Draft

Sam brought along a book of haiku in English translation from Japanese Master Poet Buson to provide a starting point for finding inspiration for his own poem. He leafed through the book, quickly skipping over poems containing the very common imagery of cherry blossoms, which he deemed to be “a little too prosaic,” and read aloud the following haiku: “A flying kite as in the sky yesterday is still up there.” His immediate reaction to this poem was:

Kite…hmm… I like kites. Maybe I can do something with kite (while writing and underlining “kite”). I like things that fly, kind of because they can capture the ideas of the spirit; (slight pause) the idea of people trying to go beyond themselves or soar or overcome whatever is holding them down or holding them back. Kites also, like people, have a life experience: they get caught in trees, they crash to earth, they cut loose and break away from people. Maybe some of these ideas could work for a tanka or a poem or a haiku or a senryu. So I’m going to dabble with kite as an image or metaphor for a poem.

Sam came upon the first image he would use in his poem by spotting a poem that reminded him of an object that he likes. He thought of many ways in which the image of a kite has resonance for him. Sam used his knowledge of how kites are used to think of a number of rich possibilities of what kites can symbolize, including a number of ways in which kite imagery could be used to represent human triumphs (“the idea of people trying to…soar or overcome whatever is holding them down”) as well as failures (“like people…they get caught in trees, they crash to earth…”). The manner in which Sam went about posing a number of possible paths along which he could develop his newly
chosen image before experimenting with any of the choices is a behavior that is consistent with an interpretation that his writing session began with a focus on finding a suitable topic for exploration rather than expressing an idea that had already crystallized for him.

Having decided that there were some interesting possibilities that he could take the image of a kite in, he considered a couple of colors for the kite, and then said:

Well, right now I’m not going to focus too much on the color of the kite, but I can come back to that...but this kite, it’s going to do something. And I might need to write a little bit. With a little quiet as I—sometimes when I write I think, so— (writing as he says the words) the kite is (slight pause) floating on a wave.

In his own words and in a completely spontaneous manner, Sam had explicitly claimed that thinking and writing sometimes go hand in hand for him. Given the context of his claim, it seems that he is referring to thinking of what to write about, since he had not yet fixed upon a setting or action for the kite, but began to draft possibilities immediately following this statement. Sam had deliberately decided that his kite would “do something,” and then assigned it the action of “floating on a wave.” While we don’t know what role Sam’s subconscious may have played in choosing the action of his kite, we do know that he had consciously guided the development of his poem by determining that an action for the kite was more important than its color, at least at this early point in the writing process.

After repeating parts of his initial phrase “the kite is floating on a wave” a few times, Sam then brought more specific detail to his image:

(slowly, while writing the phrase) a giant wave brings in a kite—brings in a blue kite, red kite, damaged kite, broken kite. The giant wave brings in a broken kite. Brings in a—
an image of a horseshoe crab with a tail—kites have a tail, horseshoe crabs have a tail. Hmm. A giant wave brings a broken kite to the sand. (writing)

First a giant wave, and then the image of a horseshoe crab accompanied his initial image of a kite. In his immediate utterances, we do not know where these images have come from with the exception of possibly a mirroring of the kite’s tail in the horseshoe crab’s physique. About forty minutes later, Sam explained in his interview that he greatly admires a famous Japanese painting of a giant wave with Mt. Fuji in the background, and he has included images of horseshoe crabs and beach settings in other poems. So we don’t know how his subconscious may have been involved in choosing the images he chose for this poem, only that he wasn’t consciously thinking of them until he voiced them at this point in the session. The way in which Sam generated many possibilities for his poem in these few sentences (different qualities of the kite as well as identifying another object) shows that he was generating ideas that might be included in his poem, rather than expressing an existing notion of what types of images he wanted the poem to contain. Generating multiple ideas and then selecting one or more for further development is an activity that is often performed in the course of inquiry. It is difficult to tell whether Sam’s inquiry on the kite constitutes inquiry on the content of his poem or inquiry on expression. On one hand, Sam’s characterization of the kite may not have been fixed yet in his mind, as can be inferred from his wide ranging search for descriptors: two colors, red, which often connotes an active presence such as passion or struggle, contrasted with blue, a color which often implies a more subdued presence and sadness. These two colors were considered alongside adjectives that set a much darker mood: damaged and broken. It is possible that Sam was generating different adjectives
because he had not yet decided whether his kite would be a passionate struggler or more of a victim to its circumstances and condition. On the other hand, one could argue that the mere fact that the kite was arriving on a wave rather than flying in the sky suggests that Sam had already decided on the emotional quality of the scene and the role that the kite would play in creating that mood, and at this stage of the process he was working on narrowing down to a single detail to enable the reader to visualize the kite.

Sam then further worked with the horseshoe crab image, which resulted in forming his first complete draft of the poem (see also Table 3):

A horseshoe crab (pause) —Now what is that horseshoe crab doing? (pause)—floats on its back. Floats—floats alone. Well, I guess when you float you always float alone (laughing). Well, float—but the sound—I like the sound of float, the “o” sound. A giant wave brings a broken kite to the sands. A horseshoe crab floats alone (slight pause) in a pool of water.

By asking himself what the horseshoe crab was doing, Sam further demonstrated that he was creating the poem as he voiced his thoughts aloud, rather than writing down a poem that he had composed instantaneously at the onset of the session. By this point in the session, there were two additional types of evidence that showed that Sam was actively and purposefully thinking about how to develop the poem. First, there was a steady accumulation of images over time: the kite, and then the wave, followed by the horseshoe crab, and then the action and location of the horseshoe crab. Sam explicitly pondered the connection of some of the images to the preceding ones before incorporating them into the poem, such as the fact that both kites and horseshoe crabs have tails, and that he liked the assonance of the phrase “floats alone.” He also made explicit talk regarding decisions he was making, such as when he said: “Now what is that horseshoe crab doing?”
asking directed questions such as these Sam showed that he was not only aware of how new material came into his poem, but that he was deliberately orchestrating the process of determining the actions of the images to further develop the scene he was creating.

**Table 3: Sam’s poem at two different stages.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First complete draft</th>
<th>a giant wave brings a broken kite to the sands a horseshoe crab floats alone in a pool of water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End of writing session, at time of follow up interview, &amp; extended follow up*</td>
<td>a giant wave brings a broken kite to the shore an upside down horse shoe crab floats in a pool of water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that Sam did not make any changes to his poem after his writing session.

**Revising the Poem**

Once he had written his first draft, Sam repeated the newest phrases he had added, and then read the whole draft as a piece:

…Giant wave brings a broken kite to the sands. A horseshoe crab floats alone in a pool of water. I kind of see, almost, the kite and the horseshoe crab meeting. Now, is the horseshoe crab floating on its back?

Sam had described his vision of how the kite and horseshoe crab relate to each other in the scene. He then began to consider specifying a much more difficult position for the horseshoe crab to be in compared to floating in an upright position, considering how the heavy armor restricts its movement. With this statement, Sam had continued in asking
himself genuine questions about the action or condition of one of his images in order to further develop the bleakness of his scene.

Sam then tinkered with the wording, making small adjustments and testing them by repeating the new phrases. He continued:

Hmm, horseshoe crab floats on its back in a pool of water. I kind of like the idea…floating on its back—kind of a little bit out of its element and the kite is kind of out of its element, and they’re kind of meeting on the sand, in a pool of water.

In the above statement, Sam showed that the awkwardness of the scene he was creating was made by conscious choice rather than by influences that he might be unaware of, such as forgotten memories or chance associations. At this point, the poem read: A giant wave / brings a broken kite / to the shore / a horseshoe crab floats on its back / in a pool of water.

Sam indicated that the poem was complete, but then, upon reading it through once, read it again at a faster pace, eliminating the phrase “on its back.” He asked himself: “I wonder if I need on its back? It’s a little cumbersome.” He then continued tinkering with the wording of the fourth line, gave a slight pause and then said:

Do horseshoe crabs really float? Well, they kind of swim. But if—no, they’re kind of heavy (laughing). (pause) A horseshoe crab—an upside down horseshoe crab. Hmm. I have an idea, maybe I might change this. An upside down horseshoe crab… spins in the water…struggles in a pool of water… something in the water. (slight pause) I picture—I’m picturing the image of a horseshoe crab upside down, trying to right itself up. (pause) struggles in the water. (long pause)—s—hmm. It does something in the water. Maybe (slight pause) upside down horseshoe crab (slight pause) settles in a pool of water. (slight pause)

Moves—moves—I need something to give the idea of struggling, with movement in a pool of water. An upside
down horseshoe crab (slight pause)—moves in a pool of water…settles. All right, it’s not as optimistic. Settles in a pool of water. [Sam reads through the first two lines, tapping at the sound of each syllable and writes the syllable count for each of these lines. He reads the whole poem through and then pauses for 5 seconds.] Hmm. Settles in a pool of water. Just the one word—I’m not sure if I want this crab to settle, or to do something else.

In the above statement, Sam showed that he was very consciously considering the actions and predicament of the horseshoe crab. He began making changes with the statement: “I have an idea, maybe I might change this,” which is a clear indicator that not only was Sam consciously making decisions that would affect the development of his poem, but he was indicating that he would change an aspect he had already included. By initiating changes in his poem even after he had created a complete draft, Sam showed an active involvement in shaping his ideas, rather than in communicating an idea that existed in a fixed form in his mind. He even voiced his reasons for rejecting some of his ideas: he decided that horseshoe crabs swim rather than float, so he began to think of possible actions to replace the word “floats,” contrasting some vigorous movements such as “spins” and “struggles” with the more passive action of “settles.” He noted that the word “settles” is “not as optimistic” as the other options (such as “moves”), and voiced his indecision with choosing that action. Sam’s ability to make his thinking very transparent about how he went about deciding the horseshoe crab’s actions shows that he was consciously developing his ideas regarding this aspect of his poem.

Sam then read through the poem again, commented that he liked the rhythm of the last two lines, which included the phrase “settles in a pool of water.” He read the poem through once more:
a giant wave
brings a broken kite
to the shore
an upside down horseshoe crab
settles in a pool of water

At this point he decided it was finished, and wrote a clean copy of the poem (without edit marks) for me at my request. When he finished writing, he said: “On second thought (laughing)...part of me is still not a hundred percent sure on ‘settles’ in a pool of water.” After reciting the poem in its current form again, Sam tried replacing the word “settles” with “floats.” He paused briefly, asking himself: “Would it float?” He then read the poem through with this new change a couple of times, and then decided that the poem was finished, with the fifth line reading: “floats in a pool of water.” Sam did not make any changes to the poem subsequent to that day, so this version may also be considered the “final” version of this poem (see Table 3).

Once Sam had provided me with a copy of his new poem, I immediately began to interview him about his experience of writing this poem. First, I asked him to tell me the story of how he created this poem. He answered that he got the initial idea of using a kite as an image from Buson’s haiku in translation, and then started thinking about possible colors for the kite. He continued describing his thoughts, showing how he anthropomorphized the kite in his mind:

I was picturing moods of the kite or different things of the kite. And then thinking of a kite, comparing it to a person—an extension. A kite is sort of like a pet. It’s an extension of a person, to a degree. A kite is kind of like a pet. It’s on a leash, you control it, it has a mind of its own a little bit, kind of does what it wants, and it can break away and become free, and then what happens, you know, it can end up on the beach—the kite ended up on the ocean, then it’s on a wave. And the wave...can damage the kite a little bit. It’s generally not as sturdy after being battered by
some waves. And the waves can bring it to the sands. And—it’s still a kite. It’s on the sand and who knows, maybe it’s reparable, or fixable or usable…. So I pictured the image of this floating kite that had this sort of life cycle and ended up back on the sand.

With this description, Sam showed that he had created an entire narrative involving the kite, and it was the end of the narrative that Sam had chosen to include in his poem. Sam had used his imagination to create a fictionalized account of what could happen to a kite, and by his ability to recount the sequence of events that this kite went through in his mind before he touched upon the image that he used in his poem shows that Sam was aware of the way in which he created the initial scenario on which his poem was based. We do not know how his subconscious may have contributed as a means of shaping his narrative, but we do know that Sam was able to give a detailed account of the chain of ideas that led to his first image.

In his narrative, Sam also explained his decision making regarding the horseshoe crab’s actions:

Then, this horseshoe crab—I guess initially I was picturing it floating alone, in a pool of water. Then, I don’t know—it just sounded a little dreary to me, so I tried other ideas. Well, on its back, it’s not in the best of shape either, but it sounded wordy, so I wanted to make it more concise…. And then I still worked with the idea “floats in a pool of water.” I guess the floating in a pool of water could convey on one level, a sort of helplessness, but on the other level, the word float can also convey the idea of just going with the flow. So I wanted a little ambiguity, although the image of an upside down horseshoe crab floating in a pool of water—I guess there’s a little tension whether it’s going to right itself up, and swim away. And I guess the image of these two creatures, if you will, the kite and the horseshoe crab meeting…struggling creatures meeting on the shore. And…some of the contrast is a kite is more of a pretty, fancy, or engaging object. The horseshoe crab’s engaging too, but it’s not as pretty, although it can be; you know,
beauty’s in the eye of the beholder. I find it a fascinating thing, but if it’s on its back, you’re seeing its less pretty side.…

Sam showed that he was aiming for “ambiguity” by choosing to have the horseshoe crab float, and remarked on how he had created “tension” in the scene at one point by placing the horseshoe crab on its back. Sam also showed that his sense of aesthetics entered his decision making with regard to the crab’s actions when he said that the phrase “on its back…sounded wordy.” In his narrative Sam had further explained how his desire to create tension in the content of the poem, as well as how he aimed for a more concise style, had shaped some of the decisions he made in writing his poem.

In addition to the explanation Sam gave in his narrative, there was another way in which his aesthetic sense appeared to shape the content of his poem with regard to the horseshoe crab’s actions. Sam’s attention to the rhythm of the line containing the horseshoe crab became apparent through his spontaneous remarks during his writing session. At various times he read through the line “an upside down horseshoe crab” in a way that rhythmically emphasized the stressed and unstressed syllables by shortening the unstressed syllables and elongating the stressed syllables. After reading through the line in a rhythmic manner while tapping his pen at the sound of each syllable, Sam remarked that he liked that line, explaining: “I like the poem to have sort of a rhythm or singability, if possible.”

After Sam finished telling his narrative about how his poem came into being, I asked him some more specific questions about the poem he had just written. One of the questions I asked him was if there was a mood or emotion that he was trying to capture. He answered:
Well I guess—just, you know, dealing with some family issues—challenges with the family, and (slight pause) I don’t necessarily think I’m a broken kite, but (slight pause) I would like to maybe be floating, or higher in the sky. But anyway, I guess I’m conveying some of the angst of today in my tanka.

With this response, we can see that Sam is aware of how the mood of how his day had gone was captured in the bleak scenario that he had painted in his poem. Moreover, since this statement was made in reply to the question if there was a mood or emotion that he “trying to capture” in his poem, Sam’s answer in the affirmative shows he had consciously associated himself with the kite, to a degree.

At another point in the interview, I mentioned to Sam that I noticed that he had said the word “settles” a few times while writing the poem, and asked him what made him decide not to use that word. He answered:

> It almost had the idea that the crab was giving up. And whatever struggles I have, I’m not giving up. So my horseshoe crab is not going to give up either. He might float, he might chill out for a little while or do whatever, but (slight pause) he’s not going to settle—I almost thought of it as kind of (slight pause) giving up. And I didn’t want the crab to give up. Damn it! (laughing) The crab is not going to just become bird food like that.

In this testimony, Sam showed that he had also identified himself with the horseshoe crab, and that was a primary reason why he chose not to allow the horseshoe crab to give up and suffer a horrible fate.

**Summary of the Bearing of Sam’s Writing Session on Sub Questions A & B**

The writing process that Sam engaged in clearly addressed Sub Question B in one key manner. Sam indicated that the issue of whether or not to allow the horseshoe crab to
settle was of particular importance to him. In the end, he chose an ending for the poem that leaves the reader unsure as to the fate of the horseshoe crab. Remember that Sub Question B asks: “In what ways, if at all, does the process of writing a poem involve challenging, unsettling, or making ambiguous meanings that had already been formed or settled upon in the poet’s mind?” Keep in mind that none of the participants knew the focus on inquiry for the study, much less the specific research questions, while reading Sam’s statement below. Near the end of the interview, I explicitly asked: “And while you were creating the poem or reading the completed version, did you have any thoughts or emotions that seemed particularly new to you?” Sam answered:

I (slight pause) fought the image of settling the crab. So I unsettled the crab. So I don’t know, I guess probably, in my journal, I might have let it settle—the crab. But I guess there’s a sense here, that this, in some form may be published, and anonymously or not, I wanted to have it more open ended as to the story of the crab.

Notice that Sam said he “fought” the idea of creating an image where the crab had settled, which shows that he challenged a mood he had earlier decided he would use in the poem, which, in turn, changed the meaning of the poem. Sam even used the word “unsettled” in his testimony—in the case of his poem, he “unsettled” the crab, and with regard to conducting inquiry, Sam had unsettled his initial inclination to allow the crab to “give up” and showed preference for an ambiguous ending—one that is “more open ended;” where the crab “floats” instead.

Determining the tone of the horseshoe crab’s precarious position had led Sam to consider an ambiguous fate for the crab, rather than allow it to give up. In the light of Sam’s recent challenges in his personal life, and his admission that he was trying to capture that mood in his poem, it seems that Sam’s anticipation of the poem’s impact on
future readers was a factor that led him to consider an original, alternate ending for the scene he created.

While the data of Sam’s writing session appeared to address Sub Question B rather than Sub Question A, it appears that the analytic questions that I designed to align with Sub Question A can also, at times, apply to Sub Question B. For example, the following attributes are listed as an analytic question that was designed to help me to find ways in which the data may apply to Sub Question A: whether the poet’s spontaneous utterances while composing and reviewing the poem suggest that he or she is actively seeking to gain knowledge or understanding.

Sam exhibited the types of actions described in the analytic questions that support Sub Question A while working on his poem. However, because he ended up deciding to give his poem an ambiguous ending, they ended up being in service to identifying the conscious ways in which he engaged in inquiry related to Sub Question B. For example, Sam sometimes asked himself questions in order to guide the development of his poem. Specifically, at one point he asked: “Now what is that horseshoe crab doing?” Sam’s conscious efforts to find a suitable action for the horseshoe crab ended up being important to developing the overall mood of the poem (inquiry in service of the emotional content of the poem), given that he considered the options of allowing the horseshoe crab to float upside down or to settle in the water, both of which suggest much more dire outcomes for the crab than the more ambiguous action of floating that he ultimately decided to use.

Sam’s writing session shows that he engaged in inquiry not only because he ended up changing his poem from one with a dismal ending to one with an ambiguous
ending, but also because he exhibited behaviors that showed he was searching for ideas, such as generating multiple attributes for an image and then selecting only one to develop further, and asking himself questions about each of the new elements of his poem. The questions he asked himself were genuine in that he did not already know the answer. Sometimes he came up with an answer relatively quickly, and sometimes he debated multiple possibilities, such as when he decided on the action that the horseshoe crab would engage in. Regardless of whether Sam was engaging in inquiry regarding the content or expression of his poem at any given point, one of the salient features of his writing session was the intentional, strategic quality of how he guided his development of his poem. Because his direction-finding strategies (such as strategic questions) and decision-making (reasons for favoring one option over another) were so explicitly stated at various points in his session, one can see that characterizing such skills—and the conditions in which to employ them—would be a promising route for teaching novices how to use the writing process to conduct inquiry.

One way in which Sub Question B was not addressed by the data of any of the participants in the study was if a poet were to articulate a specific intention, mood or theme for the poem at the outset of the writing process, and then to capture an opposite or ambiguous meaning in the completed poem. We do not know if Sam had a specific intention to create a dire mood at the beginning of the poem, only that he didn’t indicate such an intention; he had voiced that he wanted to use the kite as an image because it had so many similarities to a person.
Frank’s Writing Session: Description and Discussion

*Composing the First Draft*

Frank wrote two poems during his session. The first he wrote before he had gotten into the habit of thinking aloud, so there are several gaps in his data for that poem. He offered to write a second poem immediately after the first, and the data record is much more complete for that part of the session, so his experience of writing his second poem will be presented in detail here.

Frank began by looking around the room for inspiration for his poem. Before writing the first words of his draft, Frank said:

> I’m looking at a little plastic glider over there, and I’m thinking “overhead.” (short pause) And I’m not going to get into the squirrels—something else, because I’ve already sort of started that one. (brief pause) Okay. Torn—torn (slowly, while writing) paper clouds.

In the interview, I asked Frank what he had meant about the squirrels, and he said that he had recently written a poem about squirrels throwing acorns out of a tree, which he thought of when he said “overhead.” Frank’s rejection of the first image that he thought of after saying “overhead” because it was not a new image for him had allowed him to consider another image, one that he had not yet included in a poem.

Also during the interview, I asked Frank about the phrase “torn paper clouds.” He said:

> Yesterday what I saw…were [clouds] that were vertical and they looked like tissue that had been torn. And that stuck in my head. And I looked up here, and I thought, well, they’re not torn tissue today, but they could have [been] paper.
Frank’s reference to the clouds seems to have been triggered by seeing the clouds outside his window and remembering the striking image he had seen the day before. However, he had not thought of using this image in a poem until he had rejected the squirrel image and searched for another one that would go with the word “overhead.” In this manner of rejecting an idea that had already solidified into a poem and finding a fresh image from recent memory, Frank had begun to come up with something that he could form into an original poem.

After he had written these first two lines, “overhead / torn paper clouds,” Frank paused in thinking aloud, and when I prompted him to voice his thoughts, he replied: “I’m not exactly sure where this is going, which would be typical. (short pause) For the moment I’m going to throw in ‘gathering.’ I don’t know where this one is going.” At this point, Frank had drafted the first three lines of his poem. He also had deliberately stated that he had no preconceived idea of where he wanted the poem to go, so his thought processes would need to include coming up with ideas to write about, in addition to expressing them.

Frank paused, and when I reminded him to say everything that he was thinking, he replied: “I’m thinking of seasonal changes, I guess. But what part of it, I don’t know. (short pause) I’m sorry. I’m drawing a minor blank here.” (Note that in the directions for using the think aloud protocol, I had asked participants to narrate what was going through their minds at every moment, even if only to say something like “I’m drawing a blank” if they weren’t thinking of anything.)

After another pause and prompting to give voice to his thoughts, Frank said: “I’m thinking of September. (short pause) I don’t know what will follow this, so I’m just
going to throw it down. September (pause) chill.” The date of Frank’s writing session was in September, so it became clear that he was using images and impressions from his current environment and/or very recent memory. Frank’s admission that he didn’t know what would follow the line further suggests that he was developing the poem as he went along, and had not yet thought of an ending or overall trajectory for it.

During his narrative, Frank explained the likely origin of this phrase, referring to the line as it appeared in the poem at the end of the session:

And the “September night’s chill”… probably came from: we heat with propane; furnace and a fireplace. We just got that fixed and we used it yesterday morning for the first time to take the chill off the house, and we were talking about how the guy that cleaned it out screwed it up today. So that may have been there someplace.

It appears that Frank continued to draw upon recent memories of his environment for material for his poem. Furthermore, Frank hadn’t mentioned a connection between the chill and the unusual looking clouds he had seen on the same day, so it seems likely that he was taking distinct, unconnected memories and finding a way to sequence them in the poem to create an effective sequence of images. Whether the effect was intentional or not, the references to the first month of autumn and to the cold in this line advance the ominous mood that Frank had created by the clouds that are gathering in the previous lines. By retrieving recent memories that were likely unconnected to each other in Frank’s consciousness before he began writing, and then piecing the images together in a sequence that created a mood, Frank had not only begun to create an original means of expression for a particular mood, but he had begun to create a whole that was more than the sum of its parts. In other words, the poem that Frank was developing was new in its expression, and possibly even new and original to him in the overall meaning that was
arising from his action of stringing unrelated sensory impressions together to create not
only a mood, but a particular mosaic of his recent experiences. While we can’t say
anything more than it is possible that Frank’s sequencing of the unrelated images brought
him any new insight on the topic, theme, or emotions in his poem, the way in which he
pieced these images together represented inquiry on expression—that is, an active
investigation of how to express an idea or mood in an original and aesthetic manner.

After he had written his fourth line, Frank paused again, and I prompted him to keep thinking out loud. He laughed, saying: “I’m back in the garden now. Last of the tomatoes.” Frank now had his first complete draft (see Table 4). During his narrative, he said that the image of tomatoes entered his poem because after the first two lines, “the rest of it was searching around for something that was present in my mind, and that was that the tomatoes are on their way out.” Even later, in his interview, he revealed a little more complexity in his feelings toward the tomatoes, and the significance that they will not last much longer: “I guess in a way, I have mixed emotions on the tomatoes because the first frost I won’t have to deal with them (laughing).”
Table 4: Frank’s poem at three different stages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| first complete draft                 | overhead  
torn paper clouds  
gathering  
September chill  
last of the tomatoes |
| end of writing session               | overhead  
torn paper clouds  
gathering  
last of the tomatoes  
September nights chill |
| at time of follow up interview       | near sunset  
strips of torn cloth clouds  
gather  
tomatoes covered  
before the hard frost |

Revising the Poem

Frank read through his first complete draft and declared: “I’m not impressed.”

Frank paused again, and I prompted him to keep thinking aloud. He said:

I’m looking at…‘September chill,’ and wondering if that could have more to it. I hate it when you just give a seasonal plug, which is often done in haiku because it’s required, because you’re supposed to have some seasonal aspect to haiku. (short pause) Well, I really have to look at this a little bit and think.

By reevaluating the phrase “September chill,” Frank was using his knowledge of the craft of poetry, specifically his nuanced understanding of how to draw upon the traditional Japanese practice of frequently using seasonal references to enhance the mood of a poem, in order to see if he could infuse more meaning into his poem. Frank’s reevaluation of
whether he should modify one of his lines in light of his other experiences writing and reading poems with seasonal references was an intentional revision strategy, and he could articulate quite clearly what he was doing and what the motivation behind it was. Frank’s conscious decision making was apparent in how he decided to refine the images he had used in his poem.

Frank then began to critique his last three lines as a unit, looking beyond the explicit reference to *September chill*:

I got a seasonal thought of September. I think there could be more in these last three—last two lines. In fact, I’m looking at “gathering” which really doesn’t work as an entity with the last three lines: gathering / September chill / last of the tomatoes. So maybe “gathering” is wrong, I don’t know…I keep looking at “gathering” and wondering if that’s the weak member of this thing. …It’s just that the last two lines sort of sound uninteresting (laughing). I mean it’s perfectly fine as an image of what I’m seeing at the moment as seasonal form, but this certainly doesn’t impress me.

In the above statement, Frank noted that the word “gathering” might not cohere well with the other lines, and circled back to his concerns about how well the seasonal cues affect the overall poem. He then affirmed that he liked the phrase “torn paper clouds,” possibly taking note of what he didn’t need to change. Frank’s thinking revealed his expectations for the style of his poem (that it would cohere well and that all of its parts would interest a reader such as himself), and he had deliberately pinpointed which areas of his poem he would concentrate his revision efforts on in order to improve it along these lines.

Still looking for a way to make the last three lines cohere as a unit, Frank read through the whole draft, took a short pause, and then said:

Ah—okay. Epiphany! Last of the tomatoes should be the fourth line, so—and I haven’t really sorted out September
yet, but it would then make it possible for the first three lines: overhead / torn paper clouds / gathering to be an entity, and then gathering / last of the tomatoes, and finding something that nails it down as to when; I mean the September [part].

Frank had expressed that he was pleased that reordering the lines of his poem allowed the word he previously had said might be “the weak member” of the poem to become the link that joins the first and second halves of the poem. Specifically, he had made his third line mean slightly different things when it is read only with the first two lines, compared to when it is read only with the last two lines. This effect is known as a pivot and is common in, and some would even consider a defining characteristic of, traditional Japanese tanka. During the interview Frank revealed his knowledge of this technique and opinion of its particular importance to the tanka genre. Therefore, it is likely that his knowledge of traditional Japanese tanka had influenced the development of his poem by giving him a certain expectation for how his poem should hang together, which led him to pinpoint how his earlier draft had come short of his expectation. Of course, the spontaneous exclamation “Epiphany!” shows that Frank’s decision to reorder his lines came as a new idea to him after he had specified the problem he was trying to solve. It seems that this epiphany was one that was in service to the poem—to structure it in a way that is more pleasing to the poet—rather than one regarding the subject matter of his poem.

Frank then returned to pondering the seasonal references, noting that the way he had included tomatoes in his poem brought more meaning to the poem than his explicit reference to the month:

…but September chill is like “Eh, so what?” Even last of the tomatoes, but last of the tomatoes pins it down to: you
probably have a garden. It is near the end of the season. So that, to me, has value. What I’m getting is gathering / last of the tomatoes, you know. blah, blah, blah. (laughing) I haven’t got the blah, blah, blah to my satisfaction yet, I’ve just got “September chill,” which would work, but it doesn’t really send me anywhere. (sighs)

Frank said that the “value” in using “last of the tomatoes” comes with the added context that such a phrase necessarily implies. This type of phrase makes the poem more meaningful because of the attendant associations that it invokes. Because Frank had articulated the specific added meaning that “last of the tomatoes” gave the poem, we can be certain that at this point in the process, his decision to keep that line and change the other one was a deliberate one.

Frank continued to try to think of a way to improve the final line, saying that he would normally leave the poem in its present form, and return to it again later. He summed up his recent efforts: “I’m not that excited about the last line. But I am excited by the fact I was able to improve this by adjusting the last two lines.” He then made a last attempt to think of a new final line, but did not voice a new one. He evaluated his use of seasonal cues in terms of how well his fourth line contributed:

I guess what I’m thinking is, anyone who deals seasonally with things like [this], or grows, last of the tomatoes—would realize where I’m at seasonally, and I shouldn’t have to underline it, so to speak… I mean, again, I think I have a problem of the other one in terms of the fullness of the last line.

Frank then decided he was finished drafting his poem (see Table 4). His revisions after the session replaced the explicit references to the month and colder weather with a more subtle reference that underscores the danger of the advancing season: “tomatoes covered / before the hard frost.”
It appears that the act of writing this poem likely brought to the surface some of Frank’s subconscious thoughts about his mortality. I asked him if there was a mood or emotion he was trying to capture, and he said:

Yeah: the passing of the seasons, the fact that it’d be nice if the tomatoes kept coming, although we’ve had our share of them this year. I think it’s the beginning of seasonal sadness for me. And off the top of my head, I hadn’t thought about it that way, but last winter was rough… I’ve got plasma cell leukemia… but I’m in remission at the moment, so… the terminal aspect of our daily existence is always prevalent. So yeah, that would be in the back of my head, I’m sure. Yeah. And if I got real maudlin I’d probably think in terms of: will there be another spring, sort of thing.

Since he prefaced his thoughts about mortality with “I hadn’t thought about it that way,” Frank likely had unconsciously drawn upon that aspect of his mood when he was initially just aiming for expressing a seasonal sadness that he was feeling. Frank had explained that during the past year, the seasonal sadness that comes with autumn had become more of a constant companion to him than a passing mood. Although he identified this connection in response to an interview question, he may well have come to see how the state of his health had influenced the writing of this poem in a future reading of the poem.

*Frank’s Testimony: “that’s what bothered me”*

There were some ways in which Frank approved of the poem overall, in addition to certain lines that he favored over others. When I asked him “How does this poem fit into your life more generally,” Frank said: “It’s a pretty good view of my view.” He said that the poem was typical of the types of poems he writes. However, in terms of quality, he compared it to other poems he has written and placed it in the third of three tiers. He
also stressed that the poem was a draft: “I want to say it’s a beginning.” In this way, Frank was critical of his poem while at the same time recognizing that it was characteristic of some of the poems he writes.

Some of Frank’s dissatisfaction with his poem may have been due to his feeling that he did not gain insight on the content of his poem. During his interview, I learned that gaining insight while writing poetry is a common occurrence for Frank, even though he said it didn’t happen for him with this particular poem. I asked him my standard question: while he was creating the poem or reading the completed version, did he have “any thoughts or emotions that seemed particularly new” to him. He replied: “No, and I think that’s what bothered me.” He went on to say that when he writes a poem that “pleases” him, he does come up with something new, and that “there are some of them…that I can’t wait to tell somebody.” Although Frank may not have gained any specific insight through writing this poem, he has made it clear that an important standard of his best poems is that while he is writing them, he does encounter original thoughts or emotions.

Summary of the Bearing of Frank’s Writing Session on Sub Questions A & B

The data from Frank’s writing session addressed Sub Question A, but did not address Sub Question B. Frank couldn’t point to a specific insight that he had come to as a result of writing the poem other than noting that it had surfaced some of his thoughts of his own mortality in response to an interview question. However, his behaviors in writing his poem suggest that he approached the task as one of inquiry. First, Frank passed over using an image that he had recently included in a poem and sought a
replacement: a unique description of clouds that he had recently seen. Then he said that he didn’t know what direction to take the poem in. Both of these actions revealed that he was searching for (and finding) ideas of what to write about on the spot rather than translating an already formed idea into words. Frank then used his knowledge of the genre of traditional Japanese tanka to change the order of his lines and to choose a seasonal reference that had unspoken implications. Both of these actions enhanced the meaning of Frank’s final poem compared to his earlier draft, but they are likely to have been more in the service of expressing the poem well than signs that Frank had come to new insight regarding any of the content (subject matter and mood) of his poem.

While Frank may not have been particularly happy with the overall impact of the poem, he said that “It’s a pretty good view of my view,” which shows that he did consider it to express some ideas that seemed true to him. Because he had not linked the individual images he had gleaned from recent memory into a meaningful sequence before he started writing the poem, there is a possibility that the overall observation of his poem—particularly the ominous mood that builds throughout—is a uniquely new meaning that Frank created during his writing session. Furthermore, Frank explained that his mild dissatisfaction with his poem comes from his expectation that a good poem should create new meaning in an even more obvious way, which became evident when he said “there are some [poems]…that I can’t wait to tell somebody” because he had come up with something new.

In short, the data from Frank’s writing session offers a somewhat modest level of support for concluding that Frank’s writing process also functioned as a process of inquiry for him. His behaviors of consciously searching for new images and meaningful
ways to combine them suggest that he was conducting inquiry (at least at the level of expression; how to put together an original poem that expressed his current mood), but his mild dissatisfaction with his poem suggests that his inquiry did not yield the insight on content of his poem that he had hoped it would.

Elizabeth’s Writing Session: Description and Discussion

Composing the First Draft

When Elizabeth started to generate ideas for a poem while practicing the think aloud protocol, she first asked if it would be okay if she wrote a poem about the way the blueness of the sweater I was wearing matched the blueness of my eyes. She acknowledged that it would embarrass me, but that she wanted to go with her “first reaction,” and if she couldn’t develop it into a good poem, she would look for other another source of inspiration. I promised not to get offended or too embarrassed, emphasizing that “it’s really whatever you want to write about now.” I didn’t want to make her pass over her first inclination, since she is the one who would normally decide which initial sparks of inspiration are candidates for developing into a poem. To aid myself in treating this poem with a similar degree of detachment as I have the other poems in the study, I will from now on refer to the initial subject of Elizabeth’s poem as “a woman.” However, Elizabeth began to fictionalize her account very soon into her writing process, so that the subject of her poem is more a character who plays a role in a distant memory than a person from her real life. Elizabeth identified her initial source of inspiration:
...all the time we’ve been talking here, this is what’s going through in the back of my mind is that: the blue—the matching blue, the clarity of the blue, the unexpected similarity of your eyes and the sweater, and the nice contrast against your skin has struck me. Now I’m expressing what had struck me when you walked into the room. And all of this is what I would like to try to put down on paper.

It soon became clear Elizabeth’s initial inclination was not, at least at a conscious level, more developed than she initially stated. She quickly drafted a couple versions of the first line, showing preference for her second attempt, “the blueness of her eyes.” She counted the syllables, a habit she later explained that she had developed to make sure none of her lines got too long. She then thought of a second line, and indicated that she did not immediately have any further ideas for where to take the poem: “Clear as a summer sky. I don’t know where to go from here. See, I’m stuck.” With this admission, Elizabeth made it clear that he primary task for the rest of the writing session would be to develop her idea into a fixed form, rather than to express a fully formed idea.

Elizabeth began to rework these first lines to include the image of the sweater, and became concerned that she was using the word “blue” too much. She cut herself off in the middle of composing a line to say: “No. I don’t like the way that’s coming…I’m drawing a blank.” She quickly tried a new tack, drafting a new version of the first two lines, identifying her initial problem:

Well, we’ll try this. (slowly, while writing) The clear blue / of her eyes and her dress. It’s the word sweater. It’s just—I don’t like the sound of “sweater.” That’s part of the problem, so I’m changing it to dress. The clear blue / of her eyes and her dress / like a summer sky—(slowly, writing) like a summer sky. (slight pause, then writing) The image—the images of something. The image of something, what do I want?
Elizabeth’s aesthetic sense took the lead in alerting her to make a small change to the poem that then freed her mind to begin searching for additional images to further develop the poem. We can see that Elizabeth’s search for either another image or a way to describe the preceding images was deliberate, as she had posed the question to herself: “what do I want?” We have seen this type of question asking already in Elaine and Sam’s writing sessions, and in all cases the questions appear to be not only genuine in their search for an answer, but can be answered by the poet. (If a poet were to ask a question he or she couldn’t answer, or ask a question that led him or her focus to stray from the task at hand, such a question might be genuine and therefore an indicator of a true search, but not a useful means of advancing toward the end goal of a complete poem that satisfies the poet.) Because the questions appear to be effective in helping the poet to develop his or her ideas and/or to express them effectively, we might think of the questions as being strategic; the poets have posed themselves questions that are relevant to their poem in a way that answering the question keeps the momentum of the writing process going. Therefore, these questions appear to be not only an indicator that the poet is engaging in inquiry, but a tool for advancing the inquiry.

Elizabeth then reread the first three lines of her poem, and tacked on a new phrase that included the word “image” in it, which suggests a successful conclusion to her search. Notice that shortly after drafting the fourth line she progressed to composing the fifth line, as well:

The image—I repeat a lot: the clear blue / of her eyes and her dress / like a summer sky / the image I shall remember. Let’s try that. (slowly, writing) the image I shall remember—(faster pace) in the winter of my life—yeah—(slowly, writing) in the winter of my life.
We cannot know exactly where the inspiration for Elizabeth’s fifth line came from, only that she thought of it immediately after writing her newly composed fourth line. The rapid progression from one line to the next suggests that it is likely that Elizabeth’s idea for her fourth line triggered a new idea for the fifth. At any rate, we can see that the first draft of Elizabeth’s poem developed in a stepwise fashion, accompanied by a few overt comments that revealed Elizabeth’s purposeful search for ways to develop her poem beyond her initial inclination to describe a quality of blueness she saw in a woman’s eyes and sweater (see Table 5).

Table 5: Elizabeth’s poem at three different stages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Poem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first complete draft</td>
<td>the clear blue of her eyes and her dress like a summer sky the image I shall remember in the winter of my life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>end of writing session</td>
<td>the clear blue of her eyes and her dress like a summer sky; as the years go speeding forward she will be the warmth I need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at time of follow up interview</td>
<td>the clear blue of her eyes and her gown like a summer sky; as the years go speeding forward she will be the warmth I need</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Revising the Poem

Elizabeth now had a full draft of her poem, but she immediately expressed that she was not content with it: “That’s kind of melodramatic, I think.” She read the whole draft of the poem through, and then began to rework the ending by reading the first three lines with a new ending: “the clear blue / of her eyes and her dress / like a summer sky / in this cold time of my life, a brightness.” She immediately decided against this version, explaining: “I kind of know what I want—to make a metaphor, or draw some parallels between aging and youth, but that’s not doing it.” At this point in the process, Elizabeth had determined a broad theme that she wanted to address in the poem. She had not mentioned anything on the theme of aging until she began drafting the final lines of the poem, so her theme did not likely exist in her conscious mind at the start of her writing process, when she got “stuck” a few times, trying to think of where to take the poem next. Her articulation of her goal shows that her conscious mind was guiding at least part of the process of developing the theme of her poem. In this regard, she was conducting inquiry on the content of her poem.

Elizabeth continued to retry her original ending, repeating “in the winter of my life,” followed with the assessment: “well, summer, winter, I don’t like that, but let me try it.” She then changed the fourth line, reread the whole draft, and added a new fifth line, using a variation of the winter theme that resulted in the following closing lines: “she will warm the coming cold / when there is nothing left.” Her admission that she wasn’t happy with a specific comparison but willingness to experiment with new phrasing shows that she was actively negotiating the process of expressing an idea that fit with her goal of using a metaphor to “draw some parallels between aging and youth.”
She then explained that she couldn’t think of how she would develop the poem further, and indicated that she was done for the moment, but might possibly continue working on the poem at a later date.

Elizabeth then gave her narrative of how she created the poem and began answering interview questions. Not far into the interview, she remarked more than once that she was not fully satisfied with the current state of the poem, and would likely revise it more at a later date. In order to have a larger portion of her writing processes recorded for the study, she agreed to temporarily suspend interviewing and return to working on the poem.

Elizabeth reread the first three lines of the poem, voicing the following possible ending: “she will warm the coming years. Well, when I need it the most.” She said “I don’t think I’ll like that, but I’ll write it down anyway.” She repeated her new fifth line, and then decided to write “when there is the need” instead.

She repeated the newly developed last two lines, and said: “I don’t know, maybe this has to be a somber poem.” With this remark, it appeared that Elizabeth’s objection to her poem may have had more to do with the mood she was creating with her last lines than with the summer/winter metaphor, given that she had already removed overt references to winter from the poem. Elizabeth decided she was still dissatisfied with the poem, and continued to revise it. She recopied the first three lines, and added: “as the years go speeding forward / she will be the warmth I need.” She considered trimming the fourth line by replacing the word “forward” with “by,” but determined that she didn’t like the alliteration in the phrase “speeding by,” and decided to keep the word forward, despite the extra syllable. She decided at that point that the poem was complete (see
Table 5). Elizabeth’s continued attention to the rhythm and sounds of the words she chose to include and her expressed concern for the mood she was creating show that her aesthetic sensibility and conscious efforts played a prominent role in writing the poem.

During the follow up interview, I asked Elizabeth if she had made any further changes to the poem, and she said that she had changed the word “dress” to “gown,” because “It would make the image more beautiful—not just an ordinary dress, but a gown—a really, truly elegant, beautiful image that would stay in this person’s memory.”

**Elizabeth’s Interview**

I began the interview portion of the session by asking Elizabeth to tell the story of how she created the poem. She said the blueness of a woman’s eyes and matching sweater seemed a “poetic picture” to her when she first met the woman. She described her initial moment of inspiration as something that did not come to her in the form of words, and that this type of situation is common for her:

> when I started writing, it was a question of how to express what I felt internally—or instinctively, perhaps, without having put into words, because this is often the case where, especially with haiku, you feel a moment—something, and it’s difficult to translate that quick feeling into words, which is not quick. It could be anywhere from a half hour, fifteen minutes, to an hour of struggling with the words, which was a feeling that came instantaneously, that you’re struck by a thought. So that’s when I start playing around with words.

Elizabeth’s sparse description of the initial moment of inspiration as “a feeling,” along with the fact that she did not immediately have words to describe her feeling, are two indicators that she was not likely working to simply express a fully crystallized idea, but
that she was also, to some extent, developing her ideas as she developed the wording for
the poem.

In Elizabeth’s narrative, she more fully detailed the process of coming up with an
image that set the tone of her poem by capturing the feeling that she didn’t initially have
the words to describe. She explained that, after having settled on an initial draft for the
first two lines, she thought of a third image of blueness that better invoked the mood she
was aiming to express:

I immediately conjured up an image of [a summer sky]; I
didn’t set out to make a comparison to anything, but it just
came to me, like a sky we had a few days ago, where it was
absolutely blue, just perfect blue on a late summer day.
And that blueness, that feeling one gets when one is under a
summer sky like that, I’m trying, I guess, to convey that
that beautiful clarity of the sky produces a certain sensation
in one’s being, and the blueness—the matching blueness of
her eyes and the dress sort of produces that same feeling of
well being and enjoyment.

By saying that she “didn’t set out to make a comparison to anything, but it just came,”
Elizabeth shows that her conception of her inspiration most likely unfolded over time, as
she worked on her poem. Once she had described the matching blueness of a woman’s
eyes and sweater in a close approximation of what she had actually seen, she thought of a
third image that created a similar mood to her initial feeling, but was not a literal part of
it. In fact, we were in a room with large windows that revealed a completely overcast
sky, so she wouldn’t have gotten her third image from her immediate surroundings.
Although her third line developed after her initial moment of inspiration, it was still tied
very closely to it, by expressing the mood she wanted to convey.
Elizabeth’s Testimony: “something that kind of developed after I started jotting down words”

There were a few indicators that showed that the fourth and fifth lines of the poem were formed as Elizabeth worked on the poem, rather than from the original inspiration that sparked the poem. After describing how she wrote the first three lines as a fairly straightforward observation, she explained that she was looking to make the last two lines into a “summing up—or a conclusion, or an observation that sort of pulls the first part of the tanka together, or: why am I struck by this.” In this remark she had expressed that she was aiming for a tanka that holds to the traditional form in which a three line, haiku-like observation is followed by a subjective reaction to the observation. In this way, it appears that Elizabeth’s expectation for how to structure her experience was influenced by the genre she was writing in, and that she was no longer looking to describe specific images, but to explore the question of why they had an impact. Elizabeth then disclosed that she may have taken on the persona of an old man in order to write the last two lines of the poem:

If I get an inspiration, and sometimes it’s the only way to express something that occurs to me, [I will slip] into the persona of somebody else. And in this case, it is an old man. Although, it could be an old woman; could be me. It could be, but my first thought was an old man, an older man who is aware of the coming years and can still appreciate beauty and youth and when he’s [getting] older and older, that this is one of the images, is one of the things that he will remember with fondness and enjoyment and will perk him up.

With that statement, Elizabeth ended her narrative. I later learned that she also writes and publishes short stories, so working fiction into a poem is second nature to her. It appears that, in order to conclude the poem with a reason for the significance of the images in the
first three lines, Elizabeth used her resourcefulness to either conjure up an appropriate narrator and context, or tapped into some of her own ideas that were not consciously available to her until the point where she consciously focused on drafting a conclusion. Whether Elizabeth came up with an answer to her “why am I struck by this?” question by imagining she was an old man or by assigning herself to be the narrator, she created a hypothetical situation: the future state and needs of the older narrator, as expressed in various drafts of her last two lines. Elizabeth used this hypothetical situation that she had created in order to explain the phenomenon that she had observed in the first three lines. In this way, the trajectory of Elizabeth’s writing session developed into an occurrence where she made an observation and then attempted to explain the importance of that observation, thereby conducting inquiry on the content of her poem. This basic pattern of observation followed by explanation via hypothetical examples is often seen in inquiry in other disciplines, as well, such as in the scenarios that archeologists and paleontologists construct to tell plausible stories that explain the content and context of their excavations.

Later in her interview, Elizabeth explicitly acknowledged that the overall theme of her poem was a result of her efforts to draft the poem, rather than an intrinsic part of the initial inspiration. During the interview, I asked her if there was a mood or emotion she was trying to capture. She replied: “appreciation of beauty and youth.” I then reminded her that, while she was composing the poem, she had said that she was working on a metaphor for youth and aging in this poem. She readily agreed:

Yes, yes. I didn’t start out with that. I just started out knowing that …struck…by the blueness, the two colors that are so compatible, so similar, that I just had an idea that this would work into a poem, but I didn’t get immediately that same thought, that this blueness is going to develop into a poem about life, and aging, and beauty. It
was just something that kind of developed after I started jotting down words.

Elizabeth’s reply confirms that her theme took form only after she had begun the writing process, and not when she had received the “quick feeling” that had sparked her writing process in the first place.

Later on, I asked Elizabeth what possible directions she considered taking this poem in. Her reply confirmed her earlier claim that the theme of her poem developed as she was writing, rather than at the time of her initial spark of inspiration:

As I started out, I didn’t have any direction. Well, as I was writing…the direction was to try to create, I guess, some metaphor of aging—somebody aging, somebody knowing he’s going to age, and wanting to maintain, or needing to maintain some pleasant, clear images of youth and life. I don’t know if that was a conscious thought… I don’t know if I do that when I write. I think things just come and sometimes I look back and I realize that it’s developed into something…I don’t think I had any conscious theme in the beginning.

In this quote, Elizabeth reveals that sometimes her writing processes allow her to develop ideas in ways that she didn’t anticipate when she began composing the poem. Like other poets in this study, at times Elizabeth found it difficult to differentiate between when her thoughts that guided the development of her poem were conscious, and when they were not. That is one reason why using a think aloud protocol to record the progression of a poet’s conscious thinking while writing is so helpful in reconstructing how the poem was created. From an observation that she made about aiming for a metaphor on youth and aging as she was writing, we can say that at some point she was consciously aware of that particular intention for the poem.
Even further into the interview, after she had finished revising her poem, Elizabeth said that she liked her poem better, now that she had revised it further, because “It’s not so depressing. It has a more upbeat ending… it’s not such a downer at the end.”

I asked her why it was important that it not be a downer at the end, and she replied:

I really don’t know why, just something that bothered me, and I guess that was it, that it makes it seem like that there’s nothing except coldness when growing old and that’s all there is, whereas, I think in this final version…it’s less somber. For some inexplicable reason which I can’t say clearly, sometimes either I like something that I’ve written or I don’t. And I can’t analyze why.

Although Elizabeth said that she couldn’t say exactly why she liked her revised ending better, she was able to give a pretty clear reason of the implications for her first ending, particularly given the context of the rest of her interview. Earlier in her interview, Elizabeth characterized her experiences of retired life with her husband and many family members in very positive terms. It seems that her initial, more somber endings did not fit with her own experiences of aging. Rather than simply looking for a happier ending to her poem, I would argue that Elizabeth was trying to form an ending that rang true to her own experiences of aging. In trying to avoid the “drama” of her earlier endings, Elizabeth not only successfully avoided cliché, but she also came to express a more nuanced characterization of aging that better approximates the tenor of her own experiences.

Summary of the Bearing of Elizabeth’s Writing Session on Sub Questions A & B

The data from Elizabeth’s writing session clearly addresses Sub Question A, and I was unable to find any ways in which it addresses Sub Question B. Elizabeth’s
spontaneous remarks made while composing and revising the poem showed that she needed to actively search for a new direction to take her poem in after she had written her first three lines, and that her knowledge and experience as a tanka poet and as a fiction writer had also shaped the development of her poem. Most notably, Elizabeth testified that she started her writing process aiming to describe a “quick feeling” she had when she saw a certain quality of blueness in a woman’s eyes and sweater. She explained how her theme of youth and aging developed after she started the writing process, and not before: “It was just something that kind of developed after I started jotting down words.” It seems that engaging in the writing process caused Elizabeth to develop the instantaneous, positive feeling she had upon seeing a woman whose sweater matched her eyes into an examination of her feelings about aging. In short, she used her writing session to conduct inquiry on the theme of her poem: how youth and beauty can be relevant—even necessary—to those who are aging. It is clear that these ideas developed while she was writing, from her spontaneous remarks as well as from her interview.

**John’s Writing Session: Description and Discussion**

*Composing the First Draft*

John began his writing session by telling me that he wanted to draft more than one poem for the study, and then choose the draft he found most promising to develop into a finished poem. He explained that this method is closer to his normal way of working, so I agreed that he could proceed in that manner for our session, as well. Although John said he would have preferred to create more drafts for the study, time restrictions limited
him to producing four drafts during the session to allow for enough time to interview him afterward. While John preferred the fourth poem overall, he indicated that new ideas had occurred to him while drafting and reading the first, second and fourth poems during our writing session, and his third poem developed into a stretching exercise rather than a serious poem draft; it was a longer, free verse poem rather than a tanka, and to give a flavor of the subject and tone of the poem, its first line reads: “So, this is my third poem.”

John chose the fourth poem as the one that he liked best in terms of potential for becoming a finished product, so that part of the session will be presented in detail. Knowing that we only had enough time for him to create one more draft before proceeding on to the interview, John said “this better be a good one” at the onset of drafting his fourth poem. That thought immediately triggered thoughts of achievement for him. In his interview, he reported “I dwelled on my failings for a while,” which I interpret to correspond to the few seconds that he spent conveying his dissatisfaction with a tendency to misspell words. John then deliberated on writing a poem on his son’s attainment of his ideal job. He drafted three lines but decided to move on and search for a different poem topic to develop into a poem. Later on, in his interview, he explained: “I wasn’t quite sure what to write about it really, because he left [to begin his new job] last week, so it’s really too new for me to have enough emotional perspective to be ready to write about it.”

Shifting his focus to begin the search for a new topic or image for a poem, John said: “Let’s write about a nature image of some kind. Nature. Let’s be objective. Let’s be outdoors. Let’s be sneaky about talking about ourselves.” By invoking these particular qualities, John named some key characteristics of haiku, a genre in which he
reported he feels more comfortable writing compared to tanka. Later, in his interview, John listed some of the salient features of the poem he developed, saying: “It’s an easy and unforced comparison between what I see in the world and what I feel taking place within me.” It appears that he achieved his goal of using “a nature image” to “be sneaky about talking about ourselves.” In fact, at another point in his interview, John acknowledged the intention he had voiced: “I was joking for a while, out loud, about how to talk about myself without talking about myself.” Near the end of his interview, John explained that his experience of writing this poem “was really an exercise of craft for me.” It is likely that he characterized his experience in this way because he was drawing upon a familiar sense of aesthetics and set of writing strategies, as we will see below. Because he described his writing session as “an exercise of craft,” we wouldn’t anticipate that John had come to any great epiphanies while writing this poem. However, through his experience of writing and reading his new poem, John did report that he had gained some specific insight about an issue that had been of concern to him for the past few weeks, as is described below.

Once he had specified the goal of writing about himself via nature imagery, he began drafting the poem immediately. He said the word “autumn,” repeated it a couple of times, and then began jotting down a list of words, which he later said were associations he had with autumn: “Autumn fall leaves chill scents grass goldenrod, (slight pause) pencil, (slight pause) fern.” John later mentioned that “pencil” had entered the list due to “a little bit of free association” with goldenrod. He attempted to use a recent memory of seeing goldenrod to start a poem, but then decided not to pursue that image, explaining later in his interview that it “seemed like a dead end in the moment.”
John later related in his interview that once he had decided not to pursue the image of goldenrod, “I thought: there’s a particular version of autumn colors that the marshes have.” Also during his interview, John had the following to say about the image that sparked this poem:

I was picturing… an exact spot here. This is really an exact spot, and it’s a spot that I started to kayak to on Sunday morning, but the river was too rough and it was too windy and I had to turn back.

John didn’t report what had triggered this memory. We’ll never know for certain what caused John to think of this particular memory while writing the poem, only that he had been kayaking with the intention of going to that spot two days before his writing session. Given the current state of knowledge of the workings of the human mind, we can only attribute the surfacing of this memory to some possible combination of recent memory, the subconscious, or to chance.

John then began writing the phrase “the marsh in autumn / colors,” pausing slightly after writing the first line. He then decided to use the same phrase to begin his poem, rewriting it with a different line break, narrating his choice:

The first line: the marsh
Second line: in autumn colors
above and below
the tide line

He then read through his first four lines very quickly, and once again more slowly. He paused for seven seconds, and then related that his focus was on: “Something about the articulation of a tide line. (reading very quickly) the marsh / in autumn colors / above and below / the tide line.” John paused for nine seconds, then read through the lines again at a slightly slower (yet still quick pace), paused slightly, and wrote the word “low”
in the left margin. He then read the four lines again, this time at a very quick pace, paused slightly, and wrote “receding” as the fifth line. He then read the whole poem rather quickly, paused for three seconds, and then indicated that it was finished (see Table 6).

Table 6: John’s poem at two different stages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>first complete draft &amp; end of writing session</th>
<th>the marsh in autumn colors above and below the tide line receding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at time of follow up interview</td>
<td>the marsh in autumn colors above and below the tide receding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Revising the Poem

When I contacted John months later, he had made only one change to the poem; he had removed a word from the fourth line so that it read “the tide” instead of “the tide line.” See Table 6 for the complete poem.

Discussion of John’s Writing Session

It appears that once John fixed upon the image of a marsh, the first four lines came rather quickly. In terms of time spent thinking, he seems to have put much more conscious effort into composing the last line. In the interview immediately after the writing session, I broached the topic of what John’s thought process was while trying to
come up with the last line by noting that he had written the word “low” on the side of the page. He answered:

Yeah; low tide. But I didn’t want to say low tide; that wasn’t what I was looking for…I just wasn’t sure what I did want to say. So I put the ideal over here, because I want to hang onto the idea, but I don’t want the word.

Although the first four lines came almost as a unit for John, he took a long pause and read through his draft again before he generated the idea that he wanted to note that “the tide line” in line three was “low.” He then decided he would write the word down in order to “hang onto the idea” while he considered different options of how to express the general idea. This pause in John’s writing process suggests that the entire poem didn’t arrive in his initial flash of inspiration.

In the action of writing a word in the margin, John employed a strategy to record an idea that had occurred to him that he knew wasn’t quite right for inserting into the poem. The fact that he saw a need to “hang onto the idea” by writing it down somewhere on the page shows how any given idea that can influence the writing of a poem can be a fleeting occurrence. The difficulty of holding onto some ideas (usually amidst competing ideas) long enough to develop them into something that fits seamlessly into the poem is one reason why it is so useful to study a poem as it is being written, rather than only asking about its creation after the fact, when the most transient of ideas have already been lost. John’s reference to the process of writing this poem as “an exercise of craft” highlights the strategic nature of the decision he made to preserve an idea that had occurred to him but that still needed shaping before it could be added to the poem. While the first four lines were written so quickly that they might possibly have arisen mostly in
his subconscious, the last line was generated, at least in part, through John’s conscious efforts.

Perhaps one of the reasons that the last line took longer to materialize is because it is central to the entire poem. It can be combined with each of the preceding lines to enhance the overall mood of the poem. John described one of the reasons he likes the poem:

I like it because of the syntax of it…its reference points shift. And they continue to make natural connections as they shift. So: the marsh in autumn colors, autumn colors above and below the tide line, the tide line receding, the autumn colors receding, the marsh receding, above and below receding…the whole thing of it to me has a feeling of the tide going out.

According to the poet, the very last word is what unifies the whole poem, because it can be combined with each of the earlier lines, and because the overall effect of the shifting of the reference points produces “a feeling of the tide going out;” a sense of the “receding” tide. We know from the think aloud protocol that the last word took longer to find, relative to how quickly the first four lines were drafted.

It turns out that the word “receding” was important to John in another key way, too. Later in the interview, when I asked John what he thought was “important” about the poem, he answered:

this whole idea of receding is—the whole poem is unified around that in a way, it seems to me. And it’s a theme that—I’m about to have a big important birthday here: in about three weeks I’ll be sixty. So, at any time in life, but more so, I think as I get older, I think about …how things are sort of receding, and slipping away and so it’s a big theme and it’s a natural theme, but it’s also a theme to easily become sort of maudlin or sentimental about, and this is a theme that I would want to be very careful with. I don’t want to shy away from it because…it’s a truth for
me…. I think …this [poem] avoids being sentimental or maudlin about this. I mean, part of it is couching it in nature in this way—you know, it’s the way it is, and actually it’s quite beautiful.

I later asked John if he was thinking about his upcoming birthday while he wrote his poem, and he said that he wasn’t; the last time he thought about it was while he was eating dinner just before our session, and then he thought of it again while reading his completed poem (before he had been asked any questions about it). Because he had written a poem that had mirrored his own mood and circumstances in such a close, yet metaphoric manner, John gained insight about how the metaphor applies to his personal life when he read through his final draft.

*John’s Testimony:* “I didn’t set out to capture sadness.”

I asked John whether there was a mood or emotion he was trying to capture in the poem, and he replied that he went through a number of emotions as he thought of different things to write about. He said: “I didn’t set out to capture sadness. I arrived at sadness though, through working on the poem.” Specifically, he said it was “by just the end of the poem. It was when I found receding for low, when I found what I wanted to do for low; low tide.” In this case, it appears that John was making meaning in an unanticipated way in terms of understanding a mood that he had been having over recent days. He then fully realized the way he had been tying together elements of his recurring mood and became conscious of it when he completed the poem. In his interview, John said: “My first reaction to it as a reader was: ‘Yeah, it’s talking about the receding time of life; the part of the natural cycle when the tide is going out.’”
Through his narrative and interview, John was able to articulate what he was consciously thinking while composing the entire poem, and how his intention for making his last line function differently than his first four lines was the key to how his poem developed. He reported that he was primarily focused on describing a scene from memory, rather than on developing any particular theme or idea with his poem. I asked John one of my standard questions, “Were there any ideas or abstractions you wanted to communicate when you were writing this particular poem?”

Well first of all, I was completely and utterly unconscious of any such thing. So I’d be analyzing it after the fact, I could certainly give that a try…. While I was doing it, no. I wasn’t thinking in terms of ideas or abstractions or anything.

I was really thinking about: I do a lot of kayaking, and I particularly like marshes and I particularly like this time of the year in marshes, and I was thinking of the special coloring of marshes, so the marsh in autumn colors was memory of experience. And then I was just thinking about: marsh plants exist above and below the water, and … you see coloring of different kinds going on. And then the tide line business was—to begin with, was giving it a setting, and giving it some action. And I suppose initially the idea low—low tide was also setting and description, and that’s why I didn’t want to settle on [it]—I wrote low, but it’s low tide, really, but (slight pause) I wanted to do something besides just describe. I had already done enough describing by the tide line part of it.

By his own admission, John hadn’t set out to use this poem to explore his mood or any themes of aging. It appears that his surprise understanding of his current experience of aging was due to his literary decision to stop developing the setting and include some action with his fifth line. It seems that John’s literary knowledge had a hand in guiding his meaning making in this poem.
John’s thought processes in developing the theme of his poem were also very likely due to chance or subconscious thought, rather than to conscious intention. In his interview, he described the process of developing the poem:

I had no idea of a theme, I had no idea of having any particular place to go, I’m looking for what’s the next sufficient thing, you know, what will do next. There are a lot of possibilities about what the next line can do, and what the next word can do, and I didn’t have a particular idea of: among that array of possibilities, I want this one. I just said, among these, well, what can I do? Okay, I can do one of these, you know, so let’s try it; let’s put that there and try. So if I’ve got that, then well, what will hook out of that? Well, there are a lot of things with hooks, you know? (laughs, slight pause) I think it’s like putting those things together—the Tinkertoys and Erector Set, now what’s the more contemporary version—there’s Legos. (slight pause) And then seeing whether you like it or not. And if you like it you keep it, and if you don’t like it, you do something else, you try something else.

In this statement, John reveals quite a bit about the unplanned way in which this poem developed. In other parts of his interview, he stressed that he “almost never” thinks in terms of themes when he writes poetry, regardless of the genre. Instead, he explained that he starts from a specific image, such as when he wrote this poem. While I think it is likely that his theme developed from images and actions that appealed to his subconscious, it is also quite possible, given the exploratory manner in which he assembled his poem, that his theme developed by chance, and that his preoccupation with aging caused him to see the relevance of the theme to his own life. Whatever the mechanism, the end result of John appreciating the applicability of the theme to his own life is what suggests that the act of writing this poem allowed John to create a new meaning for himself regarding a topic of importance to him.
Like Miriam, John found himself writing a poem on a broad theme that he had thought about many times. In fact, during the interview he detailed the ways in which he is familiar with the theme of milestone birthdays:

Okay, so I went through this process of writing this poem and I wasn’t really thinking about becoming sixty soon, and all of that. But I thought of that right after I read it again. Well, this becoming sixty-ness is pretty ingrained in me. I mean, I’ve been thinking about it for a while. I’ve been approaching it for a while. It’s interesting that in my mind that I wrote about the marsh here and all that, because one of my best friends and I, we do a lot of kayaking together, and particularly enjoy kayaking marshes. And [he] just had a big birthday, he turned seventy last month. And so all that stuff, it’s all been sort of churning around for me often.

Toward the very end of the interview, when I asked my standard question, “While you were creating the poem or reading the completed version, did you have any thoughts or emotions that seemed particularly new to you?” John said no, he didn’t have any new emotions, “nothing startling there.” Perhaps it was because he had thought so often about the theme of aging that he didn’t see the specific connection between his new poem and his life as worth remarking on.

Earlier in the interview, John had spoken of how he had made a connection between the sadness of the receding tide and some of his feelings about his approaching birthday, which had made an immediate impression on me. I wanted to perform a member check and see if my interpretation that his earlier comment had indicated that he had gained a specific insight through his poem. Therefore, I then reminded John that he had talked about preparing for his sixtieth birthday when he first read the completed poem, and asked him: “Would you say that that is, in a small way, a new thought or
emotion, something that seemed particularly new to you when you read through your poem?” He replied:

    Yes… I didn’t write it with that in mind at all… what struck me about that is that the poem was consistent with the larger pattern of my current emotional life. So, yeah.

In addition to coming to subtle new insights while writing the poems he drafted for the study, John also reported having insights at a much more profound level at other times while he was composing poetry, which will be discussed in detail in the findings for Sub Question C.

*Summary of the Bearing of John’s Writing Session on Sub Questions A & B*

The data from John’s writing session appeared to address Sub Question A but not Sub Question B. Although John composed his poem very quickly, it appears that he was not expressing a crystallized idea but that he developed the ideas of the poem as he wrote it (particularly the last line, which took longer to compose). John considered his experience of authoring the poem to be “an exercise of craft” for him, which shows that he drew upon skills and knowledge he had acquired through decades of writing poetry to consciously guide his efforts.

One of the most noticeable ways in which John appeared to gain insight through writing his poem is through the mood that developed as he composed it. He remarked: “I didn’t set out to capture sadness. I arrived at sadness though, through working on the poem.” Specifically, he reported that he did not decide to incorporate such a mood until he came up with his last line. Upon reading the final draft of his poem, John gained insight on how the poem mirrors his current situation. However, he explained in his
interview that “I didn’t write it with [my approaching sixtieth birthday] in mind at all.”

In this way, John may have used the writing process to surface a theme from his subconscious that he was able to recognize and appreciate once he had read his poem in its final form.

**Pearl’s Writing Session: Description and Discussion**

*Composing the First Draft*

Pearl began the session explaining how she usually gets her poetic inspiration while outdoors, so we had originally planned to go on a walk, bringing the voice recorders and pen and paper with us. We ended up doing the writing session in her living room, due to the weather. In fact, the very observation of our change in plans she made while she was practicing thinking aloud sparked the poem that she created during her session:

… it’s too hot to go out there today (laughs). But that’s part of it too. It’s hot, and it’s oppressive, and the hurricane’s coming, and it’s changing, and the whole world is going through a seasonal change in this, the hurricane kind of a feeling, kind of oppressiveness around you. So—and I see my—that’s an idea, with *tomatoes* (speaking slowly while writing) *wilt*ing *on the vine*.

Just a couple of minutes into the activity of practicing thinking aloud while trying to find something that she could write a poem about, she had already fixed upon a topic to write about. Because she said “that’s an idea,” and began writing on the very topic that she was talking about, we can conclude that the outdoor image she had begun to work with was material that was not a priori formed as a poem in her mind.
Pearl used this mental image of her tomatoes (which she told me was from seeing them earlier in the day) to write the first two lines of a draft of her poem, with “tomatoes” comprising the first line, and “wilting on the vine” comprising the second. Without pause, she continued thinking about her tomato plants:

They’re in the process of a change. They’re feeling the oppressiveness and the leaves are wilting and trying to sustain the plant as they are passing into a wilted form. And then they’re trying to give a tomato, their fruit, its all; its fullness. It’s a giving; there’s a giving there. I’m writing “giving.”

With this statement, Pearl drew upon the conditions of the day, the “oppressiveness” of the atmosphere and the coming hurricane as an ominous background and possible reason for the condition of the wilting leaves. In other words, she incorporated information from her immediate circumstances, rather than knowledge that had already crystallized in her mind (such as historic storms and their devastation), which further suggests that she was forming ideas in the moment rather than expressing an idea she had thought of before writing the poem. She then shifted her focus to the life-giving action of the plant—the tomatoes that are still growing—rather than the “wilting” leaves.

Without pause, Pearl shifted her thinking to the wider meaning of the scene she had described in the first three lines. She said:

And the whole process is in the change, and our whole lives are in a change, so as I connect with what’s inside of me, and how am I connected with that?

By asking “how am I connected with that?” Pearl had changed from the mode of objectively describing a carefully chosen image to creating a subjective response, using a common structure for her tanka in which the first three lines read as a haiku and the last two lines form a personal response to the haiku. In this way, it is likely that the tanka
form itself had influenced the development of her poem. There are also other accepted ways to structure a tanka (including as five short free verse lines), so we cannot be certain that Pearl’s thoughts had taken a subjective turn at this point due to the tanka form itself. Note also that Pearl had asked herself a genuine question, the function of which appears to be strategic in helping her to develop her poem. Pearl’s question acts as a means of changing the direction of her focus, much in the way that Elaine, Sam, and Elizabeth’s efforts to answer their own strategic questions have, as we will see below.

Before resuming Pearl’s writing session to see how she approached the task of answering the question she had posed, it seems pertinent to discuss whether her conception of the tanka form itself was a likely reason she had asked a question that would make the poem take a turn toward the personal at this point in the process of creating her first draft. There is some evidence from later in Pearl’s writing session, her narrative and interview that supports the conclusion that Pearl’s interpretation of the tanka aesthetic likely influenced her shift toward forming a personal, subjective response to what she had written in the first three lines. Toward the end of the writing session, when Pearl was explaining how her handwritten poem should appear in typed form on the page, she explained:

This is definitely a haiku (the first three lines), and this is a meditation on the haiku, and what the haiku has opened up for me…when I have the haiku come out so great in a tanka, when that first three come out in a unit, so closed…I find the other one is a meditation. It’s when it opens up a door, and the second…becomes a response to the first part. Then I indent it.

In this statement, Pearl shows that the structure of the tanka she wrote for this study is a common one that she uses. However, she also implies that this is not always the case by
using the phrase “when I have a haiku” and following it with “then I indent [the second part].”

Later, in the interview, when I asked if she saw any stylistic continuity between the poem she just wrote and the other poems she has written, she replied:

Yeah, that’s basically it… I try to have a concrete image, and I try to have it connect with greater realities of life—there again, with deeper meaning; I’m always searching for the meaning.

Whether Pearl’s interpretation of the tanka form ended up influencing the content of this particular poem is not conclusive, and it is not as important as the larger issue it raises. It is likely that the personal aesthetic of the poet—including his or her writing habits that may be shaped by familiar genres—is likely to influence the content of the poem in subtle ways, as the poet keeps changing parts of the poem that don’t fit his or her sense of how the poem should unfold, or what the poem should sound like.

Also, during her narrative, Pearl suggested that the tradition of including seasonal thinking in Japanese poetry may have also helped her to find an appropriate topic for her poem:

tanka is very reliant on season, because it really connects with what’s going on in your life. And I am in the autumn of my life, and it’s something I contemplate a lot, and I think it’s a time of a rich exploring to do about what life is and to come to terms with your life… And so those tomatoes out there kind of represented something that was a good thing to explore for that kind of feeling.

In the above statement, because she considers herself to be “in the autumn of [her] life,” Pearl has shown that the theme of autumn, as it is represented concretely in the wilting tomato plants outside, was particularly resonant for her. Additionally, she used the word “explore” in ways that suggest that she uses the writing process to think “about what life
is and to come to terms with your life” in new ways. Such an action could well be considered to be an act of inquiry.

Another possible subconscious influence on this poem is Pearl’s experience of disability throughout her life. After Pearl had given her first impressions during her narrative, she said in her interview: “I usually try not to write too much about disability, because that can be a trap for me. Because I’ve known so much of disability, and if I write about life and ability then it helps me to overcome disability. And so I’m not dwelling on what I can’t do, I’m dwelling on what I can do. Or what things can be done. And so I think that’s why I thought I’d write about autumn.” It is possible that there was more than one reason that autumn seemed an appropriate topic for Pearl’s poem.

Now we return to Pearl’s writing session. Along the lines of “how am I connected with that,” Pearl continued her train of thought by asking another question that was more specific to her poem:

…but, what can I give? What now—there you see, there you go, there; here’s where you face yourself, and this is possibly what—tanka means something because you have the tomatoes and the process of what’s happening on the vine and what’s happening in your life, but what you have to give: “giving.” And you face the emptiness. There, I’ll put that in: facing the emptiness. That’s pretty much what autumn is all about, isn’t it? *The autumn of our lives* (writes the phrase). …tomatoes / wilting on the vine / giving / facing the emptiness / the autumn of our lives. Do you think it’s—it’s so sad? [rhetorical; Pearl wasn’t looking at me, and I didn’t respond to these questions] Too sad? Should life be a sad enterprise? … There’s got to be something more to it than that though. It’s not really—I don’t think, what I feel about life.

In the above statement, Pearl made the connection between the phenomenon of her tomato plant wilting while giving tomatoes, and herself in the course of creating her first
complete draft (see Table 7). She initially thought of “facing the emptiness” in terms of how one’s focus might change in the latter years of life, but then rejected the idea because it was not resonant with her own experience or attitude toward life. In this way, Pearl had gone through a process that is common to inquiry; she had formed a hypothesis (that a good connection or similarity between the tomato plants in autumn and herself in “the autumn of our lives” is in “facing the emptiness”), tested it against her own attitude toward aging (“Too sad? Should life be a sad enterprise?”), and rejected the idea because she said it did not fit with “what I feel about life.”
Table 7: Pearl’s poem at three different stages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First complete draft</th>
<th>Tomatoes</th>
<th>Wilting on the vine—giving facing the emptiness—the autumn of our lives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>end of writing session &amp; at time of follow up interview</td>
<td>Tomatoes</td>
<td>Wilting on the vine giving life we cannot know what need the harvest feeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one year after follow up interview*</td>
<td>Tomatoes</td>
<td>Wilting on the vine giving life we can’t know need the harvest feeds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that Pearl did not make any changes to her poem between the writing session and time of the follow up interview, but she did present changes when I contacted her about a year after the follow up interview. She explained that her efforts were focused on “tightening it up and taking out connecting words that limit instead of clarify.” She further remarked that she “discovered that by eliminating the word "what" it opens the poem up and allows what I could not say to enter. There's always an element of ‘that which cannot be said’ in any good poem…this emphasizes ‘need’…which answers ‘giving’....”

Revising the Poem

Pearl then redirected her focus to a less bleak view of autumn, deciding definitively to remove her invocation of “emptiness.” She began to search for a new ending:

It’s changing. Changing to what? There we go. Now, we want to maybe take out that “facing the emptiness,” …Now this is really where you really need quiet time to think about autumn and let autumn come over you and feel what
the changes are in autumn and how their lives are
different….

This was Pearl’s first reference to her need for silence as she mulled over the way in
which changes come through autumn. She continued to work through ideas to form a
new ending:

The autumn. (6 second pause) Giving; I don’t know,
that’s—harvesting (5 second pause while writing).
Tomatoes / wilting on the vine / giving—harvesting.
Hmm. Now there’s something that this thing demands that
just is more than—it might be more than I can give it—
great. Wait maybe that’s it.

At this point, Pearl reread her poem through the third line, and then said she had lost her
idea. She then said:

Wait—what is “it”? What is it? (short pause) It’s the
(short pause)—(slowly while writing) giving a harvest we
cannot know. Tomatoes / wilting on the vine / giving / a
harvest we cannot know. Can we know our lives?... We
cannot know… Oh, maybe I’m getting too deep there.

In her interview, Pearl explained that when she asked herself “what is ‘it’?” she was
thinking of using the word “it” in a line (that she had not yet voiced):

The first thing that caught me was “it.” What is “it?”
Never use “it” in a poem. What is “it?” Tell somebody
what “it” is. The minute I saw I had “it” there, I said,
“what is it?” What’s the word I’m trying to say for “it?”

Pearl’s knowledge of the craft of writing made her realize that her poem would be
stronger if she chose a more specific word than “it” for her poem. Pearl’s sense of a
word that is unacceptable for her poem led her to think more about what exactly she was
trying to express, which helped her to develop the content of her poem (the fourth line in
her draft) in addition to the style in which she expressed her ideas.
Pearl then began to recite the lines of her poem again, and interrupted herself:

there’s something there, there’s something much more profound than the words I’m finding to express it there.
It’s something I have to talk into some words to get there.

With this statement, Pearl reconfirmed that she was experimenting with using different words to try to develop an idea that had not yet crystallized into words. She continued to read sections of her poem aloud, musing that she could use the word “changes” instead of “giving,” but then decided that she needed to use the word “giving.” She then paused in voicing her thoughts more frequently and for longer intervals, so I reminded her to speak aloud, even if she wasn’t thinking anything. She replied, “Oh, I’m thinking, but I’m waiting for the word to come to me.”

Pearl had already said earlier that she would need some “quiet time,” and was now having difficulty making progress in composing her poem. I wanted to accommodate her usual methods of writing as much as possible so she wouldn’t be prevented from finishing her poem, while still having a sense of when she was thinking anything that could be voiced and preserved for the study. I told her:

If you need a few seconds to be quiet to have a word come to you, you could just say “I’m going to be quiet now, let the word come to me,” and then you can interrupt your own silence and say whatever words are coming to you.

It appears that Pearl may have picked up on one of the words I used in this request as the word she was looking to put in her poem. She replied:

All right. Okay. Yeah, well I’ll try to work it through here, because I realize too, what you need. Maybe that’s what the—well, the harvest is not the harvest we cannot know—wait, that’s the answer—tomatoes / wilting on the vine / giving / a harvest we cannot know / (short pause, then slowly, while writing) what need it can feed.
Pearl had also used the word “need” in her reply, and then capitalized on it as the word she had been looking for to express the idea that was forming in her mind. During her interview, she specified the exact connection: “a harvest feeds a need; feeds a hunger.” Also during her interview, Pearl claimed that she would have come across the word she needed eventually, and that her usual way of writing a poem included taking cues from all around her. She said:

Your word didn’t anymore change, write, go into my poem, than if I was outside and the tomato—did the tomato write this poem?...my head still had to understand that...that was the word I was trying to search for. So don’t feel like you’ve inserted anything into it.

In the interest of being completely transparent on how my presence may have affected the data I collected, I have included the exact exchange that preceded the inclusion of the word “need” in Pearl’s poem, and how she regarded the occurrence. While a comment I made about adapting the think aloud protocol to her situation may have influenced the development of her poem, the context of the word I used was very much different from the context in which Pearl applied it. I will let the reader determine what level of impact my presence had on the data, and whether it is of importance.

Having written a new fifth line for her poem, Pearl still considered the poem a work in progress. She repeated the new line a few times, and then continued to rework the last two lines of the poem. She explained in her narrative:

I didn’t like that sing-songy “what need it can feed.” That had to be changed…I had “a harvest we cannot know,” and then, “what need it can feed.” And I didn’t like the word “it.” So I crossed [it] out; …“cannot know” had to go with “life.” Because it’s a life we cannot know. The harvest we know, but the life we cannot know.
In her narrative Pearl gave two explanations for changing her fifth line: she didn’t like the “sing-songy” sound of the phrase, and as she elaborated in her interview, she prefers not to use the word “it” in a poem. In this way, it appears that Pearl’s sense of aesthetics and/or knowledge of poetry had again influenced her decisions to keep revising the poem. The last three sentences of the above statement show that she had rewritten the last two lines of her poem in order to delineate that which can be known from that which cannot; a distinction that she hadn’t made until she decided to remove the word “it” from her final line.

Pearl then recited the poem a few times, and began to think of the poem’s overall meaning, before she made her final edits:

It reminds me of the Spanish proverb: there are more things grown in a garden than you know. (recites the poem)… and this is probably one of the things I wrestle with, too, is how you praise and have the thankfulness in life, and how the spiritual part of life is connected with the tomatoes wilting on the vine. Because the human spirit is more than just flesh and blood and yet, the flesh and blood holds so much…there’s so much that goes into a tomato.

In this remark, Pearl identified a paradox that has yet to be resolved: how is the positive, “spiritual part of life” related to the physical part that can die? This is an age old question about the meaning of life and one that cannot be fully answered in any poem. However, the imagery and meditation in Pearl’s poem offer an anchor for considering this issue (see Table 7 for the final draft of her poem).

Although Pearl started the writing process with using the imagery of her tomato plants, it turns out that it is not surprising that her poem took on a spiritual focus. During her interview, Pearl explained that growing tomatoes has been an apt metaphor for her sense of spirituality for quite some time:
When I first moved in here, my landlady asked me what religion I was and… I mean, what do you say to people like that? I mean, we all have our own religions, and I didn’t need to offend her about anything… I said, I believe in tomatoes. (laughs)… To me, that whole thing of putting that seed in that ground and having it grow is rather a miraculous experience to go through. It really is…. And to watch it, nurture it, and take care of it, and put it in cages, protect it and water it and everything, but…all I can do is water it. I can’t make it grow. And it feeds me… the tomato to me is a spiritual thing. I’m talking about seeds but it also applies to words…. What makes the poem grow? What gives it life? But that’s what I meant by spiritual thing.

In this explanation, Pearl has identified both tomatoes and poems as spiritual things that are alive and grow. Given the following factors: 1) Pearl has a history of regarding her tomato plants as symbols of spirituality; 2) she claimed in her interview that she often spends time pondering the meaning of life while writing her poems; and 3) she is in her latter years, what she considers to be “the autumn of [her] life,” perhaps her writing of this poem was not completely by happenstance, but was a surfacing of issues that have a place of prominence in her subconscious. If such were the case, any insight gained through writing this poem would be all the more significant to her.

It appears that one of the ways in which Pearl’s exploration of the theme of her poem progressed was by including something in the poem that didn’t ring true to her. During the interview, I was following up on some of the things that she had said during the writing session that I was hoping she would elaborate on in more detail, now that she no longer needed her concentration to write her poem. I pointed out to her that when she was writing her first draft, she noted that it was “sad.” She took that cue as an invitation to talk about a line that she had considered putting in the poem:
“Facing the emptiness” was something that I don’t know; I don’t understand emptiness. I guess my life has been very full and it’s always opening out into other things so I can’t even imagine death as being emptiness. It’s just a crossing over into more experience in a different form, a different shape; different consciousness. So …I can’t comprehend emptiness. I can understand leaving and loss and all that that entails in autumn. But leaving and loss has been so endemic in my life that it’s never created emptiness. It’s always opened out into something else. When [my second husband] Tom died it was a brutal, ghastly loss. And it changed my life drastically. But it wasn’t emptiness. So for me to write about emptiness is impossible. So I had to take that out. That wasn’t me. That wasn’t my writing. I see the tomatoes gone. So that’s why I thought of emptiness there. But the autumn of our lives is just a changing. To me, it’s not an emptiness. We’ll leave summer, but in the process we’re moving into winter, which is different. It’s just different, that’s all.

As we saw earlier, Pearl immediately decided to strike that line from her poem and continue searching for a line that felt more authentic to her beliefs. But her consideration of using “facing the emptiness” in her poem allows us to see another dimension of how inquiry may proceed as one writes a poem: Pearl found one of the limits of her beliefs by writing something that she found didn’t feel true to her, and then discovering the reason that she would edit it out. Sometimes one makes progress by ruling out alternative options that are not as promising.

Pearl’s Testimony: “little bit of knowledge”

At the beginning of her interview, when I asked Pearl if there was a mood or emotion she was trying to capture, her answer revealed that she considered her writing session to be a process of inquiry, and that the poem that she wrote represented
“knowledge” that could be added to the communal understanding of the bigger question of what life means:

I was trying to explore the mood of change in our life, and what it all means…. And perhaps none of us ever come to the idea of what life really means, but we all kind of share what we know and keep adding to the knowledge, a little at a time.

The above answer by Pearl represents a spontaneous and unsolicited claim that she used the writing session “to explore” a mood and what it means to humanity. She also expressed that the poem she wrote represented “a little” knowledge.

Near the end of the interview, when I asked Pearl my standard point blank question that hints at the topic of inquiry: “While you were creating the poem or reading the completed version, did you have any thoughts or emotions that seemed particularly new to you?” Her response was in the affirmative. She said:

It’s new in that I can’t understand it. It’s new in that it’s something that’s beyond understanding, but it’s something that’s old, and it’s as old as my soul, I suppose. It’s trying to experience it. (pause) I’ve been wilting for a long time (laughs). (pause) I think that the little bit of knowledge that I’ve gained from writing the poem, the understanding that even if this isn’t a great poem, and even if it doesn’t go any place, or doesn’t do anything, it has met some need, some need that was required at that particular time. I think that’s new.

In response to my direct question, Pearl readily claimed that she had a new thought. She even said that she gained a “little bit of knowledge…from writing the poem,” which is consistent with her many claims about how she has used poetry to make sense of life and the world around her on many other occasions.
I questioned a claim she had made in the above statement: “It has met a need for you?” In her reply she elaborated on the understanding she came to while writing the poem:

…The thing that was new to me was perhaps coming a little closer to understanding a little bit that all of our actions fit a need. The idea is: I go back to the spiritual aspect of it, is deciding what need we’re going to spend our time on. You know, how are you going to spend today? What need are you going to fill today? It is picking and choosing what’s important.

In this way, Pearl has shown how she can apply the wisdom of her poem to offer guidance in going about her daily living. (At a different point in her interview, Pearl also said that an important aspect of the poem was “how valuable time is; I don’t know if that’s captured in that poem. I’m hoping that it is. I’m hoping that it’s captured in the wilting of the vine and in that moment, or that process.”) It is this quality of time that Pearl refers to in the above quote about how the poem has met a need for her.) We have already seen how it is possible that Pearl’s inquiry may have led to a philosophical understanding (or, at the very least, an emotional resolution to an unanswerable question, as is discussed below with regard to Sub Question B). In the above testimony, Pearl shows that conducting inquiry through writing poetry can also lead to knowledge or attitudes that can be put to use in day to day decision making by setting priorities for using the limited amount of time we have.

When I asked Pearl what made the poem unique to her, her answer revealed a different facet of the knowledge she gained during the process of writing the poem:

It might be that perhaps the understanding that our need is important in life; that what we need is important in life. Actually, really, when you come right down to it, that’s when things are answered, is when you really, really, really
need, and you really, really, really, truly understand your need. That’s where your answers are.

Throughout the course of her interview, Pearl had told me of many hardships she had endured during her life, including spousal abuse from her first husband, being paralyzed for years, and the deaths of two of her children and her beloved second husband. Nevertheless, she kept a positive outlook throughout her life, and it seems possible that the realizations about need that crystallized for her while writing this poem were drawn from sensing a common theme in the effective ways in which she overcame her most trying moments. However, Pearl did not voice any connection to specific hardships in her life while writing the poem, so we cannot know what influence they may have had in shaping the poem she wrote. I can only say with certainty that the type of knowledge that she has described above is consistent with the way one might expect someone who has overcome great obstacles to speak about how one can find answers through having a profound need.

The Relevance of Pearl’s Writing Session to Sub Question B

It appears that the data from Pearl’s writing session does not directly relate to Sub Question B because she was not challenging ideas that had already been settled or formed in her mind. When she said “this is probably one of the things I wrestle with,” Pearl indicated that she was working with ideas that didn’t have clear cut answers due to the paradoxical nature and complexity of the issues she was contemplating. While the initial state of surety in Pearl’s mind does not apply to this research question (she didn’t claim to understand the meaning of life at any point in her session), key features of her writing session did resemble the scenario posed in this question. The ambiguous conclusion that
“we cannot know” the meaning of life or where we’re headed after the physical body dies fits snugly within the ambiguous type of outcome described in Sub Question B, in contrast to a specific crystallization of an idea that is new to the poet, as is addressed in Sub Question A. Therefore, it could be informative to examine the data from Pearl’s session in light of Sub Question B, not to answer Sub Question B per se, but rather to sketch a scenario for what other features one might look for in a poet’s inquiry when the outcome of the poem is ambiguity rather than surety.

The salient feature of Pearl’s inquiry related to the ambiguous ending of her poem is that she reported a preference for not knowing the answer of the question that her poem asks. In the interview, when I asked Pearl to identify some of the most important aspects of the poem, she referred again to her questions about the meaning of life: “The important part of the thing is trying to ascertain where are we going, what’s it all about, Alfie? (laughs)” I then asked her if she thinks it answers those questions. She replied:

I think it might be on the road pointing a way. I don’t think it can answer it. I think it asks it. It asks the question, and it points the way, but it’s on a road; it knows it’s a journey and it knows that it doesn’t know what lies ahead. So it can’t really answer it. It’s begging somebody to answer it, but then, would you really want to know? (laughs) I mean, to go to France, it’s better just to enjoy the journey while you’re there, instead of having somebody tell you what it’s all about before you get there. It’s never quite the same thing anyway, is it? So I don’t think you can ever answer that.

In the above statement, Pearl has identified something she doesn’t understand—something that nobody can know, and makes peace with it by realizing that it is best left that way. In this manner, she has used her poem to find an emotional resolution to a question that cannot be resolved. Perhaps a sense of emotional resolution is a key factor
when a more cerebral understanding is unattainable within the poem. The role of emotion, either in the response of the writer/reader or in the emotional content of the poem itself, is an intrinsic and defining characteristic of poetry, as it is with the arts in general. Studying the role of emotional resolution in the process of writing poems that have no clear conceptual resolution is a promising area for future research.

Summary of the Bearing of Pearl’s Writing Session on Sub Question A

Most of the data from Pearl’s writing session addresses the scenario posited in Sub Question A. Some of Pearl’s spontaneous utterances while she composed the poem can be taken as direct evidence that Pearl was developing the ideas behind her poem as she was composing it, rather than working to express an idea that had already formed in her mind, such as when she said “that’s an idea,” when she first thought of using the image of tomatoes in her poem, and when she said “wait, that’s the answer” when she had determined that the word “need” was relevant to “the harvest we cannot know.” Pearl also displayed signs of experimentation while engaging in the process of inquiry when she tried using the phrase “facing the emptiness” in her poem, and then subsequently rejected it because it did not feel true to her. Moreover, Pearl readily claimed that she had gained “a little knowledge” from the endeavor, and when she said “but then, would you really want to know?” she indicated that the poem she had written offered an emotional resolution to an inherently unanswerable question.
Overall Findings Summary for Sub Questions A & B:

Most of the poet sessions contained data that addressed Sub Question A, in that the poet either created a new meaning or refined an existing meaning in his or her mind (see highlights of overall summary in Table 8). These sessions were marked with the poets expressing an image or mood that they wanted to capture at the outset of the session, with very little elaboration on how the image was related to a theme or how the poem was likely to end. Examples are when Elaine decided to write about an ideal setting with a positive mood, and when Elizabeth wanted to write about a quality of blueness she saw in a woman’s eyes and sweater. Frank’s poem began with the idea of something “overhead,” and Pearl’s poem began with an image of her tomato plants. Even John’s poem, which developed quickly, began with a vague sense of the colors one can see in the marshes in autumn, and realized its meaning as the final line was composed. One of the poems—the one by Miriam—began with a very specific inspiration that was almost entirely developed within a few seconds at the beginning of the writing process, and the rest of the session was devoted to expressing this rather specific idea.

Sam’s poem ended up addressing Sub Question B, in that he developed and expressed a mood using a kite and horseshoe crab as metaphors in his poem, and then decided to change the tone of his poem to support an ambiguous outcome. Pearl’s data addressed Sub Question A, but part of her session was relevant to Sub Question B in terms of how a poet might use her writing process to take on an unanswerable question in the topic of her poem.
Table 8: Summary of Findings for Sub Questions A & B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Sub Q</th>
<th>Evidence of insight on topic or theme?</th>
<th>Evidence of emotional insight or resolution?</th>
<th>Did poet claim new thoughts or emotions?</th>
<th>Types of evidence of inquiry on topic, theme, or emotions* directly from spontaneous utterances and behaviors while writing:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Elaine | A     | Yes                                  | Yes                                         | Yes, and identified specific insight   | • Strategic question asking  
|        |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Observation followed by explaining its significance                                                                             |
| Miriam | A     | Yes                                  | No (indirect evidence)                      | Yes, but did not identify specific insight | • Observation followed by identifying its significance to her                                                                           |
| Sam    | A and B | No                                   | Yes                                         | Yes, and identified specific insight   | • Strategic question asking  
|        |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Generated multiple ideas or images and selected ones to develop further                                                             |
| Frank  | A     | No                                   | Not during writing process, but during interview | No                                    | • Explicitly noted occasions when didn’t know where to take the poem next  
|        |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Experimentation                                                                                                                   |
| Elizabeth | A | Yes                                   | Yes                                         | Yes, and identified specific insight   | • Strategic question asking  
|         |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Explicitly noted occasions when didn’t know where to take the poem next  
|         |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Observation followed by generating a plausible context to draw out its significance                                                                 |
| John   | A     | No                                   | Yes                                         | Yes, and identified specific insight   | • None, but later described the unplanned, experimental manner of how the poem developed                                               |
| Pearl  | A with aspects of B | Yes                                   | Yes                                         | Yes, and identified specific insight   | • Observation followed by explaining its significance  
|         |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Strategic question asking  
|         |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Experimentation                                                                                                                   |
|         |       |                                      |                                             |                                        | • Approaching an unanswerable question from a new direction                                                                          |

*Evidence of inquiry on expression is summarized separately and is not included in this table.
Evidence of Inquiry:

It is now time to take stock of the different types of searching behaviors and attitudes the participants exhibited. Listed in the far right hand column of Table 8, the different types of evidence of inquiry on the content of the poem can be grouped into three main categories. These categories represent the specific ways in which inquiry was made evident in these data. Of course, there may be other indications of inquiry that have not surfaced in the transcripts of these seven writing sessions, so the description below is offered as a starting point for characterizing the specific moves a poet might make while conducting inquiry through the writing process. However, while these moves are good indicators that inquiry is being conducted, they are not prerequisites for inquiry. Much work is still to be done, both theoretically and empirically, to characterize the process of inquiry, including the identification and role of passive strategies for engaging in inquiry, such as “sleeping on it” when one cannot immediately solve a problem, or engaging in various types of meditation (including self-hypnosis, as Frank had reported as one of his methods of relaxing his mind to overcome blocks in his writing process, and Pearl’s meditative state that she referred to as “letting the silence talk into you,” both of which are detailed in the Findings for Sub Question C).

The categories below constitute only the most explicit indicators of conscious behaviors that reflect a search for knowledge, understanding, or resolution. All of the examples listed below originate from the poets’ spontaneous utterances during their writing sessions unless otherwise noted. Data gathered in the moment of shaping the poem represent the most immediate and direct source currently available for characterizing the inquiry process in this type of context. Because inquiry on the content
of the poem is more difficult to establish than inquiry on expression, the discussion of the three categories of inquiry moves below are built upon the evidence for inquiry on the content of the poem. However, it is likely that inquiry on expression could take the same general form as these examples. A separate discussion of inquiry on expression follows.

**Inquiry: Unknowing and the Search that Follows**

A basic prerequisite for inquiry is that there must be some sense that knowledge or understanding of some sort—an adequate answer to a question, either asked or unasked—exists, but is currently unknown. The other important part of the definition of inquiry is that there needs to be a search for knowledge or understanding. That sense of unknowing was clearly articulated by both Frank and Elizabeth, and their observations about not knowing where their poems were headed were followed by a search for ideas regarding the content of the poem, in order to come up with a first draft. The specific utterances and contexts of these examples showed that Frank and Elizabeth, at that point in their writing sessions were conducting inquiry on the content of their poems rather than (or in addition to) inquiry on the expression of it.

For example, Frank acknowledged that he didn’t know where his poem was headed on multiple occasions while composing his first draft. After writing the first two lines of his draft, he said: “I’m not exactly sure where this is going, which would be typical. (short pause) For the moment I’m going to throw in ‘gathering.’ I don’t know where this one is going.” He made a similar statement as he drafted his fourth line: “I’m thinking of September. (short pause) I don’t know what will follow this, so I’m just going to throw it down. September (pause) chill.” These excerpts from Frank’s
transcript shows the experimental nature of how he engaged in drafting his poem—not only did he not know where the poem was headed at various junctures, but he also made it clear that the lines he was composing were provisional; the experimental nature of his first draft became evident through the iterative process of evaluating what he had written and revising it once he had a first draft to work with.

In contrast, while drafting her poem, Elaine stated “for the moment I haven’t got any real direction.” However, it is not as clear as the other two poets’ statements that she was referring to the content of her poem, since she had already posed two different themes that she might develop before saying this. It is possible that her remark may have been an indication of inquiry on expression. As a conservative measure, I have not included Elaine’s example as evidence for this phenomenon regarding the content of the poem in the summary table or in the current discussion.

In addition to the examples from Frank and Elizabeth’s sessions, another facet of how a poet might explicitly claim a state of unknowing and then search for answers came from John’s interview. John did not make any explicit remarks about not knowing how he would develop his poem as he drafted it, but described during his interview the unplanned manner in which he developed the poem, which involved a sense of not knowing as well as a search: “I had no idea of a theme, I had no idea of having any particular place to go, I’m looking for the next sufficient thing….” He then went on to describe in abstract terms the manner in which he regarded the “possibilities” of his writing experience, and how he approached them.

Another way in which the poets evidenced that they were engaged in the process of inquiry was through posing themselves genuine questions about their poems, a slightly
more focused and prescriptive activity than acknowledging that they didn’t know where their poem was headed. Elaine, Sam, Elizabeth and Pearl all engaged in asking questions about their poems that they then went on to answer with regard to the content of their poems, and in doing so, advanced their progress toward creating a poem that satisfied them. For example, when Elaine asked herself “how will I manage to do something with this very ideal kind of image?” She immediately answered her question with ideas for two different themes she could develop: “Maybe compare it to the lousy world we live in, or what the world could be like.” Elaine went on to draft and revise her poem, incorporating the first idea as her theme. This type of question-asking appears to be a strategic tool in addition to a sign that the poet is engaging in inquiry. Further research is therefore warranted to characterize what types of questions appear to be the most helpful, when to ask them, and how one might teach this skill to novice poets.

Many consider brainstorming to be a thinking strategy that is often effective in promoting inquiry for open-ended problems, where the solution is not fixed, but rather includes a multitude of possibilities (Perkins, 2000). When Sam was deciding what the horseshoe crab’s action would be in his poem, he generated some rather different options—including “spins,” “struggles,” “moves,” and “settles”—before selecting one to try in his poem. Sam did not formally engage in the activity of brainstorming; his primary goal was simply to find an action that seemed appropriate enough to allow him to continue developing his poem to his satisfaction. However, his behavior did exhibit two defining characteristics of effective brainstorming: generating multiple options, and diversifying the options that are created (Perkins, 2000). Sam generated variety in his options, which included diametrical opposites with the contrast between *struggles* and
settles. Sam’s inclusion of these distinctly different options shows that he was not merely looking for a synonym to the first option he generated in an act of inquiry regarding expression, but that he had not yet decided what response he wanted the crab to have to its predicament. Sam’s search for an action for his horseshoe crab was central to developing the emotional content of his poem.

**Inquiry through Experimentation**

Experimentation as a method of advancing inquiry can be briefly characterized as the testing of an idea or product by putting it into the context where it will be used (or a very similar situation), and evaluating its effectiveness in achieving the intended purpose. Experimentation often takes the shape of an iterative process, where the evaluation stage is followed by making adjustments in order to improve the intended effect, and the revised idea or product (or even context) is then tested in its own right. A trial and error form of experimentation was seen in the markedly provisional nature of some of the parts of Frank’s first draft (“for the moment I’m going to throw in ‘gathering’”), including sensory images and their implications, which he later revised in order to improve the poem.

Experimentation also played a key role in Pearl’s writing session. We can see a search for better meaning was conducted by Pearl when she found something that untrue about a statement or idea, decided to discard it for that reason, and then worked to replace it with an idea that seemed truer to her. When Pearl wrote her first draft and then determined that her line “facing the emptiness” did not fit with her own experiences of
difficult times, she took out the line and worked to replace it, eventually coming up with a new ending that she identified as representing a “little bit of knowledge.”

**Inquiry through Identifying or Explaining the Significance of Observed Phenomena**

Another form of inquiry entails making an observation and then identifying the significance of that observation to one’s own life. Both Miriam and Elaine made observations about their world and then explicitly articulated the personal meaning that their observations led to. For example, Miriam’s inquiry progressed very rapidly after she decided not to write a poem centered on the scent of freesia. She continued looking at the plants she had on a table in her living room, first describing the display, and then noting a significant feature regarding her collection: “…and some of it is old and wilted, but I don’t like to dismiss it on account of its age or its vulnerability… So maybe I’ll try that…I’ll start there and see if it takes me any place.” Through progressive iterations of her poem drafts, Miriam came to increasingly stress the connection between caring for her garden of pots and caring for herself, making an observation of a display in her living room into a statement of personal meaning.

In a similar fashion, Elizabeth showed us that one could make an observation and then create a plausible context or story to explain the significance of that observation. She reported that she did this by taking on a persona to answer the strategic question she had posed herself: “…why am I struck by this?” By tapping into her fiction writing skills, Elizabeth was able to take on a different perspective, imagining that her narrator was an older man, in order to create a hypothetical context that would allow her to explain how
the image of youth she had created with her first few lines could have a particular significance to one who is aging.

As we have seen from Pearl’s writing session, the most important part of inquiry regards the search, as some questions are unanswerable. Pearl investigated an age old dilemma: developing an explanation for the meaning of life. Specifically, she pondered how to reconcile “the spiritual part of life” that we cannot know with the dying of the physical—the part that we can know. She approached this topic in a new way, framing it in a new context (using the imagery of wilting tomato vines) in order to explore the question, and then came to a preference for an answer based on the new imagery and context she had developed. While she concluded that the paradox remains, she believed that her poem “points the way” toward answering the question, and found emotional resolution through writing her poem: “but then, would you really want to know? (laughs) I mean, to go to France, it’s better just to enjoy the journey while you’re there, instead of having somebody tell you what it’s all about before you get there.”

**Inquiry on Expression**

In addition to inquiry conducted on the topic, theme or emotions of their poems, all of the poets’ writing sessions exhibited signs of inquiry with regard to expression. The above categories described the *process* of inquiry using examples where inquiry moves that led to insight on the content of the poem. This section delves into the findings regarding evidence for occasions when the *goal* (regardless of which inquiry process was being used) was to find an appropriate and/or more impactful method of expressing the poem. For example, many writing sessions were marked by moments where the poets
voiced their aesthetic preferences immediately before revising the aspect of the poem that didn’t live up to their expectations. Some poets remarked on the rhythm or alliteration that they saw in their poem drafts, commenting on factors that influenced their decisions to continue revising or to move on to developing subsequent lines.

When Elizabeth said “I don’t like that, but let me try it” she made it clear that she was not simply transcribing a fully formed poem. Rather, she was experimenting with methods of expressing an idea that had occurred to her in broad strokes, rather than as a specific statement: a comparison of youth and aging using the seasonal images of summer and winter. Frank was clearly conducting inquiry on expression when he provisionally sequenced distinct, unconnected ideas together, and then reworked the phrasing and line order to form a whole greater than its parts: a mood of seasonal sadness that intensifies throughout the poem.

Although there are specific occasions in the data that reveal inquiry on expression, the fact that each of the poems written for this study was revised in some way before the poet considered it finished is proof enough that all of the poets conducted inquiry on expression at some level during their writing sessions. None of the poems came out fully written on the first attempt during this study, although John’s poem underwent very few revisions. That is not to say that such a phenomenon never happens; it is simply a rare occurrence that does not describe the ways in which these seven poets typically go about their work of writing poems. During their interviews, each of the poets confirmed that the poems they had written for the study were typical of what they would normally write, and that the manner in which they went about writing their poem was more or less what they usually did when writing a poem. Of course, some poets
mentioned caveats about how engaging in the think aloud protocol likely had some impact how their writing session unfolded (see discussion in Methods section for details), but none of the poets claimed that their poems usually came out perfect on the first try. While such a finding would be considered a given by many readers, as I mentioned earlier, there is a myth that was championed and promulgated by poets such as Coleridge that claims that poems are written in their entirety by the subconscious, and that these poems emerge not as a draft that requires honing, but as a completely formed poem. The data from these writing sessions and interviews suggest that such occurrences are very rare. The finding that conscious effort often plays a role in shaping poems for these seven poets means that conscious use of the mind, such as in the use of thinking strategies (such as strategic question asking) and literary knowledge, is an important part of the creative writing process. Thinking strategies and literary knowledge can be learned, so designing good instruction is a worthwhile endeavor in the goal of preparing novices to become skilled poets.

Inquiry on Expression Can Lead to Insight on the Content of the Poem

In some cases, it appeared that the inquiry that the poet was conducting in the service of expression also ended up spurring forward that poet’s inquiry on the content of the poem. For example, Pearl’s sense of what constituted good writing made her decide to eliminate the word “it” from her poem draft. Her sense that it was unacceptable to allow this word to remain in her poem led her to think more about what exactly she was trying to express, which helped her to develop the content of her poem in addition to the style in which she expressed her ideas. Specifically, her examination of which part of her
The poet’s conception of the genre in which he or she is writing may also become a factor that allows inquiry in the service of expression to generate insights related to the content of the poem. For example, after writing a haiku-like observation in the first three lines, Pearl asked herself “…and how am I connected with that?” Similarly, Elizabeth reported in her narrative that after she had written a haiku-like observation in her first three lines, she asked herself “…why am I struck by this?” In the traditional Japanese structure of the tanka genre of poetry, the first three lines resemble a haiku and the last two lines represent an abstract, subjective, and often personal reflection on the concrete image or action of the first part of the poem. These poets’ knowledge of historic trends in the genre in which they were writing likely played a role in encouraging them to favor such questions over options with a less personal focus, so one might be inclined to think of these questions as inquiry to advance the expression of the poem. However, the
context in which these questions were asked suggests that the insights that the poets eventually gained by answering these questions led them to develop the themes of their poems: neither poet had given any indication of consideration of a theme before asking these questions, but began to develop a possible theme immediately afterward.

The above findings suggest that, for some poets in this study, their literary knowledge and skills caused them to come to insights on the subject, theme or emotions of their poetic inquiry while working on the poem that they wrote for this study. These findings imply that perhaps the teaching of literary skills should take on importance as a tool for inquiry in the humanities and social sciences in addition to its obvious role in literature and the arts.
FINDINGS TO SUB QUESTION C: THE POETS’ PERCEPTIONS

Introduction

While much interesting information came from the poets’ writing sessions, the writing sessions represented the thoughts and behaviors of the poets as they wrote a single poem (or two to four poems, for a couple of poets who opted to write more than one). The poets had been asked to write a poem on the spot, without the usual impetus of an intrinsic reason to write a particular poem. There was still much to discover about the poets’ regular writing habits, their sense of how the activity of writing fits into the greater scope of their life, and whether they perceived their process of writing as one in which they engaged in inquiry, either in agreement or in opposition to the way in which they went about writing their poem for the study. Below I offer the poets’ perceptions on their regular practice of writing poetry to supplement the data from their writing sessions, and then I relate how their perceptions advance the findings of this study.

While reading the poets’ perceptions on how writing poetry imparts various types of meaning in their lives and how they characterize their thought process related to all stages of poetry writing, there is a key point of caution to keep in mind. We must acknowledge that poets are a self-selecting group. It is possible that the participants in this study (and other poets) have a natural facility for using language as a symbolic medium for thought. It is possible that the benefits they report from engaging in writing poetry come primarily from their hard-earned practice of their craft, and that such benefits are therefore equally available to all individuals who are willing to engage in a sustained and thoughtful practice of writing poetry, regardless of their initial aptitude and
proclivities for using a verbal means of representation for thought and communication. On the other hand, perhaps the individuals who become interested in poetry enough to put the time and effort into sustaining a practice of writing their own poetry do so because they have an aptitude for using language in such a way that they derive different benefits (or to a greater degree) than a person who is not drawn to poetry in such a fashion. To some extent, this is a classic nature vs. nurture debate, which appears in so many guises in the field of education (and which is usually resolved by acknowledging that both contribute to the phenomenon of interest). While my own orientation toward the topic favors the importance of nurturing ability, I am unaware of hard evidence to cite in refuting the importance of natural differences in verbal ability, and how this might affect the types of multifaceted experiences that the poets describe.

There are occasions where the poets in this study report that their practice of writing poetry imparts great benefits to themselves, and there are also occasions quoted below where a poet will draw upon personal experience to prescribe specific ways in which they believe writing is a beneficial activity for everyone. I can assure the reader from my experience of interviewing these poets that their responses were sincere, carefully considered, and represent a thoughtful orientation toward an important area of their lives. For that reason, each poet’s testimony deserves our trust that the poet is not only providing an honest description of experience or belief in reply to my interview questions, but is also being candid and revealing deep reflections on how poetry operates in his or her life. However, we must also take into account that each poet’s perception is necessarily derived from personal experience and is shaped by his or her own beliefs about how the mind works. While I hope that someday soon the benefits of writing
poetry that these poets describe will be accessible to any given individual through engagement in high quality instructional opportunities on poetry, we must be careful not to generalize the benefits of writing poetry that these poets describe to the general public at the present. Given the early stage of this research, it is perhaps more useful to consider the poets’ testimonies as representing possibilities that might one day be achieved by a wider population through offering educational programming that can support virtually any individual in achieving the level of skill and knowledge of these published poets.

**Addressing Sub Question C1:**

**Writing Poetry Affects Meaning Making in Other Areas of Life**

Sub Question C1 asks: How do the poets perceive that sustaining a practice of writing poetry has impacted their meaning making in other areas of their lives? All of the poets in the study talked about writing poetry in ways that showed that it has a profound effect on their meaning making in other areas of their lives. Some of the statements made by the poets (related below and included in the other sections relating to Sub Question C) were precise in identifying ways in which poetry has brought meaning to their lives, and some of their statements were at the more general level of claiming that poetry is meaningful to them.

Some of the poets were specific in identifying how writing poetry affects their meaning making, such as when Sam described how he is able to relive his past experiences through reading his old poems, or when Elizabeth explained how writing poetry has encouraged her to observe the people and environment around her more closely. There were also claims that more generally asserted the importance of writing
poetry to one’s well being, such as when Miriam likened the personal importance of writing poetry to that of breathing. Regardless of how much detail the poets used to describe the way that poetry has contributed to the meaning of their lives, the testimony of the poets throughout the Findings for Sub Question C suggests that the meaning that they assign to any given poem is just the tip of the iceberg. The poets have reported many ways in which the entire enterprise of writing has meaning in addition to the specific meanings that are embodied in the poems that they write. From the ways in which they find it to be a meaningful way to spend their time, to the ways in which sharing their poems helps them to connect with others, the poets have reported many ways in which sustaining their writing practice has enhanced their lives.

There were a few themes in how the poets perceived that their practice of writing poetry added meaning to their lives. Five of the poets identified ways in which they use poetry to relate to others. In their descriptions of this phenomenon, they described a sense of sharing ideas, feelings and experiences that they value, of communicating with others, and even of connecting with humanity in abstract ways.

Six of the poets related ways in which poetry enables them to experience life in ways that go above and beyond what they are normally capable of. Some of the poets expressed this theme by identifying ways that poetry helps them to live more fully. For example, Miriam expressed the belief that writing poetry helps her to extend her own sense of herself. Elizabeth told of how writing poetry encourages her to be more observant of her surroundings and the people she interacts with, and helps her to engage more deeply with the world so that she is generally more “enthusiastic” about life. Pearl expressed the belief that writing poetry and creating art have in the past (and to a certain
extent, still do) helped her to overcome disability by training herself to focus on what she “CAN do.”

The poets had so many wonderful things to say about how poetry was meaningful in their lives that I was not able to fit all of it within the text of this chapter. I have chosen to focus on developing the two robust themes that I found in the data: how the poets perceive that writing poetry helps them relate to others, and how they believe it enables them to achieve objectives above and beyond their usual capacities. I have collected and commented on the poets’ other remarks (and more complete versions of quotes that I have abbreviated below) on how they find poetry to be meaningful to them in Appendix J: Extension of the Findings to Sub Question C1.

Miriam’s Perceptions

In response to my question of what has kept her writing poetry over the years, Miriam began her answer strongly: “I cannot stop. I cannot stop. Even if nobody ever hears it or sees it or reads it, I need to do it.” Miriam’s unequivocal claim had impressed me. In order to get a better sense of the ways in which Miriam found her practice of writing poetry to be personally meaningful, I decided to probe further into the response she had just given. I pointed out that Miriam had begun her reply by saying she “cannot stop.” I asked her if there was anything else she could tell me about that. She answered: “…I can’t stop. Thank God I can’t stop. Because if I stop, that means I’m putting a stop to myself. So, I’m very happy that I can’t stop….” Miriam expressed several reasons that she “can’t stop” writing poetry. The most fundamental reason appears to be that she believes she would be “putting a stop to” herself if she stopped writing poetry, which
implies that she views the act of writing as an extension of herself. In this manner, Miriam communicated that writing poetry is a manner in which she is able to extend her sense of self above and beyond what she perceives she would be able to if she were to stop writing poetry.

Miriam had prefaced her remarks that she “can’t stop” writing poetry with a reference to the act of writing poetry as “a conversation I’m having all the time.” I thought it was interesting that Miriam had referred to writing poetry as being a “conversation” as the reason she gave for not being able to stop writing poetry. I expressed my interest in that word, and she replied:

Well, it is a kind of conversation, with myself, until it becomes a dialogue: …when somebody publishes it. Or when I’m walking with a friend or somebody and they say such a thing—oh, I just wrote a haiku about that, and I tell it to them. Something that reminds me, something they say provokes it, and then…it becomes an echo.

In this explanation, Miriam shows that she considers the act of writing to be a relational activity, even at the early stages, when she is the only one involved in the conversation. In that respect, it is likely that Miriam refers not only the relational aspect of a conversation, but the intellectual or emotional stimulation that conversation provides, as well.

Miriam had also mentioned sharing her poems through publication, which she considers engaging in “a dialogue,” and sharing her poems with friends during an ongoing conversation about something else, when a poem she has written that is relevant to the topic becomes an “echo” to her friend’s words. I then asked Miriam what were the benefits and drawbacks of sharing her poetry with others. She remarked:
Sometimes it means something to them. The drawback is, sometimes it may happen that they don’t see anything in it, or like it, and you might have said something valuable, but I don’t run into that much. I don’t know about any drawbacks.

In her answer, Miriam revealed that the primary purpose in using her poetry to relate to others is through sharing the meaning of the poem. When Miriam said that the benefit is that “it means something” to the person she shared the poem with, she could be referring to the ability of a poem to relay an insight or to have an emotional impact on the recipient, or both. Such an answer implies that the poem also “means something” to Miriam, which is presumably why she decided to share it in the first place: when she believes she said “something valuable” in her poem. It appears that Miriam perceives the way in which she uses poetry to convey meanings that she finds “valuable” to be an important part of her writing practice. Additional details on how Miriam reported that writing poetry is meaningful to her are included in Appendix J: Extension of the Findings to Sub Question C1.

**Sam’s Perceptions**

Sam answered the question “What are the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry for you?” by invoking meaningful ways in which poetry can function in his life, implying that poetry allows him experiences above and beyond the limits of our current understanding of how time operates (and the impossibility of time travel). He characterized reading poems he has written as enabling him to engage in activities that we have not yet found a literal means for achieving:

I can sometimes read an old poem and it may bring back a mood or a feeling from when I wrote it or the place that
inspired it, or the people, or the setting. (slight pause) That it’s almost like a time machine or (slight pause) a portal to another time and place, or feeling. So it’s pretty functional.

Sam describes how old poems conjure up his previous experiences so vividly that he uses science fiction terminology to describe the effect as one where he is actually transported “to another time and place” rather than simply recalling the experience. Sam’s conclusion that poetry is “pretty functional” shows that he perceives the act of writing and then reading his poems as serving a purpose for him: he uses his poems to directly connect himself with the experiences that were significant enough for him to have recorded them in poems. In short, he is able to relive his past experiences and emotions.

**Elaine’s Perceptions**

Most of Elaine’s explanations on the meaningful ways in which she uses poetry in her life are also examples where she explicitly spoke of using writing as a means of thinking. Those examples are presented in response to Sub Question C3. When I asked her what were the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry for her, her response shows that she enjoys sharing her poetry as a form of relating to others:

They’re highly personal. I mean, the benefits are personal, and (slight pause) it makes me feel good. I mean, I feel pretty good that I came up with this poem this afternoon (laughing). And I’m anxious to show it to other people and see what they think. You know, it’s part of our vanity. That’s a big benefit. And, as I said before, it’s an occupation, it’s a means of expressing oneself.…

Elaine’s reply shows that the feeling of achievement that she has when she is able to write a poem, especially one that she can share with others, is one of the ways in which writing poetry is meaningful to her. She also reported that she finds that the way in
which poetry offers her a “means of expressing [herself]” is important to her, as well.
While Elaine may have meant this in a private sense of simply finding ways to express emotions, we can see from Elaine’s exuberance to share her poems with others that poetry also provides her a means of communicating her ideas and emotions to others.

\textit{Frank’s Perceptions}

When I asked Frank what has kept him writing poetry over the years, he replied: “The general enjoyment of having created something, but, that pleases me….” In his answer, Frank shows that the act of creation is a joy for him to engage in, and that his joy is realized when his creation satisfies his sense of what represents a good poem. As we will see, part of Frank’s expectation for a poem is that it will carry meaning above and beyond the message that the poem communicates. At various other times in his interviews, Frank articulated what he looks for in one of his poems in order for it to merit his approval: “It’s got to elicit something more than just a string of words, for me, for someone else; if it doesn’t, I don’t think it’s successful. And all the poetic elements, to me, have to be in there, whether it’s the diction, the rhythm….” In addition to the stylistic elements of expression in poetry, Frank also mentioned “coherence” as a main element he looks for in his poems. He also said that there should be “an enigmatic aspect,” which he characterized by saying: “I enjoy a poem you can chew on, not just swallow.” In short, each of Frank’s poems must be more than a sum of its parts for it to please him. In this way, we might consider that Frank perceives that he is making meaning by combining the elements of poetry such as word choice and rhythm with the
content of the poem, and that he expects that the resulting synthesis should “elicit something more than just a string of words.”

Similar to Elaine, after Frank mentioned the “enjoyment of having created something” in response to the question of what has kept him writing poetry over the years, he then went on to talk about the ways in which writing poetry stimulates his mind. Frank’s elaborations on how he believes that writing poetry helps to keep “the machinery of the brain” functioning, particularly as he ages, are included in the findings for Sub Question C3. During Frank’s follow up interview, he was discussing how he benefits from sharing his poetry with his “crit group,” and will often revise his poems more than once due to critical feedback from others:

…so I’m very conscious of the reaction anything I say or write has with other people, because that’s where it’s at. It’s not satisfying me alone. Somehow it has to trigger some kind of reaction on somebody else’s part, either nausea, or joy, or profundity, or asking someone to think a little bit more about what I’m talking about.

In this way, Frank described how sharing his poetry with others is meaningful for him.

As an extension of Frank’s beliefs that a good poem is more than the sum of its parts, he expects the poem to have an impact on its reader, either at the visceral sensory level, the emotional level or the intellectual level. Using poetry to connect with others in some way was reported as a key purpose for writing poetry for several poets in the study, including Frank.

Elizabeth’s Perceptions

When I asked Elizabeth why she wrote poetry, she gave a reason that she had already expressed in an essay that she had published in a haiku journal. She explained: “I
started writing haiku because I found that it was a way to express what I had been observing, which I developed the habit of really looking at things.” She went on to explain that she had taken an art appreciation class in which she “became aware of little things in which there’s beauty.” Years later, when she read haiku for the first time, she reported that:

I thought: this is the way to express all these little beautiful things that have moved me, and continue [to do so]...And when I discovered tanka, the difference is that it is not objective like haiku. It can be subjective. I can express— overtly—feelings... And then the other poetic form I use is haibun, which combines prose and haiku, and that satisfies my storytelling; my need to write a narrative.

Later in her interview, when I asked Elizabeth what has kept her writing poetry over the years, she reemphasized her “continual need to express” what she sees, her emotions, and her experiences.

Elizabeth also gave a more detailed account of how the art appreciation class had taught her to look more closely at the world in the first place, to be able to notice the things that she would later come to express in poetry. She explained:

And after that class, I didn’t [do the specific exercises that trained me to appreciate small things] anymore, but I was aware of looking—of really looking at things, not just going through life seeing: oh yeah, there are mountains and there are trees, there are woods, but there’s...a caterpillar on that leaf that’s on the tree—little things that before, you just take for granted. Maybe it got me back to looking at things—without even thinking about it, with a child’s eye...and so I guess that class got me to see things more with the wonder of a child. And it wasn’t until years later, when I discovered haiku, I discovered a way in which to write about it.

Elizabeth offered a description of how the art appreciation class had trained her to see elements of her surroundings in a way where she can appreciate the details that are often
overlooked by the adult world. The foci of her attention for the art class are the same
types of elements that take center stage in the poetry genre of haiku. In the above
statement, Elizabeth emphasizes the role of poetry in expressing the details that she has
been made aware of and come to appreciate.

When I asked Elizabeth what the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing
poetry for her, she answered in a way that tied her earlier answers together in a synthesis:

Well, it keeps me enthusiastic about life, about wherever I
am. I love just going out and looking at scenery and taking
walks and I guess it just keeps me stimulated (slight pause)
and enthusiastic... because I keep looking at the world. I
keep observing people and places and things and I just keep
going through life with my eyes open, and partly it’s just
because I like to write poetry, and I think one plays upon
the other. I write poetry because my eyes are open and I
see things, and I look for things so that I can write poetry.
It’s like the chicken or the egg, which comes first?

In this explanation, we can see that Elizabeth’s practice of writing poetry not only allows
her to express the beauty that she sees around her, but also keeps her “stimulated” by
reminding her to look for the beauty to have something to write about. In this manner,
Elizabeth appears to perceive poetry as a way of keeping engaged with the world around
her. Her writing practice encourages her to “keep observing people,” to keep “looking at
scenery and taking walks,” and remaining alert for inspiration that may come for a poem.
Elizabeth reported that her writing practice keeps her “enthusiastic;” poetry offers her a
meaningful way to engage with the world around her, above and beyond the ways in
which she feels she would regularly engage with the world if she didn’t sustain a practice
of writing poetry.
Pearl’s Perceptions

Pearl spoke of how poetry acts as a means of relating to others in a number of ways during her interviews (See Appendix J for additional details). At several points in her interview, Pearl returned to the subject of sharing poetry and why it is so important to her. For example, I had been asking her about another topic and she guided her answer back to the topic of sharing poetry:

I think there are some things that happen in art that cannot be defined…poetry says things that can’t be put into words. That’s the point. You say things that people instinctively understand but you cannot find a word to say it. And what happens when you can share it, that’s the most fantastic thing in the world, is when somebody else understands it too and neither one of you’ve been able to say it. And you can’t explain that to people, because some people just don’t understand.

In this statement, Pearl has reemphasized the importance of using poetry to relate to one another. She has also expressed that the joy she feels from sharing poetry stems from the thrill of communicating ideas and experiences that had seemed impossible to express through words.

Later in the interview, I remembered that Pearl had said that “poetry says things that can’t be put into words,” and played devil’s advocate in order to elicit more of her thoughts on how poets communicate. I asked her: “When you’re dealing with something that can’t be said and you somehow capture it in a poem, does that mean it can be said?” She replied:

No. Because what happens is you passed on a feeling to somebody else…that’s what happens in the poem. You’re handing them something that’s happened to you that somebody else has experienced also. They can’t feel it, but they can go back and recall it. And sometimes if that
memory is sharp enough within them, or means enough to them, they can almost experience it.

Pearl had given an explanation of how she believes the process of using poetry allows her to communicate with others: by reminding them of times when they have had similar experiences and emotions. This elicitation of empathy may be one of the reasons why Pearl believes that sharing poetry entails forming a relationship, and why it represents “the sharing of humanity,” as we will see below.

Pearl revealed another facet of how she regarded writing and sharing poetry as a humanistic endeavor. She began by relating an experience she had while interacting with people who were displaying elitist attitudes about poetry on a blog site. After giving some examples of behavior she didn’t approve of, she concluded:

I haven’t got time for people that are just annoying, or trying to be annoying. There [are]...an awful lot of people that use poetry. And poetry, I don’t think, is well served when people use poetry. I think you let poetry use you. If you let poetry use you, you have a beautiful thing, and a most amazing thing happens, with you and people around you.

I thought the phrase “when poetry uses you” was not only poetic, but was likely laden with personal meaning for Pearl. I asked her if she could explain a bit more about that phrase, and she characterized “when poetry uses you” as meaning:

…when you receive a poem that means something and opens up an explanation of something deeper that you can share with somebody else, that can perhaps mean something to them. I know when I was first dealing with widowhood, I came across this book, *Asian Figures*, where [the poet] W. S. Merwin had collected figures [of speech] from the Far East and translated them, and one of them was an expression from Japan that says: “only a widow / knows what a widow / is crying about.” And it just hit me—that poem had an impact on my life because then I realized that I could cry, and if I could share it with somebody else, and
when they were dealing with their widowhood, they could understand that they would be allowed to cry. They would also be allowed to laugh, too—and to make it beautiful, or to make it into a poem, or to explore it and find out the humanity in it. It’s the sharing of humanity, I think.

In this answer, Pearl identified that allowing poetry to “use you” meant that a poet would share poems that touch upon “deeper” meanings and emotions in order to allow others to “find out the humanity” that the poet has expressed.

I then acknowledged to Pearl that she had said that she let a poem “use” her when she read poetry, and asked her if she had ever found that same effect when she wrote a poem and then shared it with somebody. She replied:

Well, yeah—all of my poems. It’s exactly what you write for. I write a lot of things that I don’t share because they’re too personal, but they’re the ones that mean something are the ones that I can share with you because they’ve touched something deeper. They’ve touched something that means something that’s more universal, and opens up and…sheds a little light on a certain aspect on humanity.

With this answer, I interpret Pearl to have clarified that poems can use people in a sense that when people share poems with each other, they enable others to glimpse “a certain aspect of humanity,” and in this way sharing poems represents “the sharing of humanity.” Furthermore, by replying that “it’s exactly what you write for,” Pearl has given an added measure of importance to the way in which the process of relating to others through poetry represents a humanistic pursuit.

Also within her broader view of the humanistic quality of poetry, Pearl related her beliefs that writing poetry about life and ability has helped her to overcome the physical disabilities that she has known. Pearl gave the following statement while explaining how she chose the topic of the poem she wrote during her session:
...I usually try not to write too much about disability, because that can be a trap for me. Because I’ve known so much of disability, and if I write about life and ability then it helps me to overcome disability. And so I’m not dwelling on what I can’t do, I’m dwelling on what I can do. Or what things can be done...I don’t usually write about dying and that kind of thing in that sense, because I really don’t have that kind of a feeling about it. I don’t believe in disability. (laughing)

In this statement, Pearl explained how writing “about life and ability” has helped her in her life, by changing her focus to what she can do. In this way, it appears that Pearl perceives that her choice of focus for her attention in her writing can direct her attention and attitudes in her daily life, and enable her to operate at a level above and beyond the limitations of her disabilities. See Appendix J for additional details on how Pearl saw her involvement in poetry and the visual arts as enabling her to gain a strong sense of identity and overcome disability.

*John’s Perceptions*

Like many of the other poets in the study, John also expressed that using poetry to relate to others is of key importance to him. He said that one of the major reasons why he writes poetry “is sharing it with people, particularly sharing it with people directly, like reading to people, and reciting things to people.” Sharing poetry as a means of direct communication with others was one facet of the way in which John spoke of how he uses poetry to relate to others. At another point, the topic came up again when John was remarking on the subject matter and style of his writing: “I want to have my writing be close to daily living. Because that’s where you meet people.” With this statement, we can see that John also values the way in which writing poetry connects him to people at
the more abstract level of humanity, similar to the ways that Pearl spoke of. The use of
poetry to allow poets to relate to others was one of the most common ways in which the
poets in this study claimed that writing poetry was meaningful to them.

When I asked John what has kept him writing poetry over the years, he spoke of
how his poems meaningfully connect him to the various parts of his life. He related a
sense that he is able to capture elements of his life in his poems above and beyond the
impact of words on a page. His example of what he believes he would miss if he didn’t
write poetry refers specifically to haiku he has written:

What happens with haiku is you write them a lot of
different ways, but one way you write them is right out of
your experience. You use the things that are around you.
So after about sixteen years or so of writing haiku a lot, I
look around my room and just about everything in here is
connected to a poem. And the same thing for all the rooms
in my house, and the same thing for all around my house,
and all over [my hometown], and all in my car and all the
places I go on a habitual basis in my car, and many of the
places that I have gone once in my car, and everything at
work, and the people at work, and all of them—there are
poems connected to them. And that’s kind of where I live.
So to not write poetry would be like leaving my family,
leaving my job, leaving my country, leaving everything that
I know. (pause) It would be like choosing exile, without
any motivation… I mean, I’d have to give up everything, in
a sense.

John’s explanation of why he continues to write poetry shows that he feels that so much
of his life is connected to his poems that he would be missing out on much of his life if he
gave up the poems. To feel so close to the process of writing that to not write poetry
would seem like “leaving everything that I know,” it seems likely that an important part
of the act of writing for John is infusing his poems with so much meaning from his
surroundings that the act of writing poetry allows him to actually capture the essence of the poems’ objects.

Another way in which John expressed how writing poetry enables him to make meaning at a level above and beyond the ordinary was the way in which he feels that, through writing poetry, he is able to achieve things that are normally beyond his grasp. He explained:

you get some wonderful results by…attempting something that’s impossible. To completely and clearly and utterly communicate to another person is impossible in some ways. But you can go in that direction and do some quite beautiful and wonderful things.

The above quote briefly identifies John’s belief that engaging in the act of writing poetry (and any act of creation through art) is a means of being able to achieve objectives beyond what one is usually capable of. An example of this is when one is able to communicate at a higher level than one normally achieves through the act of writing a poem.

John also related the idea that writing poetry has also enabled him to approach a truer sense of the world. While he had also expressed his belief that “truth” (in an absolute sense) is an impossible objective, he believes that writing poetry is an act that can enable one to have a “sense of true things.”

I think, as an adult, what’s been the common thread about this is…I have wanted to have a sense of true things, and have been kind of restless about accepting anything as “the truth.” And what I would like to attempt to do with writing poems is to suggest truth that actually can’t be expressed in words…. And so what I’m trying to do with poetry is to do something beyond what words are actually capable of doing. And I know I won’t get there, but as I said then, you get some very interesting things out of the attempt.
John begins his explanation with a claim that communicating “a sense of true things” is a common goal for the poetry he has been writing throughout his adult life. He then reminds us that he considers such an act to fall into his category of impossible objectives. He further acknowledges that he has been able to create some worthwhile glimpses of truths that were uniquely attainable precisely because he was attempting the impossible. During his interviews, John expressed a nuanced set of beliefs about the ways in which gestures of making of art are attempts at achieving the impossible (his belief that “art fails”), and his sense of the nature of truth. While space limitations in the text do not allow me to include a full description of his theories here, I have included a comprehensive account of John’s deeply thoughtful explanations of the nature of art and truth in Appendix J: Extension of the Findings to Sub Question C1.

**Writing Poetry is Therapeutic for Some Poets**

The topic of writing poetry as a form of therapy was brought up by a few of the poets during their initial interviews. This is not surprising, as several poets have written accounts of how poetry has helped them to deal with difficulties in their lives, and have commented more generally on the emotional benefits of writing poetry (e.g., Bates, 2005; Leggo, 2005; Obiechina, 2002; Orr, 2002; Rosen, Weishaus, & Okamura, 2004). Poet friends in my writing group and I have privately discussed the role that writing poetry plays in helping us to deal with the difficult times in our lives. I have had strong experiences in which writing poetry has helped me to identify and sort through a gamut of emotions while grieving the deaths of my father and brother. In addition, writing about emotional experiences has also been shown to be beneficial in psychological
studies (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997). Therefore, I decided to broach the topic directly during the follow up interviews to gain a sense of how prevalent this phenomenon was among the poets in the study, and how those who found their use of poetry to be therapeutic characterized the various effects of writing on their emotional life. I decided to directly state that some poets have described writing poetry as personally beneficial or therapeutic. I then asked each poet whether it had ever been their experience.

Three of the poets (Miriam, Elaine, and Elizabeth) reported that they found writing poetry personally beneficial in the sense of engaging in an activity that they find meaningful. However, these three poets went on to explain that they did not use their writing practice therapeutically. The other four participating poets did find writing poetry to be therapeutic in addition to ways that they found it personally beneficial. Their anecdotes and reflections are particularly poignant.

Below I offer an excerpt from Pearl’s description of the many ways in which she has found writing poetry to be therapeutic. She first brought up the topic in response to my question “Why do you write poetry?” during the initial interview:

Why do I write poetry? Well, when my son died, it was a scream. Something inside of me just screamed. And I started writing it down—got myself a couple of notebooks and I wrote down the most amazing gibberish you ever saw in your life, but I was screaming. …after my son died—all those years and years and years of experience, and I had been through an awful lot of experience by then. He died in 1986. And it just came out in one huge scream. And I started writing this stuff down and I realized that it needed something. His life, our life, required something more—(pause) I don’t even know the word for it, but it required something more than this gibberish I was writing. And I tried to find the meanings of the words so that I could hold my son again—or to understand, to be part of his spirit, or to—who knows, I don’t know. I just know that it was a
loss for me. It was a terrible loss, and it was something that I just [was] trying to understand.

When Pearl claimed that she “tried to find the meanings of the words so that I could hold my son again,” she was using her newly reinstated practice of writing in order to find meaning in the experience of expressing her pain; she was trying to re-experience being close to her son, as well as “trying to understand” her loss. Pearl then explained that she had been reading poetry her whole life, even though she had stopped writing poetry due to peer pressure in high school. So even though Pearl hadn’t maintained a practice of writing poetry before she began writing “gibberish” in response to her son’s death, her knowledge of poetry had shaped the way in which she dealt with the feelings that she “screamed” onto paper. She continued her regular writing practice, and reported that eventually, when editors began accepting her submitted work, she recognized that her writing had developed to a point where it could communicate to others rather than carry meaning only for herself. It was at that point that she acknowledges that the “gibberish” that she had started writing had become poetry.

Pearl continued her account of the writing she did in the wake of her son’s death. She reported her experience of the first poem that she got published from the writing practice she had described:

I wrote this long poem about who [my son] was, and tried to recapture him. And I read it the next day, and I really felt like I had captured him in that poem. And I was so excited about it because all of a sudden it dawned on me that I was holding him for a moment. And I sent it out, and the editor loved it, and she published it. But when I got it in the mail and it had been published for the world to see, then I started looking at other poems that had gone deeper, or meant more…I realized that it was surface stuff that I was writing. I mean, I wasn’t dealing with the relationship we had, or I wasn’t dealing with the loss, I wasn’t dealing
with what couldn’t be, I wasn’t dealing with a lot of things. I was only dealing with surface stuff. I was dealing with what everybody deals with in this world and they go through life, and they miss dealing with half the stuff that really makes you human.

Then I felt like I’d betrayed him by sending it out. I felt very bad about that. So I realized that poetry has to be said in words that go deeper and mean more. And then I started pulling back; I didn’t publish again for a while. And then I started writing about other things because I didn’t want to deal with that right then, and then it started coming back again…

Pearl’s perception that “I was holding him for a moment” by reading a poem she had written about her son seems a powerful incentive to write poetry after a loved one’s death. Her sentiment is similar to Sam’s claim that reading his old poems brings back elements of the original situation that inspired the poem, much like a “time machine.” However, Pearl’s experience was not uniformly comforting to her, even after she began producing viable poems. Instead, taking a fresh and more critical look at the poem that had been published alerted Pearl to her need to begin approaching her loss at a deeper level. She reported that she was not yet emotionally ready to do what she perceived she needed to do to write better poems about her son, so she redirected her writing focus to other topics until enough time had passed that she felt she could return to writing about her son. In this way, it appears that Pearl’s experience of publishing her poem led to a more objective assessment of where she was in her process of grieving. Her method of using poetry therapeutically was also flexible enough to accommodate the hiatus she felt she needed before returning to such an emotionally difficult topic. Pearl also identified an additional mechanism by which she believes that writing poetry has operated therapeutically in her life: she describes how she believes that writing poetry taught her to
see her situations more objectively (see details in Appendix K: Writing Poetry is Therapeutic for Some Poets).

Unfortunately, space limitations allow for only an illustrative example and brief summary of the poets’ discussion of whether or not they find writing poetry to be therapeutic within the text of the findings. However, the reflections of all seven participants have been described in full in Appendix K: Writing Poetry is Therapeutic for Some Poets. Included in Appendix K is also a poet’s description of how the perceived connection between poetry and therapy can be experienced as a drawback, both by readers attempting to diagnose poets with medical conditions through various interpretations of their work, and through the general application of negative stereotypes that connect poets with mental illness. (While I had asked each of the poets what the drawbacks of sustaining a practice of writing poetry were for them, most answered that there are no drawbacks to writing poetry, or only identified trivial concerns that they then brushed aside. In the few cases where a poet has identified a genuine drawback that he or she perceives, I have noted those testimonies in the relevant part of the Findings to Sub Question C.) In Appendix K I also give some brief reflections on how future research might benefit from studying how published poets use poetry to reflect on both positive and negative experiences to make meaning of their situations, and the potential for aiding novices and patients engaged in poetry therapy to perhaps derive similar benefits as those reported by the four poets.
Summary for the Poet Perceptions Regarding Sub Question C1:

The poets were prolific in the ways in which they talked about how poetry affects their meaning making in other areas of their lives. Six of the poets described ways in which they believe that writing poetry allows them to achieve a level of achievement or intensity in their lives that is above and beyond what they would experience if they didn’t write poetry. There was much variety in how this theme appeared in the different participants’ lives. For Sam, poetry allows him to reenter past experiences with a level of intensity that rivals time travel. Elizabeth reported a sense that writing poetry encourages her to live her life with increased intensity—through a general sense of stimulation and enthusiasm, as well as a specific sense that she is more observant of her environment and interactions with people. Pearl reported that writing poetry and creating art enabled her to foster a healthy sense of identity and focus her efforts on what she is capable of doing in order to overcome her disabilities. In a similar vein, Miriam reported that writing poetry allows her to develop and extend her sense of self, as she claimed that she would be “putting a stop to myself” if she were to stop writing poetry. Both Frank and John reported using poetry to allow them to create effects in both level of meaning and communication that go above and beyond what is usually achieved with using words.

Five poets reported that they find poetry allows them to relate to others in meaningful ways. Some, such as Miriam and John, reported the importance of feeling that they have been able to communicate with others, while others, such as Frank, Elaine, and Pearl, expressed that it was important for them to not only share their poetry, but to gain a sense of how their poem was received; what type of effect it had on others. Pearl and John also spoke of using their writing practices to connect with humanity at a more
abstract level. While all of the poets reported that their writing practice was personally beneficial, four poets described ways in which they considered their use of poetry as therapeutic.

**Addressing Sub Question C2:**

**Poetry as Mindset and Skill Set to Apply to Life**

Sub Question C2 is an extension of Sub Question C1, and it asks: Do the poets perceive that their practice of writing poetry has developed a mindset or skill set that they have applied to other areas of their lives, and if so, in what ways has this occurred? The poets’ perceptions ranged from Miriam’s belief that she uses her knowledge of poetry solely for the purpose of writing poetry, to Elaine and Frank’s sense of enrichment in their lives that is due to poetry, to Pearl’s belief that her knowledge of poetry informs and infuses every action she takes, regardless of the context. Each poet had a unique perspective to contribute.

**Miriam’s Perception**

I asked the poets the direct question: “Have you ever found yourself using what you know from poetry at other times, when you’re not actually writing a poem?” Miriam considered the possibility that her knowledge of poetry might inform other arts that she engages in, but concluded that each art was distinct from the other:

I don’t think so. I don’t know, but I don’t think so. I mean, I do ceramics…but poetry is softer and flowing and a different thing. I don’t see any resemblance...sometimes I feel a certain relationship to the economy of Chinese brush strokes and haiku maybe, but I can’t say that the one helps me to see the other.
Miriam had considered a possible connection to other creative pursuits that she engages in, but related her sense that skills gained in one endeavor do not transfer to other domains. She summarized her thoughts: “I think it comes from the same wellspring, but I don’t see a connection to the arts.”

**Sam’s Perception**

When I asked Sam the same question, he expressed that the knowledge and skills used in dream interpretation and in poetry are very similar. He explained:

> Well there is, I think, a harmony between dream interpretation and poetry…dreams and poems come probably from the same wellspring; art as well. When I took a dream interpretation class at [a nearby university] some years back, I noticed…[according to] different schools of thought in haiku…[that] the symbols or the objects in haiku [are] that of images in dreams. And I saw some parallels in just how dreams were viewed as were poems.

Sam’s experience with taking a course in dream analysis allowed him to recognize that the images that are used frequently in haiku also operate symbolically in dreams. His background in poetry also allowed him to see “parallels” between dreams and poems, which means that his knowledge of poetry became available for application to dream analysis, and his newly acquired knowledge of dream analysis and interpretation could lend a new perspective to how he views poetry.

To gain a sense of whether Sam was speaking at a theoretical level or out of his own experiences, I asked him if he interprets his own dreams. He replied:

> I do try to jot down my dreams and I don’t know if I always interpret them, but I will in a similar fashion often write them after they’re dreamt and I think just in transcribing
them there’s sort of a therapeutic or healthy, creative process and as a writer, also, sometimes the things that come up in dreams can be used for something creative or a haiku or a poem or humor or whatever….So the dreams themselves can be a wellspring for creativity.

Sam replied that he interprets his dreams on occasion, and often transcribes them, so this is an area of knowledge that he applies regularly to his life. By transcribing his dreams he not only preserves them, but also exercises his writing skills in determining what images to record and how to describe them. In fact, Sam described the act of transcribing his dreams as a “creative process.” By preserving his dreams, he amasses a bank of rich images and relationships among symbols that he believes can be used as material for his various creative pursuits, including writing poetry. As Miriam had said that all of her art “comes from the same wellspring,” Sam related his perception that dreams are sometimes “a wellspring” for his creative works. Sam views the fields of dream analysis and poetry as symbiotic, where knowledge of one can enrich and inform his activities in engaging with the other, for mutual benefit of both practices.

**Elaine’s Perception**

I asked Elaine if she ever found herself using what she knows from poetry at times other than when she’s writing a poem, and she replied:

Well, not from my poetry, but from other people’s poetry I have. I have found that some of the things they say have been driven home to me in a way that I don’t forget, and can quote or reuse in another way.

I sensed that Elaine had interpreted my question to be restricted to the informational content of poems, so I asked her if she had drawn on her poetry knowledge or skills in the context of other activities or areas of interest. She replied:
I made comparisons with painting, often—and writing of poetry. Otherwise I don’t know specifically if it has, except that everything you read and that you feel has ramifications in other parts of your life, since it’s a kind of an enrichment… I mean, reading poetry, reading other people’s tanka, for example; I’ve gotten glimpses into who they are, and what the real meaning of what they’ve written is, sometimes comes through. Friends, for example, that I’ve worked with and who’ve written poetry alongside me, I’ve seen more clearly into their own psyche, things that are their basic preoccupations, or emotions, that sort of thing. And I suppose they’ve seen mine.

Elaine perceived that similar skills are used in painting and in poetry, and in a more general sense, poetry has brought “an enrichment” to her life. We can see in Elaine’s reply that, like Pearl, she values the ways in which poetry has helped her to relate to her friends more closely.

**Frank’s Perception**

Frank also reported a general sense of enrichment in his life that was due to poetry:

We just played The English Patient again last night, and [the original author of the book] introduces into his dialogue, his prose, such subtle poetic stuff that it’s just a total joy to listen to it. [That’s] where in everyday life poetic things come back to me as poetry: …I certainly could not put my surroundings or existence or my day in any kind of dull, linear thing. There’s too much enrichment there to be grabbed, (slight pause) which basically makes up my world: …images that stick with me, that have multiple purposes [like one of the images I included in my poem today]… I should have my eyes open more but when I do see stuff it does enrich my thinking.

Frank’s example illustrated how he believes that poetry has helped him to notice and appreciate other works of art and literature, as well as everyday images.
Elizabeth’s Perception

Like Frank, Elizabeth claimed that her skills of observation go hand in hand with poetry:

I guess it’s just observation, and thinking about people’s feelings, and emotions. Maybe that’s one helps the other... [when] writing poetry, you’re expressing an emotion, and so you have to be aware of emotions, perhaps I’m aware of emotions in other people and what they’re feeling, and being aware of people’s feelings and emotions helps in writing poetry, too.

Elizabeth claimed that she draws upon skills in observation and gaining awareness of others’ emotions. While Elaine said that poetry gives her insight into others’ emotions by reading their poetry, Elizabeth has stated that she is more apt to notice others’ emotions because she is more attuned to thinking about emotions for the purpose of writing poetry.

Elizabeth had mentioned “observation” briefly in her statement above, but later explained the importance of observation for her and her poetry when she said: “Being more observant has created better poetry and trying to create better poetry has made me more observant.” I asked her if she could describe any times when that has happened. She couldn’t recall a specific memory, but related her sense that:

...any time we get in the car or go outside, I’m always looking, looking, looking. Maybe all poets do this, and writers, more so than someone who is not a writer or a poet, because there’s always an inspiration that could come from the most mundane sights or events. I not only look for poetry inspiration, but for ideas for stories. So, I guess it’s just being observant, and trying to be attuned to other people’s emotions, so I can capture them and write about them.
I wondered if Elizabeth’s use of observation in her life was an intentional strategy to find inspiration for her poetry. I asked her if she was conscious that she was looking for material to write a poem about. She replied:

No, no. I don’t leave the house and say “now I’ve got to find something to write a poem,” but without thinking, I just look. My husband does most of the driving so it’s easy for me to turn this way and that way and look at the countryside to observe little things and big things and I’ll see something and it’ll strike me as being interesting, and often I will pull out my notebook, which I keep in my purse all the time, and jot something down, right then and there, and then go back later and work on it.

For Elizabeth, it appears that her knowledge of poetry encourages her to look at the people and world around her more closely. Elizabeth reported that she has developed the mindset of looking for “inspiration that could come from the most mundane sights or events,” which means she incorporates her knowledge and skills from the realm of poetry across the different activities of her daily life, and with frequency.

*Pearl's Perception*

When I asked Pearl if there are any ways in which her poetry knowledge and skills have been useful in other areas of her life, she replied strongly in the affirmative. She explained that poetry is integrated in all aspects of her life:

Everything. Everything I do. It has defined my life, really…you learn a frame of reference of dealing with things. When I go into the Motor Vehicle Department, and I have trouble with the Motor Vehicle Department [recognizing my identity], it gives you the tools to be able to step back and look at it objectively, to see what’s happening not just subjectively, but to see what’s happening around you, and the ingredients for that moment in time. And poetry gives you that ability because it becomes a way of life, in everything you do. …[at the
motor vehicle department] you can tell the people that have no art in their lives at all, because (pause) there’s a lack of understanding certain things. That things can be beyond what they expect, you know, when something isn’t just what they expect. Poetry expands your world, or expands your creativity. And so it helps you. It helps you in everything you do, by giving you a broader concept of what the world is like, and what to expect in life.

First, Pearl had identified poetry as giving her a frame of reference that she continually applies to her life. Then she returned to her idea that poetry has given her skills in being objective, and gave a specific example of where that skill has been useful for her recently: when dealing with problems of a bureaucratic nature, she can “step back” from the situation and become aware of the various “ingredients” that contribute to “that moment in time.” Furthermore, she identifies the way that she believes poetry prepares one to conceive of things that are beyond one’s expectations, which helps to avoid misunderstandings. In keeping with her explanation above, Pearl referred to poetry as “an attitude about life” at another point during her interview.

When I asked Pearl if she had ever found herself using what she knows from poetry at other times, when she’s not actually writing a poem, she indicated that poetry is infused with every part of her life:

Everything I do is part of a poem. If I go shopping, it can be part of a poem… it’s part of everything I do, really. Whether I write it down, sometimes it goes by and it never gets written down. (pause) The funny thing is that everything I do, I mean, even when I’m working and dealing with my trust account, or things like that, it’s all part of the process of the poetry. Poetry is about life. It’s not separate from it. There are things that come out of life that have more meaning for you, or I suppose we deal with things in life that our consciousness or our subconscious is trying to deal with at the time, and perhaps at that moment things in your life will have more meaning for you, and they’ll erupt as a poem—but everything I do in life is part
of it. It’s like a love affair, with life. (pause) I’m trying to think what I do that isn’t poetry.

In her characterization of how poetry is not separate from life, Pearl explained that she believes that her mind—either at the conscious or subconscious level—could be dealing with an issue that comes up in her life, and that at the moment when the problem is solved and that issue “will have more meaning for you,” that is when it will “erupt as a poem.” With this statement, we can see that not only does Pearl believe that her knowledge and skills in poetry are part of “everything” she does, but that part of the evidence of poetry continually working within her mind is that insights to issues she “is trying to deal with at the time” will come to her spontaneously in poem form.

After her general characterization of how poetry infuses “everything” she does, Pearl then became more specific in how she uses poetry in her daily life. She explained:

...After you read poetry for a while, you start forming an attitude towards life and everything, and you use it, sometimes like I’ll take a line from a poem and I might send it to somebody to straighten them out, or to explain something, or if they’re having a hard time, maybe cheer them up, or if they’ve got something wrong, or if there’s something they need to know, sometimes the poetry can be shared that way.

In these examples, Pearl has highlighted how she uses poetry to communicate with others. These applications of using poetry in various situations are in keeping with her earlier explanations about how she values poetry for the ways in which it builds relationships with others.
**John’s Perception**

John brought up the most common ways that he has used poetry at various periods of his life when I asked him why he writes poetry. He explained:

… I’ve had different motivations over different parts of my life. I mean, I started writing poetry when I was very young… and my inspirations at that point were nursery rhymes, and then the first poem that I wrote that was published, I’m pretty sure that what I was doing was sort of pleasing a teacher—my third grade teacher. And then for a while I wrote poems among my friends, which were primarily parodies, so we used these in a good natured way, more or less make fun of each other.

John reported that writing poetry served different primary purposes over the course of his life, and identified social benefits—“pleasing a teacher” and to joke around with his friends. As a child, he reported he used his skills with forming words into poems for the types of purposes that children tend to use words with their friends: “to make fun of each other.”

As John grew older, his specific motivations for writing poetry evolved to shape to his primary preoccupations of that period in his life. He reported that a major purpose of his poetry during adolescence was “self exploration” and to “explore” questions about life, which is presented in detail in Section C3 because it is an explicit example of how John perceives he has used the act of writing poetry to conduct inquiry. Once he began attending college, John became part of social circles that valued poetry to a similar degree as he did, and so sharing poems with friends and prospective love interests became a focus for him. He explained that communication became more of an issue for him, now that he was no longer the sole intended audience for his poems, as he had been during adolescence:
[During adolescence] it was fine for me to write poems where only I would know what they were talking about, because that’s what I needed to do at the time, and I wasn’t losing anything, because I didn’t want to show them to anybody. But once I was among people who didn’t think it was all that weird to write poetry, then I wanted to communicate more; it was safer to be part of that kind of group.

John also revealed another motivation for wanting to share his work once he began college: “At that stage, poetry was a good seduction device. I mean, at that point I knew young women who liked poets…at that age it’s got to be one of the great motivations…and after that, for a while it was just a certain kind of social thing. Because I began, by then, to know people who wrote poetry. So it was a good basis for conversation.” So from early adulthood onward, John began to direct his poetry writing skills to serve the purposes of enhancing and maintaining his social life.

In addition to the different purposes that writing poetry has served in John’s life, John identified an overarching characteristic of how poetry functions in his life to account for the manner in which it is able to serve many needs for him. He summarized the reason why he continues to write poetry as:

It continues to renew itself periodically for me. It stays interesting. Because it did one thing for me as a little kid, and another thing for me as a young adolescent, and then as an adolescent, and then as a college kid, and then as a young person just being married and starting out that kind of life, and then there’s a certain kind of thing between me and my son...so far, it has continued to serve different purposes and to be amazingly adaptable to my needs in different times of my life.

John concluded that poetry has been adaptable to his needs, which keeps the act of writing poetry relevant to his primary concerns during each major period of his life.
Perhaps the “amazingly adaptable” qualities of poetry are what allow it to also be used in so many different ways across the poets represented in this study, as well.

In addition to the various ways in which poetry has served different primary functions across his lifespan, John identified other ways in which he uses his knowledge and skills from poetry to serve other interests and pursuits. When I asked John what were the drawbacks of sustaining a practice of writing poetry for him, he gave a surprising answer that led to a list of the ways in which poetry functions in his life. He responded:

I think that the chief drawback may be that it makes me so self sufficient that I don’t need people as much as I might otherwise. And so it makes it necessary for me to sometimes just consciously make an effort to (slight pause) really be in a relationship. …

For clarification, I asked John what writing poetry makes him self sufficient in. He replied:

I can comfort myself. I can entertain myself. I can surprise myself. I can (slight pause) mystify myself at times. I see myself a little bit as Whitman did, I think…you know his quote: “I contradict myself. Very well then, I contradict myself”… and I can’t remember the exact wording, but essentially, he said: “I am multitudes. I contain all kinds of things.” When I was a teenager, I made a sort of a rule for myself, which was that it was all right to think anything and to feel anything. The only things that I needed to control were my actions. But any feeling and any thought was acceptable. It’s a comfortable place to live; comfortable in the sense of (slight pause) lots of room.

While John listed a number of ways that writing poetry allows him to be self sufficient, the example that he went into much detail with was the idea that he could comfort himself. Toward the end of his statement above, he began to speak about comfort in a second way—that poetry was a context in which he felt he had the space and freedom to “think anything and to feel anything.” The phrase “lots of room” seemed filled with
meaning for John, but I wasn’t sure how his sense of “lots of room” fit with the rest of his explanation, so I followed up on that term. He replied:

I started to say comfortable, and I was thinking, well, what would be comfortable for me, in terms of an interior life, and the answer would be lots of room. Lots of possibility, lots of open opportunities and things happening. … I think [the idea of lots of room] and [writing poetry], they contributed to each other.

In this way, John had expounded on his idea that, generally speaking, his habit of writing poetry had led him to come to an insight very early in life, which has allowed him to have a “comfortable” and rich “interior life.”

John then brought the topic back to his first claim, that he could use poetry as a direct means of comforting himself. He said: “I think that [writing poetry has] always been comforting, in one form or another.” I asked him what was comforting about writing poetry. He replied:

I can think of instances, lots of instances where I felt that [writing poetry is comforting]. For instance…there’s a long story to this title poem [of his book Quiet Enough] about “sometimes you can’t be quiet enough.” This is a moment when I needed some words. And these were the words. These just were the words, under the circumstances.

In his answer he had referenced one of his published haiku (Stevenson, 2004, unpaginated) that reads: “snowy night / sometimes you can’t be / quiet enough.” John reported that the context in which he composed the poem was one in which he felt he needed words of comfort, and the words that came to him in the form of this poem were the exact words he needed at that particular moment. He later described the experience of composing that poem, which is detailed below.
Before telling the story behind the title poem of *Quiet Enough*, John continued with his description of how that experience had comforted him, and how it was linked to poetry in his life:

> It was a situation in which I—on my own, I was (slight pause) just inadequate. There was nothing conventional, there was nothing that wouldn’t have to somehow come out of poetry, that could be said, then. And (slight pause) so as I explained, I’m not religious, I don’t believe in God as this person that talks to me and things, and all that. And yet, I feel that there is some kind of responsiveness in existence. I mean, I just feel that. I feel that there are times when I have needs and they are fulfilled, often in this way; that the words come to me.

In the above statement, John explained how he perceives that that at times when he doesn’t feel that “on [his] own” he can come up with something adequate to say, “the words come to [him],” and they come in the form of poetry. Recall that Pearl had also reported that the meaningful solutions to problems she was dealing with sometimes would “erupt as a poem.” We might consider the possibility that the reason words tend to come to John and Pearl in their moments of need is because of their well honed skills in writing poetry. Psychological studies of expertise show that years or decades of practice often allow an expert at a given activity to orient him or herself to the salient problems and possible solutions of situations in the familiar domain with remarkable speed (e.g., National Research Council, 2000).

Wondering if there was any role that conscious thinking might play in the type of experience for John where “the words come to [him],” I asked him if such moments occurred in the cases “when writing a poem is a quick experience, or is it when you work at it and eventually you get the words that you need?” He answered: “It could happen
after a quite protracted effort, or it could happen just directly out of the need. Either way. I mean, I can think of specific examples of either.”

John told his story of how the words he needed came to him in the title poem for his book *Quiet Enough*. He explained how his goddaughter and his niece had introduced him to a college boy who was a friend to them, and they had all shared an enriching evening together. John continued his story: “...and the next morning I found out that he had died in an auto crash that night. He’d fallen asleep driving back home.” He explained how the boy’s parents lived in the same neighborhood as his niece, and were hosting a group of his friends shortly after having learned of his death. He continued: “Mostly, I was concerned about my niece…she was the first one to hear that he was killed in an accident. Beyond that, she was the one who had to go to the scene and identify him.” He described the scene where he and his goddaughter were walking toward the house where everyone was gathered:

We were walking back over, and about halfway there we encountered [my niece] just coming out of the house, and looking just—in shock. And I wanted to say something to her that would be comforting in some way. And I couldn’t think of anything to say. And then it began to snow. (pause) And we just hugged each other. That was it. So the words of this poem, which don’t describe that event at all, those are the exact words, though, that came to me [in that moment]...the words that came to me: sometimes you can’t be quiet enough.

In this anecdote, John explains that he was trying to come up with something appropriate to say when he encountered environmental cues that led him not only to the words of the poem, but also the message within the poem: the wisdom of staying silent at such times.
After John had told the story of the moment in which the words came to him, he
continued to reflect on the way the experience unfolded with regard to his practice of
writing poetry.

…I don’t know if we talked about this or not, but my
feeling, especially recently, about haiku, is that they’re
feelings of very deep emotion expressed indirectly. So I’m
not going to write a poem about: there’s just absolutely
nothing I can say at this moment that will do, that will be
adequate. And at the same time, just being here, together,
and just the quietness of the snow descending on us, there’s
kind of a blessing in it, of some kind. I don’t expect that
someone reading the poem is going to have all that,
because they’re not going to have all that information. But
it’s there, for me. And I feel as if there’s a chance that
some of my investment in it comes through, even if it
doesn’t come through in terms of any of the specifics.

In this statement, John relayed his sense that the aesthetics of the genre in which he now
writes the most frequently had shaped the experience for him in such a way that the
words that came to him were appropriate to include in the haiku that he wrote from the
experience. In this way, John’s knowledge of poetry had shaped his experience of the
situation, had given him words of comfort in the guise of lines of a poem.

John then focused on how the experience represented a spontaneous occurrence of
making meaning for him. He continued:

So that was an instance of me needing words. I needed
words for [my niece]—I thought I needed words for [her],
but as it turned out, I really didn’t. I mean, for [her] it was
better for me not to say anything and for us to just stand
there in the snow for a little while. But I also needed words
for myself. And the words that I needed for myself were
just those words, and that is: sometimes you can’t be quiet
enough.

In this statement, we can see that John considered the experience of the lines of the poem
coming to him as a type of spontaneous composition of poetry when he needed it. At
another point in his interview, he explained: “In that moment, those words, those exact words, they were ‘enough’ for me.” The words of John’s poem had served the purpose of providing an answer to a difficult situation for him.

When I asked John if he ever found himself using what he knows from poetry at other times, when he’s not actually writing a poem, he found connections to the performing arts:

Certainly some obvious things, like other arts. So the kind of theater that I do, the playback theater, when we perform someone’s story, we don’t literally talk it back through, because we’ve just heard them tell the whole story, so instead, we look for the kind of poetic quality, the most strongly resonant images in the story, and so having a practice in poetry helps with that a lot. And I’ve given haiku workshops in a lot of playback settings—playback school or playback conferences, and so on, as well as with my own company. So that’s an easy one. What works in this art often works in some way in another art.

In this example, John reported that he had directly used his knowledge of poetry to approach situations in the type of improvisational theater that he performs in.

Furthermore, he found his knowledge of poetry to be so useful in this type of theater setting that he taught it to others for application in that setting, as well.

I asked John if he could mention more ways in which he would use his poetry knowledge in those types of settings. He first gave an example of how one of his friends sometimes uses poetry as a starting point for composing music:

Another good friend of mine who’s in my local haiku group is a composer and conductor of classical music; orchestra music. I never knew anybody who did that before I knew [her]. I was surprised, at least in her case, with how much of this she does out of images that could have been the same material you’d write poems from, or do a painting from. …because I have no talent in this area, I always thought [music] was kind of abstract in a certain way, or
that it was entirely instinctive; things that couldn’t be put into words, so they had to be expressed in this way. But she actually starts from ideas a lot. And so…I actually get a chance to witness a little bit of her reading some kind of poem, and then working off of that for writing a musical composition. Song writing, I suppose is an example of that in general. A lot of song lyrics don’t really make it very well as poetry, but with the music, there’s something quite other happening there, that isn’t happening with the words alone.

While this wasn’t an example of how John himself uses poetry in other situations, it is an occurrence that he has witnessed first-hand. In another instance where knowledge of one art can inspire and shape a work in a different art form, the knowledge of poetry has been used in the process of composing music.

John also acknowledged his own efforts in creating mixed media art:

Of course, another example is art forms where you can mix media. So in terms of haiku: haiga, the kind of dance renku compositions that I’ve been working on recently with [other poets and a dance company], so any kind of mixed media effort shows you that you can have that kind of interchange.

In this answer, John has mentioned two specific genres in which haiku is combined with art from another media to create a synergistic effect. Haiga is an art form where a haiku is arranged within an image (such as a painting, photograph or collage). Renku is a type of communally produced poems that is comprised of a series of haiku where each poem serves as inspiration for the next. This is an ancient form of poetry, but in the art form that John describes he has participated in, it is recited during a dance performance.

John had listed a number of ways in which poetry had engendered a mindset (comforting himself, having a “comfortable…interior life”) and skill set (when the words come to him at his times of need) that he applied in other areas of his life, in addition to
how he has used his knowledge of poetry for theater performances as well as in creating mixed media art. He summed up his answer to how he has used what he knows from poetry at times when he’s not writing a poem in a similar fashion to Pearl’s response to the question. He said: “The things that I’ve really learned, I think, in life are completely consistent with, and sort of mixed up with what I’ve learned writing poetry.”

**Summary for the Poet Perceptions Regarding Sub Question C2:**

The participating poets in this study articulated various manners in which their poetry knowledge and skills transferred to other areas of their lives. Sam explained the close connection he perceived between poetry and his practice of recording and occasionally interpreting his dreams. Elaine and Frank reported that their knowledge of poetry served as an “enrichment” to their lives, and Elizabeth cited its importance in helping her become “observant” of her surroundings and of others’ emotions. Pearl and John expressed their beliefs that their knowledge of poetry is integrated with the ways in which they engage in just about every type of activity imaginable. However, the perception that one’s poetry practice necessarily informs or manifests itself in other areas of a poet’s life was not uniform among the participants of the study. Miriam had reported that she did not see any areas where her knowledge or skills in writing poetry had informed or influenced her engagement in other activities; she viewed each skill set in the various arts that she practices as being a separate and self-encompassed entity.
Addressing Sub Question C3: Poet Perceptions of Writing as Inquiry

Sub Question C3 asks: In what ways do the poets’ perceptions reinforce, extend, or contrast with findings from the sample of writing sessions completed for this study? In other words, how do the poets’ perceptions of their regular practice of writing poetry weigh in, compared to what they said and did during their writing session?

Keeping in mind that the analyses for all of the sub questions took place after the data were collected, not every aspect of the findings for Sub Questions A and B was addressed by the participants in the course of their interviews. However, some of the ways in which the participants talked about their regular writing practices in the course of answering such broad questions as “Why do you write poetry?” naturally addressed cognitive and emotional aspects of writing poetry, and therefore fell within the purview of the findings from the writing sessions. I have organized this section according to the categories of findings that have appeared in answer to Sub Questions A and B, in order to show how the poets’ perceptions directly address the findings from the writing sessions.

Inquiry on the Content of the Poem: Unknowing and the Search that Follows

One of the findings from the poets’ writing sessions was that many had expressed a sense of not knowing what their poems would contain, either at the outset of the writing process, or at various points while drafting and editing their poems. The finding that I have characterized as *unknowing and the search that follows* was reinforced by ways in which the participants appeared to speak about their writing experiences. John described the typical initial moment he experiences when he has a thought that might be a good
starting point for developing a poem. He showed that the deciding factor for him on whether to engage in writing a poem was a sense of unknowing. He explained:

Usually what I do is I wait until something sort of presents itself to me. So my first [reaction] is, “oh,” you know—“oh, that’s something.” And then I will often ask myself (and I’m sort of describing something, it’s not as literal as this, but I will, in effect, ask myself): “Well, what is that?” And if I can easily answer that, then that’s one thing. If I can’t really easily answer that and yet it still tends to contain this resonance, then that’s a good start for this kind of writing.

John’s perception that he has a good material for starting a poem is precisely when he is unable to “easily answer” his questions about the nature of an experience or thought that inspires him. In other words, this sense of unknowing is one of the ways in which he identifies promising material that he might be able to work into a poem. Upon reflecting on the use to which John puts his recognition of his sense of unknowing (paired with “a resonance” that has captured his interest), we might extract a general principle that novices could apply to their own practices of writing poetry. Specifically, one might conclude that having this type of criteria might help a poet to recognize the types of thoughts and sensory perceptions that have the potential to grow into a poem.

In manner similar to relating how the writing process comprised a sense of unknowing and a search for meaning for him, John talked about his experiences in writing poetry throughout adolescence as a means of exploring issues he wanted to gain more understanding about. John explained that a main purpose of writing poetry for him during adolescence was to: “explore….so I would write about:….mortality, sexuality, what will I be, what am I, who am I, you know, all the great adolescent questions…. So that period of time, that was really about self exploration.” As we saw in the findings
section C2, John characterized his primary purposes for writing poetry as changing over the course of his lifetime. Writing poetry has functioned in many ways in John’s life, and he characterized one of the major periods of his life as using poetry mainly for the purpose of inquiry.

Pearl characterized the very start of the process of creating a poem (or a painting, as she is a visual artist) not as a planned process or an initial state where she has an idea of what the final product will be, but as “the beginning of reaching into the nothingness and pulling out something.” By referring to “the nothingness” as the place where her poems and art come from, Pearl shows that she regards the initial stage of artistic creation as not having definition; its key characteristic is the absence of anything that is known. In addition to identifying a sense of unknowing as a part of the writing process, Pearl claimed that there is also a search involved in every poem she writes. When I asked her “What makes this poem [that she wrote during her session] unique to you?” She answered: “I don’t think any poem is unique. I think every poem has its life, and its searching, and its value and its ‘tomato’ in it…. ” However, while Pearl directly identified that every poem as having a “searching” nature, she characterized the nature of the search not as a straightforward process, but as a circuitous path. In fact, she was one of four poets in the study who used the word “wander” to characterize the way in which her search for meaning proceeds as she writes poetry. When one wanders, the exact route is not planned, and the destination is often unknown at the outset, only to be determined along the way.

The phenomenon of unknowing and a subsequent search for knowledge that John and Pearl have articulated in their interviews, and that many of the participants very
clearly showed during their writing sessions, is strikingly similar to the activity known in creativity research as *problem finding*. Csikzentmihalyi and Getzels (1970, p. 94) explain that “it is possible to be working on a problem or problematic situation before actually being aware of what the problem *is*, or of how it can be solved, or what an acceptable solution will be” (italics from the original). They go on to specify that this type of creative work begins with a state of unknowing (1970, p. 94, italics from the original):

> the problem-solving process leading to a creative product begins with only a diffuse feeling of unease about a general problematic area before the actual problem is visualized. The first step in the process (and perhaps the crucial step) involves *activity in discovering the problem itself*.

Why is a state of unknowing, followed by a search for an appropriate form of an answer, judged by Csikzentmihalyi and Getzels to be “perhaps the crucial step” in art making? Their (1970) study of creative process in the visual arts found that a number of the artists whose work was independently evaluated by experts to show higher levels of originality and to be more aesthetically pleasing had exhibited a “concern for discovery” (p. 94) while making the artwork. The authors identify *concern for discovery* as an attitude which led these artists to discover a problem to solve with their artwork, rather than focus their efforts on solving problems according to principles that had already been established (either by the art community or by themselves). In short, given that one has the requisite knowledge and skills of the art, the practice of identifying something that one doesn’t already know and concentrating on that quality to determine the direction of one’s efforts is more likely to yield a unique and aesthetically pleasing product than if one does not engage in the activity of problem-finding.
Note that above Csikzentmihalyi and Getzels had also characterized the development of creative products as one in which the artist initially doesn’t know how the problem can be solved. Four of the poets in the present study articulated a technique that can readily be applied to situations where the means of solving a creative problem is not already anticipated. They reported that they “wander.”

“Wander” and Other Intuitive Means of Searching

In Pearl’s description of how she used poetry therapeutically during the most difficult times in her life (see Appendix K), she implied that at some point her “screaming” and “gibberish” turned into poetry. In order to understand how this important transformation occurred for her, and in order to understand the distinction she makes between these acts of expression, I asked: “What would you say is the difference between when you’re screaming and writing gibberish, and when it’s poetry?” Her answer suggested that the ways in which she regards an inner “silence” as part of her writing and thinking process is not something that she controls in any planned manner. She explained this, using the metaphor of wandering:

Well, because that’s when you enter the silence. And that’s when you can actually wander down it and get an objective point of view from it. It’s not so subjective any more. (pause) That’s where you can wander through it and—wander through the words and I’m just seeing [in a haiku I wrote about a kite being caught in a tree, which reflected my feelings about my own situation at the time] the difference between that kite being caught in the tree, just pulling against it, and being able to look at that and see in the kite and the leaves, and then the red leaves, because it’s autumn, that you’re being able to see the atmosphere around it, to see, to be able to understand what’s happening to you, to help you think your way through it. It helps you function, it helps you think, it helps you understand where
you’re going, it helps you make decisions in everything in your life, when you’re able to be able to write better. That’s one of the reasons, I guess, why when I don’t have time to write poetry it’s something that I’ve got to get back to. It’s something that I start turning down other things, bang, bang, bang, because I realize I need this in order to be able to think straight, (pause) to help me process information. I think. (laughs)

In the above statement, Pearl related a couple of her main beliefs about the artistic process and poetry that she had mentioned in different ways throughout her interviews. She believes that writing poetry is a means of thinking that can improve one’s life in many ways, and that she thinks best while writing poetry when she is in a sort of meditative “silence,” where she allows her thoughts to “wander” in an unpredictable fashion.

Pearl was not alone in characterizing the writing process as unpredictable. Four of the poets explicitly described the process as one where they can’t predict what the end result will be, and none of the participants characterized the search as a straightforward process of prescribed steps that would lead to a predictable outcome. For example, John characterized the sense he usually has when writing: “With writing a poem, for me at least, …it’ll be interesting to see where I end up.” At another point in his interview, John went on to give more detail, not only about how he wouldn’t know how a poem would end until he finished writing it, but that after waiting a period of time once the poem had been written, he would pick up the poem and read it. He explained that he often also wouldn’t know how the poem would end until he would finish reading it. John’s description of this phenomenon came in response to a question I had asked him to follow up on his claim that he can surprise himself and mystify himself by writing poetry. He had answered by contrasting the way in which he writes haiku to the ways in which he
writes other types of poems, using the metaphor of wandering to make a distinction between his two approaches to writing poetry:

What I was thinking [when I said I can surprise and mystify myself by writing poetry], I guess, is that that’s a frequent experience. It may be hard for me to think of a real example, but the experience I have in mind is: reading back a poem that I finished and put aside for some time, and looking at it and being surprised by my response to it as a reader, and wondering: “how did I write that?”—is what it comes down to….How did I write that? Where did that come from? Strangely enough, haiku—and so we’re talking about tanka and haiku—haiku, it isn’t like that. With haiku, I frequently remember very clearly exactly where I was, and how things came to me. Part of that is because I didn’t wander too much [when writing haiku]; I didn’t follow some kind of a stream of consciousness with the words and go someplace else. I stayed with something that had crystallized a little bit. But with other kinds of poems, I start with something that’s fairly crystallized and fairly sharp and limited, but I often follow along to places that, later on, I’m not sure I could find my way back to. So when I read the poem, I’m often a little bit surprised. I don’t always know how some of my longer poems are going to come out, when I start to read them.

John explained that he has the “frequent experience” of being surprised by the unpredictable nature of his poems, not only as he writes them, but again as he reads them. He contrasted haiku with other types of poems he writes (including tanka and free verse), explaining that with poems other than haiku, John will tend to “wander,” or “follow along to places that, later on, I’m not sure I could find my way back to.”

In addition to John and Pearl, two other participants also used the word “wander” to characterize the unpredictable nature of writing poetry. For example, Elaine explained the nature of her thoughts as she writes poetry: “You wander off, and sometimes you wander off into a direction that’s very helpful, and sometimes you’re just wasting time.”
Elizabeth was another poet to use the word “wander” in the course of describing how she sometimes goes searching for an idea that might inspire a poem. When I asked Elizabeth if there have been times when she sat down to compose a poem before having a specific source of inspiration, she replied: “Yes, yes I have. I’ll just sit and I’ll let my mind wander, maybe wander over what I’ve seen that day, or past few days, or wander over past events; think about past events and how I felt about them, to try to get an idea or a spark of inspiration.” Given that Elizabeth would purposefully try to find inspiration at times, I thought that perhaps some element of her process could be described and offered to novices as a means of authentically engaging in the writing process when they wanted to practice honing their craft. After all, while the process of searching for an idea involved the unpredictable activity of wandering, the intent that started the process was purposeful: an intention to find a bit of inspiration sufficient for writing a poem. In order to see if there was any way in which Elizabeth guided this unpredictable process to encounter a source of inspiration that she found compelling, I asked her a follow up question: “Is there any strategic aspect to your wandering mind, when you’re looking for inspiration? Do you have any tricks of the trade, or anything that you usually find works when you’re looking for inspiration?” She replied: “No, I don’t. Because if I did, I could be inspired every day. There are times when I draw a blank, and then I just pick up a book and read.” In this statement, Elizabeth has made it clear that she believes not only that her process is unpredictable in how it unfolds, but that the search for inspiration is not consciously directed.

While many of the findings from the writing sessions showed conscious, intentional, and even strategic ways in which the poets guided their thinking to advance
the creation of their poems, it is important to take a brief moment to acknowledge that, during their interviews, there were times when the poets also characterized their thinking in ways that highlight the undirected, receptive nature of thought. Part of this theme emerged in the ways in which the four poets above described writing poetry as a means of “wandering.” Other ways in which the poets characterized their involvement in writing their poetry as passive or undirected include the ways in which Pearl referred to how she will “enter the silence.” While she was working on the poem she was writing for this study, Pearl offered a few side comments in which she explained her view of how she engages in the writing process when she is working at her best. She explained:

…poetry really is walking in silence, you know. Your deepest and your best poetry comes from silence. It’s exploring the silences. It’s sitting in silence and letting the silence talk into you and you have to be quiet and listen for it…

In describing the state of mind that she was trying to achieve while working on the poem she wrote for her session, Pearl gave the impression that she was looking to enter into a meditative state, which one achieves when “letting the silence talk into you.” In this state, Pearl perceives her role as one of the listener instead of the speaker, which necessarily requires one to be “quiet.” However, while she had conjured a mostly passive image of her role in this state of mind, she did use the words “walking” and “exploring” to describe what she was doing; the actions of listening and being quiet may be passive, but she made it clear that she was still maintaining a certain quality of alertness or searching.
In keeping with her aim at that point in the writing process, Pearl was then silent for several seconds. Concerned that there would be gaps in the data for the study, I encouraged her to continue voicing her thoughts. She replied:

Oh, I’m thinking, but I’m waiting for the word to come to me because it’s not something that—see, this is where you get to the point where it’s not something that you’re doing, it’s something that it’s doing to you. When you’re writing things that are connected with this kind of thing, if you really want to get down into the depths of what things mean—I mean, you can write all kinds of things that really are kind of light and on the surface. But if you really want to get down to what things mean, and that’s basically what I try to do, is to get down into what things mean…you really have to wait and listen…it’s like love; you know it when you see it. You fall in love with that thing that is so true, and so perfect and fits so wonderfully. So it doesn’t necessarily come from you…I’m usually doing something else, and all of a sudden there’s something there that connects with me. It’s trying to tell me something….

In this statement, Pearl had revealed more facets of how she perceived that she enters into a meditative state when she does her deepest thinking in service of creating a poem. She characterized her action as “waiting” for the specific word she needs to come to her. In addition, she underscored the passive nature of this type of thinking by saying “it’s not something that you’re doing, it’s something that it’s doing to you.” She characterized this state of mind as one in which she is able to “get down into the depths of what things mean.” She then explained that she sees her successful completion of using this meditative state as one in which all she needs to do is recognize the answer when it comes to her rather than from her. However, the moment is more natural and emotionally charged for her than one of mere recognition, as she characterized it: “You fall in love with that thing that is so true, and so perfect and fits so wonderfully.”
Because Pearl and Elizabeth had spoken of needing silence to write poetry well, I had added a question about silence as a standard part of the follow up interview. When I asked Pearl “how, if at all, is silence part of the writing process for you,” she responded with the enthusiasm that one would expect from one who had spoken so earnestly about it as an aside during her writing session. She replied: “Totally. Everything comes from the silence. I’m not really an expert on whether other people do this or not, but the silence is where the things all form. It’s where you go to understand things….” I then asked Pearl if she could remember any examples of how she has used silence while creating a poem. She replied:

Oh, it’s all. It’s all. That’s exactly it. All of the poems come to me from silence. I mean, that grief [for my husband’s death], it’s buried so deep in silence that it’s going to take me the rest of my life, probably, to understand it. I think you can only deal with it in the silence. When there’s too much around, everything else is distraction; it takes you away from that. Just talking about it, it takes you away from it because you’re shifting to another part of your mind and your functioning.

Pearl had continued to speak of “silence” as a meditative state, in which “everything else is distraction,” and even the act of talking about one’s present thoughts or feelings will disrupt the state of silence. In an email to clarify parts of her interview, Pearl related her perception that there are times when she uses her “conscious mind” (more so when painting than when writing poetry), but then “I come to the moment when I sense it’s time, and then I let the art/poetry come to me. It’s a matter of not getting in its way by trying to make it do something.” By this characterization, we can see that Pearl considers her participation in her state of silence as one in which she is not directing the development of the poem, but letting it unfold in its own way.
Frank offered another example of ways in which the poets reported they intentionally invoked meditative states to continue making progress on their poems when they had come to a point where they felt they were not progressing. He described how he had repurposed the self-hypnosis he had learned in order to quit smoking for use in writing poetry. As we can already see, Frank’s application of self-hypnosis to invoke a meditative state while writing poetry is, in an overarching sense, strategic. It is strategic both in his adaptation of the procedure of hypnosis to the specific context of writing, and in the decision to apply this technique at specific times, when he feels that his work is not progressing as it should. He reported self-hypnosis as one of his methods of relaxing his mind to overcome blocks in his writing process; he characterized the process as having “re-jiggered the brain” to allow for “clarity” of thinking afterward. He reported that his practice of self-hypnosis is successful “quite often.” He described the process as sometimes being “just the beginning of a twenty minute nap,” which he also believes is helpful to the writing process, as he will wake more refreshed and with new “clarity” from his nap. He characterized his experience of self-hypnosis:

I’m trying not to [think about anything]. Because that sort of destroys the benefits of either a nap or a break. But when you come out of it, there’s clarity there, in your thinking. At least that would be the goal. Sometimes the answer is there. But, for the most part, it’s just a fresh look at what you’ve just done—or are doing.

Frank’s characterization of his meditative state during self-hypnosis (or his nap, when he falls asleep during the procedure) is one in which he is completely receptive rather than concentrating on the aspect of the poem that he is trying to resolve. He expects the answer to come after he emerges from that state of mind, when he is able to take a “fresh look” at his poem, rather than while he is in the meditative state. In this way, Frank’s
process is different from Pearl’s, even though there are many similarities between the two.

The passage of time was a continuing theme throughout John’s descriptions of ways in which he engages in the writing process without effortful, intention-filled direction. First, while he was writing the second poem he drafted for the study, he explained one of his methods for making progress in writing poems: “just be quiet for a long time, a kind of wool gathering until I come back to that, that’s another method that kind of works for me…I need more time for that.” In a similar sense, he mentioned that he sometimes will “put it aside for a while, and then I’ll read it in a few days when I have a chance to look at it as a reader.” In this way, he would use time—without conscious attention to the poem—to separate himself from it and return to it with a new perspective. Another way in which time plays into John’s perception of his writing process is in the amount of time that will elapse between an event or observation and when he feels ready to write about it. He explained:

I do have periods of time when I don’t write for over a week or so. And I try not to worry about that too much. I think that there’s an internal process that just has to be gone through. And I don’t really control it, exactly, but I sort of just believe in it…there’s an internal process that has to take its course—take its time.

In this description, John showed that he considers “an internal process” to be at work in readying him to write the poems that he will eventually write, and that this process takes time and is beyond his control.

Another aspect of the internal process that John describes is that he believes in it, which brings us to the second theme in how he spoke about his writing process in ways that were beyond his immediate control: trust.
I operate at a level of kind of—trust…there are times when I want to talk about God, but I don’t believe in God in that way. But I do really have some sort of deep trust in larger processes that seem to work without me having to steer them or make them work. And my experience of writing poetry is very much in that area.

In this statement, John has identified his sense of trust as a factor in his writing process, and also in the way in which some aspects of his writing practices operate without his conscious direction.

Part of John’s answer to how silence is part of the writing process for him involved a version of trust, as well. He explained:

In terms of composition, for me, I think of my relationship to silence as being: trusting patience. So I generally don’t try to make myself write a poem. I trust that with the right amount of silence, in terms of writing poems, something satisfying will come with time…there might be gaps of most of a week or something, when I wouldn’t have written anything at all. That’s a certain kind of silence on my part that comes out of my confidence in my ability to know when I’m ready. And it’s not perfect confidence, because every once in a while, I worry a little bit, like: “Wow, it’s been a while since anything has come to me.” I resist the temptation, though, to then try and make myself write something until I’m ready; until I’ve discovered something to write.

In this description, John speaks of “trust” and “confidence” in his regular writing process in that he will wait until he feels “ready” to begin a poem, even when that means he may begin to worry if he has gone for several days without writing in the meanwhile. When the time has come to write, he will know because then he will feel as though he has “discovered something to write,” so he does not attempt to force the writing process by trying to write a poem apart from when he feels “ready” to do so. (Note, however that this principle of waiting until inspiration comes to him rather than pursuing inspiration is
a practice that he cultivated after gaining proficiency in writing poetry through practice. Earlier, in adolescence, John reported that he kept a regular writing practice where he would sit down with the intention to write a poem without necessarily having a specific source of inspiration to begin the writing process.)

During John’s description of unexpected moments when his writing is deeply insightful, he said he feels the locus of control to be outside himself. This is another way in which John feels that something other than his conscious mind is guiding his writing processes. He explained:

...sometimes when I’ve been writing, I mentally sort of step back and see some part of what I’m doing as something quite new, quite surprising, quite different than what I thought I was doing, and (pause) remarkable. And this is something I bet you hear from a lot people that are writing: the feeling at those moments is that I am not so much making this, as I am the vehicle of this. That this is not coming from me so much as through me…that I am the place in the mountains that the river passes through.

In this statement, John characterized the way in which he feels that, when he achieves a deep level of insight, he does not feel that he is directing his writing process. In addition, in this particular characterization, his role in the writing process is relatively passive, as “the vehicle” rather than the maker of the poem, the place that the poem flows through.

John explained his sense that intuition is the key player in beginning a poem and is somehow necessarily present throughout the writing process.

There are several things involved in writing poetry, and [when stressing the importance of intuition] I’m really talking about the initiation. The sense of an incipient poem. The thing that gets you started working. And at some point, that that still is operating throughout. I mean, if you entirely lose that, it’s like when you’re trying to remember a dream but you just lose track of it at some point.
In this statement, John has described the spark of interest that he taps into in order to begin a poem as being sensed and held onto through intuitive thinking. John referred to this “sense of an incipient poem” at a different part of his interview as a dual sense of something he can’t easily identify, but “still tends to contain [a] resonance” with him. John’s belief that his intuitive mind is in charge of detecting and holding the spark that initiates a poem is consistent with his belief that an “internal process” that he can’t identify works on the material for a poem to ready him to write about it, and that his participation in the early stages of approaching the writing process is characterized by a “trusting patience” because the timing of when to begin a poem is also beyond his control.

After John had identified his sense of how intuition guides the writing process, he immediately acknowledged the importance of “rational” thinking, as well. John explained how both rational and intuitive thinking are necessary to his writing process:

There is a rational process involved in writing poems, but it’s just that that’s the process of revising, polishing, selecting what to share with readers, and what to offer for publication. Plenty of rational thought with that. And then, there’s also the possibility of rational reflection on a poem. I don’t mean to say that anything that people have said in a way of rationally discussing poetry, that that has no value, that’s not the point at all. But the point is, simply, that it has such a value and it’s so strong that it can often drown out the intuitive approach to poetry, and that’s closer to the point of inspiration than anything you can do with rationality.

With this statement, John explained his understanding of how rational thinking contributes to the writing process, in counterpoint to a concern he had voiced earlier, that “if you want to listen to your intuition, the rational mind really drowns that out…I don’t
know how much anyone can find their way into a poem through thought.” [Note: John’s discussion appears to treat rational thinking in contrast to intuitive thinking, as commonly occurs in casual conversation. We might consider that rationality and intuition are dimensions of thinking that are independent from one another, and can appear together in different combinations, rather than as opposites (D. Perkins, personal communication, January 24, 2010). Such an approach allows us to see both as occurring simultaneously at times, rather than only as a sequence of one followed by the other.] John has made it clear that the main importance he places on intuition is that it is “closer to the point of inspiration.” John summed up his perception of how he goes about the process of writing poetry later in the same interview: “I think I’m always looking at it partly from the point of view of somebody kind of crafting, making this thing, but also from the point of view of somebody receiving it.” This dual nature of how John had articulated his perception of the way his mind engages in the writing process was reflected in the cumulative individual comments and writing behaviors of each of the other participants. Whether placing emphasis on one’s conscious efforts and skills or on some process that is beyond conscious intention, all of the participating poets referenced both types of thinking at various times during their interviews. It is important to highlight how the poets perceive their poetry develops apart from their consciously directed thinking because their intuitive thinking was not always explicit during the think aloud protocol in their writing sessions.
Asking Strategic Questions and Brainstorming

The other ways in which I found that the poets went about conducting inquiry during their writing sessions: through asking themselves strategic questions and generating several ideas before choosing one to pursue, were not mentioned by the poets as they characterized the purposes and manner in which they regularly engage in writing poetry. Such activities are likely not in the forefront of the poets’ minds, as they are the skills of craft that operate in the background in relation to the focus of the poet’s mind on the content of the poem during the process of writing. While the intentional behaviors of asking strategic questions and brainstorming multiple options before selecting one to develop further were shown to be consciously directed by the poet in the moment of writing in the findings to Sub Questions A and B, it appears that the poets either do not take notice of their own engagement in these activities, or that they do not find them prominent enough within the writing process to remark upon their use. The absence of self reporting on the use of such skills of craft shows that some of the subtleties of the writing process are more suited for characterization from direct observation of poets engaged in the act of writing than from what poets will report when they describe how they usually go about writing poetry.

Experimentation

In terms of conducting inquiry through experimentation, there was only one poet in the study who characterized his usual writing practices in a way that suggests an experimenting orientation. John had described his process of writing and reading his poems (other than haiku) in terms of going places with them that he wouldn’t be able to
reproduce, discovering the destination only by the time he reaches the end of a poem. I immediately interpreted his explanation as meaning that he didn’t know exactly where the poem was going to end up, when he started writing it. I performed a member check to verify my interpretation, and he responded:

Well, certainly when I write a longer poem, that’s usually the thing. I’m sure there were some exceptions where I set out ahead of time to do this with this stanza and this with that stanza, and to get, you know, three things happening in these stanzas and then to conclude it in this way. I mean, there may have been some instances where I may have had a plan of some kind ahead of time; those would be, by far, the exception. It’s much more a matter of starting with something like what might be the material for a haiku, but having some sort of dialogue with that: trying the alternatives, arguing with it a little bit, challenging it, playing with it. And my longer poems tend to end at the point where I recognize that could be the end. (laughs) That’s about it.

When John described his writing process as taking his initial impetus for writing the poem and “trying the alternatives, arguing with it a little bit, challenging it, playing with it,” he showed that he considered his writing process to be one in which he could experiment with different ideas. In this description, note that he was also characterizing his involvement in the process as active. One needs to exert effort to argue with or challenge an idea. However, the description he gives suggests that while he may have an overall orientation in which an attitude of engaging actively with his ideas may lead him to experiment with his ideas on a regular basis, his description also suggests that there are many specific manners in which he engages with his ideas, and the unplanned nature in which John writes his poems suggests that his experimenting may arise spontaneously in response to whatever he deems the poem draft needs at the time, in order to further his writing process along.
At first, it seems surprising that only one poet would characterize his writing process as experimental, given that we saw experimentation happening during the writing sessions in various ways. Recall that both Frank and Pearl’s approaches were highly experimental in the ways in which they explicitly noted that they would add a line provisionally, planning to keep it only if the material that followed justified the line’s existence. Elaine experimented with describing different scenes that had contained a similar mood and quality of light before settling on the jazz concert. Elizabeth experimented in a more subtle way, when she noted “I don’t think I’ll like that, but I’ll write it down anyway.” We saw plenty of experimentation in the writing sessions, and with some of it remarked upon by the poets themselves as they were composing their poems, one might expect that this was a conscious technique that would be talked about in the interviews. I believe that some of the experimental mindset of the poets was captured in some of the poets’ characterization of how they would “wander” during the writing process. On the other hand, perhaps many ideas that are tested and don’t make the final cut are not particularly memorable to the poet, so poets are less likely to consider the process of experimentation as an important means by which they advance the writing process.

Identifying the Significance of Observed Phenomena

In the writing sessions I had seen four poets conduct inquiry by identifying or explaining the significance of an observed phenomenon. However, the poets rarely explicitly characterized their writing practices in this manner. The exception is when Pearl related an anecdote of how she needed to write about the trees being cut down
around her home in order to “gain understanding” of the situation, which is detailed at the end of the Findings for Sub Question C under the heading Writing Poetry as Sensory Thinking. The lack of explicit acknowledgment of the poets conducting inquiry by identifying or explaining the significance of the phenomenon they describe in their poems may simply be a result of the fact that this is often a byproduct of the writing process, rather than the expressed purpose of writing poetry. It also may mean that the findings from the poets’ writing sessions constitutes a description of the ways in which poets work that may be a very tacit process which: 1) is so subtle it doesn’t enter their awareness, or 2) is so omnipresent and mundane that the poets didn’t think to mention it. After all, several of the poets have explicitly acknowledged that they have gained insight at some point during the writing process, which is a manner of identifying or explaining the significance of some aspect of the content of their poems. Or perhaps there is a different explanation entirely for why only one of the poets reported on this process even though I had found it in some of the writing sessions. Whatever the reason, the absence of direct discussion on this topic by most of the poets in the study is a bit puzzling, and deserves attention in future studies.

*Insight or Resolution Through Writing Poetry*

There were many instances where the participating poets claimed that their thoughts or emotions had changed due to their engagement in the activity of writing poetry. Elaine, Elizabeth, Frank, Pearl and John directly claimed that the act of writing poetry had caused their thoughts and emotions to change. Miriam claimed the opposite. I was unable to ask Sam a direct question on this topic since he wasn’t available for a
follow up interview (however, Sam had claimed that the writing process was therapeutic for him, which is an example of how writing poetry can offer emotional resolution for a poet). Sam had also articulated a general belief that engaging in the activity of writing stimulates his thinking. He said: “often as I write, the writing itself is like the thinking, if you will, and it’s almost like the pen and the hand become part of the brain in the sense that the writing process is part of the thinking.” Later in his interview, Sam explained: “writing is basically thinking and feeling jotted into paper and pen and ink. And it’s…a focusing of your emotions and thoughts into a concrete accomplishment.”

You may recall that Miriam was the poet who, in her writing session for the study, quickly fixed upon a topic to write about, and spent the remainder of her session working to express her early observation as a poem. I asked her the same question I asked during each of the follow up interviews that I conducted: “Have you ever found your understanding or emotion about the topic of one of your poems to change in any way through the process of writing the poem?” She replied:

No, because I write the poem because it means something to me. And I have not changed my mind, that I’m aware of, about any position that I’ve taken. Of course, sometimes you can dance on both sides of the orchestra. But no, no, I haven’t changed anything…it’s the initial thrust that creates the poem, and there’s no reason to change it.

In the above statement, Miriam was clear in conveying her sense that the act of writing a poem for her does not appear to change her thoughts about whatever it was that she had decided to write about in the first place. In response to questions that occurred later in the interview, she also reported that she doesn’t believe her inspiration shifts at all while drafting a poem. The way Miriam’s writing session unfolded during the study is
consistent with her perception about her writing at other times. Therefore, it seems likely that in the usual course of writing poetry, perhaps whatever inquiry Miriam performs on the content of her poems is often completed in the initial moments when she fixes upon a topic to write about.

The other poets in the study claimed that they had gained insight or emotional resolution through the act of writing poetry. Frank’s response is described later, in the section that reports on how poets perceived that engaging in inquiry on expression has led to insight on the content of their poems. When I asked Elizabeth if she had ever found her understanding or emotion about the topic of one of her poems to change while writing the poem, she replied:

Well, sometimes I can see additional layers that I hadn’t thought of at first. I think that: ‘maybe someone else could see that,’ or ‘that could be another interpretation.’ It’s like that with reading someone else’s poem. Often, at first reading, you get one impression, but then going back, and you think about it, you get something else. So this does happen to me, too, but my first expression, my first thought—the words that I put down may be just to capture what I thought immediately, but as I’m writing, I may switch a word here, switch a word there, so that it will have multiple interpretations, or maybe the multiple interpretations are always there, I just didn’t see it at first. That happens with, I think, most everyone’s poems, whether you’re reading someone else’s, or my own. But not always. Sometimes it’s just one interpretation, and that’s it.

According to Elizabeth’s response, gaining insight on the content of the poem while writing it seems to be a pretty common occurrence for her. However, when I asked her to describe some of the times that this phenomenon had happened, she replied: “I do not remember my poems.” Such a reply is understandable, particularly since not only the final version of the poem would need to be remembered in detail, but also subtle shades
of meaning that she had woven into the poem by making small adjustments “so that it will have multiple interpretations.” Elizabeth’s sense that such occurrences are regular, but her inability to think of a specific one may offer a clue as to why only Pearl had mentioned that she had made an observation and then discovered the significance of it while writing a poem, even though four of the poets went through this process in their writing sessions: there is much detail to remember in the various options that one considers before making the final choice of what is included in the poem.

Elaine also answered my interview question in the affirmative when I asked her if she ever found her understanding or emotion about the topic of her poem to change while she was writing the poem. She replied:

Oh, yes, I think that happens quite often. You see things from a different angle as you write, and when you have to put things into words, you sometimes see that it’s not quite the way you thought it was going to be… I remember a tanka that I was writing about a lake I saw, and when I started writing it, I thought that the lake was more or less a barrier to something, and then, as I actually wrote it, I found that what I was feeling was really a suggestion of freedom; it was quite the contrary. But it was because I was putting it into words I realized that I had to make it very clear to myself and to anyone who was going to read it, so it changed direction completely…I guess because I had to make it clear to myself first, what direction I was really going in. I mean, I’d seen this image that struck me, and I started out by saying to myself, “there’s a barrier to reaching that lake,” and then as I was writing it I realized that that’s not really what I had seen—that I’d really seen that once I got to get onto that lake, that it was—kind of—freedom; instead of being a barrier, it was a path to freedom.

In order to clarify what the barrier was in Elaine’s example, I asked her a couple of questions, to which she replied: “There was something between me and the lake, [and] that what counted was being on that lake, and not what was the barrier to reaching it.”
asked her “about how often does this sort of thing happen, where you’re writing about one thing and then it ends up changing?” She replied: “I think it happens pretty often. (laughing) I think it happens pretty often, but I really couldn’t give a percentage on that.” While Elaine had remembered a specific occurrence in which she observed that she had gained insight on the content of her poem while she was writing it, like Elizabeth, she conveyed her sense that it is difficult to keep track of the various times when this phenomenon happens to her. Later in the follow up interview, when I asked Elaine how her inspiration shifts, if at all, as she drafts and edits a poem, she said: “…there’s always some shifting…sometimes it’s the rhythm, or it’s the use of a word just takes you in another direction you didn’t expect.” With this explanation, Elaine had described ways that her inquiry on expression has affected the content of her poem, in addition to the specific anecdote that she gave about how the significance of the lake changed for her while she wrote a poem about it.

When Pearl answered the same question about insight gained during the writing process, she responded with an example of a tanga she had written. Tanga is an art form that presents a visual image with a tanka. She said:

You know, I was thinking about that today, because I realized that lately I seem to have been winding down into facing my grief about Tom. I’ve always been kind of reluctant to put that into my poetry. I’ve always tried to look at “the bright side”—quote, end quote—and I realize there’s a certain amount of denial there, and some of my poems lately—[in a recent issue of a tanka journal] is a tanga by me. It really got down into the emotional quality of my grief for Tom, and slowly but surely it’s leading me down there. But I had to wait for it to come to me, because it’s buried so deep within my psyche. I’m just letting it unfold at its own pace. So my poetry does change over that period of time. Sometimes when I’m writing a poem, though, I’ll write a poem and it’ll be writing about one
thing, and then turn it around later on, and ... I'll learn something else from it that I didn't even know I knew. I've found times a poem means something entirely different than what I thought the poem meant when it came to me.... So that tanga—I also realized after I wrote it, I suddenly realized that I was learning; I was dealing with my own grief when I wrote it. And I didn’t realize that at the time I wrote the poem.

In Pearl’s description of this particular occasion when she reported that she had gained insight while writing a poem, she explained that she didn’t realize that she “was learning” and “dealing with [her] own grief” until after she had written it. While some of the poets spoke about their experiences of gaining new interpretations of their poems after reading the poem once it was completed, Pearl’s anecdote offers another account of how a poet may not be immediately conscious of the insight he or she has gained from writing a poem. Pearl’s husband had died nine years before she had written that particular poem, so her grief for him may not have been at the forefront of her mind when she wrote the poem.

I asked Pearl if there were any other times that she could think of when that same process had happened. She replied:

That happens every once in a while. On [a poetry blog]—those three poems that I have there, I realize every time I read them, they take me to a deeper level. The poem about picking up the stone, and putting it in my pocket, and it cutting deeper into the mountain, and every time I read that poem I get another, deeper level of the way life changes us, and the way we change everything around us, just by being here. [original poem: stone in my pocket—/ the brook cuts deeper / into the mountain ]

In this example, Pearl related a sense of gaining additional insight upon repeated readings of her poem. Pearl’s anecdote is relayed in a manner that suggests that her experience
may be similar to Elizabeth’s experience of encountering “multiple interpretations” in her own poems as well as in those written by others.

Since Pearl had shown that she had some detailed memories of her experience writing and reading poetry, I continued asking questions along the same lines. I asked Pearl if there were any times when she found that her understanding or emotions changed while she was actually writing the poem, rather than reading it. She replied that she hadn’t, and then went on to give a more detailed account of her perception of how the process of gaining insight from reading her poems at later dates has worked for her:

That’s why I love haiku, because in a long poem you don’t remember everything, but haiku condenses everything into a few words. And it stays in the back of your mind, that someday you can remember the elements of the poem. Now, I mean, I don’t remember the exact poem for picking up that stone and putting it in my pocket, but the elements of picking up the stone, and it cutting deeper into the mountain, and it’s an image that’s in your mind, and your subconscious works on it, and all of a sudden, when you come back to it and you read it again, and you start to feel things, and then you start dealing with the feelings. It produces feelings within you. And then you start to realize that those feelings are teaching you something, and you get a deeper knowledge. Sometimes…you learn things you can’t put into words…I think they’re higher truths. I think they’re universal truths; when you reach the universal, or it reaches you.

In this explanation, Pearl revealed that she believes that the way in which she learns from her poems is through the emotions that the poems engender in her as a reader. Pearl’s perception of emotion as the mechanism through which she gains “a deeper knowledge” through her poems is in keeping with the observations that some of the poets made that emotion is an integral part of the writing process (such as when Elaine reported that the poem she wrote for her session began to improve when “some emotion got into it.”)
Pearl’s sense that she learns from her poems not during the writing stage but upon reading her poems may indicate that much of her writing processes occur at an intuitive level, and her conscious mind is not registering the deeper meaning of the poem that she composes until she is able to reflect on it outside of the act of composing. Perhaps some inquiry progresses in a cyclical way, with an alternating dominance between intuitive and conscious processes in dialogue with one another. In her above statement, Pearl’s belief that the way in which her poems are “teaching” her is through the emotions that she has when reading the poems is also in keeping with an interpretation that Pearl primarily engages with poetry at an intuitive level.

At another point in her interview, Pearl also went into detail about how she believes the process of learning involves the words that comprise a poem:

You learn with the words; when you write the word, it’s no longer an abstract thing. It becomes something that you’re relating to. It’s something that has an effect on you. If it doesn’t have an effect on you, then it’s not good poetry. You start to feel the effects of these words.

Transforming the abstract into concrete specificity by selecting words for the poem is one of the ways in which Pearl reports that she will “learn with the words” of a poem. In this particular statement, she appears to locate part of her learning process in the moment of choosing the words for her poem as well as later, when she relates to the words once the poem is written. In the above statement, Pearl also seems to be reemphasizing the necessity for a poem to evoke emotion in its reader, that through our emotional response to the poem we “feel the effects” of the words.

John also reported that he regularly encountered new understandings and emotions due to the act of writing a poem. The first time it came up in his interview was
when I asked him how he decides that his poem is complete. His response shows that he has an expectation that his poems will engender new insights for him during his process of repeated readings of his drafts:

A poem is finished when I have read it and recited it enough times for it to stop surprising me in big ways. And then I’m in a position to evaluate what effects it’s had up to that point when it was still in the process of surprising me…just because a thing doesn’t do what you intended it to do doesn’t mean that it’s useless. And what’s more, sometimes the use it has is much greater than what you had intended. So I’m going along doing whatever I’m doing—kind of fiddling with words, and trying this and trying that, and so on and so forth, and feeling that I’ve reached the point where I’ve got something that sounds nice and contains a—and so on, and put it aside, and then like in another week when I’m able to look at that as a reader, I may go: “Whoa, I had none of that in my mind at all, that as far as I know, but there it is.”

At the beginning of John’s answer, he defines the point at which he knows he has finished writing a given poem in terms of when it stops “surprising [him] in big ways,” which shows that John’s regular experience in writing poetry is one in which he encounters new ideas or emotions through the process of writing. Like Elizabeth and Pearl, John has reported that even after he has completed and set aside his poem for a period of time, he will sometimes read it at a later date and discover completely new meanings that he hadn’t consciously intended to include in the poem. In the spirit of considering the writing process as a journey in which one can wander, we can see that John’s accepting and even approving stance toward the various unintended outcomes for his poems is consistent with the ability of a wanderer to see the benefit of the locations he or she has found rather than being upset with not having arrived at the originally intended location.
John continued with his description of how he expects his poems to surprise him as he reads them repeatedly both during and after the writing process. He mentioned how he might notice that his poem was drawing upon “experiences that were kind of on my mind at the time even though I wasn’t thinking that when I was writing this poem.” He continued to describe another way in which he will be surprised, but this time by a poem that he hadn’t sought publication for because he hadn’t fully appreciated the poem when he wrote it:

… I’ll look at something from say, twelve years ago, and I’ll realize, “oh, that actually works pretty well.” And the reason I didn’t think it worked before…was because I was so enmeshed with my own actual experience of it, that I couldn’t see the thing independent of my experience, but now, after all this time, I look at that poem, I said, “oh, that’s a pretty good poem.” It isn’t what I wanted it to be in terms of my literal experience at that time.

In this statement, John acknowledged that at times his poems can surprise him long after he has written them because he has gained more perspective by waiting a period before reading the poem, and this new perspective has allowed him to finally glean the insight that he had captured in his poem.

John then described yet another way that he might gain insight from a poem he has already written. He explained:

…another way that a poem can surprise me: The startling aptness of a word. Sometimes I’ll just write however I would have said something, but then later on I’ll realize: just that word has all these implications. Just the history of that word, maybe the different meanings of that word but also where that word comes from, the root of that word….There will be times when a word that I just have used, almost unconsciously, just a word that I’ve used with as much thought as talking…will suddenly appear to have all these vectors…it does seem to me that I can be surprised by both what it is that the poem is saying, how the poem is
saying it, the way the poem looks from a completely different angle, sometimes a glaring problem in the poem that I hadn’t noticed before, that I see has an easy fix...

John revealed that his inquiry on expression sometimes leads to insight on the content of his poems when he said: “another way that a poem can surprise me: The startling aptness of a word.” He reconfirmed that he was speaking of two ways in which a poem might surprise him: “what it is that the poem is saying,” which reveals inquiry on the content of the poem, as well as “how the poem is saying it,” which shows that he believes his inquiry on expression can lead to insight later on, when the rightness of the way in which he has said something becomes more apparent to him.

John gave a specific example of an occasion when his understanding had changed due to writing a poem (the poem he quotes is from Stevenson, 1968):

[My free verse poem] “Here it is Winter” starts out being, to me, kind of a combination of sarcasm and innocence, because it’s: “Here it is winter and the snow bees are busy / Building their snow hives.” It’s kind of: “the dolts,” you know. (laughs) “Hard at play, they dance on the graves of grasshoppers, / Gather flake flowers, and buzz home with full mufflers.” It still has that dismissive tone, but it’s also: I’m now beginning to remember nursery rhymes and fables and things. And anyway, I won’t go through the whole poem, but it ends up really taking seriously this idea of prayer. “In the peace you have now, / Which is drifting and wing-still, / Let your prayers be heard.” By then, in my mind, I’ve modified my tone from sarcasm to sincerity—to really, this is beautiful.

John had reported how, during the course of writing a poem, he had changed his view from one that was sarcastic and “dismissive” to one that was sincere and appreciative. John was relying on both his memory of the experience of writing his poem, and drawing upon the actual lines of the poem, which had preserved the various stages of his changing
mood as he was composing the poem. John then went on to relate the story of how the poem developed:

… I think the tone is clearly sarcastic in the opening lines. Then after I said that, I said, oh, gee, I should hang onto that because I could make a poem out of that. But I didn’t do it instantly. I mean, I wrote the poem later on. So the beginning was just—I said: “Here it is winter and the snow bees are busy / Building their snow hives,” [the setting was] on a college campus and everybody was outdoors; it looks like a little Norman Rockwell campus picture. So it was a snotty thing to say. But it also just struck me that it was interesting. So I wrote it down and then later started building on it. But what I ended up with was something that I didn’t anticipate, which was: “this is a beautiful life, really.”

In this statement, John shows how his patronizing view of the bustle on a college campus inspired a poem that he had intended to develop as a critical view of his environment. As he “started building on” the first lines of his poem, he began to discover the beauty in the scene in a way “that [he] didn’t anticipate.”

In addition to subtle insights that John reports he regularly has while writing poetry, he also related that there are times when writing a poem has entailed a very profound sense of insight. He described how he experiences those occasions:

I feel that I’m really likely to have something if I’m almost breaking a sweat when I’m writing. Writing gets to be like really physical at times…But I’m not sure that I do a lot of this out of thought, generally speaking. I think it’s interesting…I’m not sure that the poetry really happens in thought that much. I think that the poetry happens while thought is going on, but I don’t think it actually comes out of the thought. I think it comes out of something that’s like underneath or behind or more parallel—somehow—to the thought. So my feeling when I feel that I’ve really got something, when I’m writing is: (slight pause) sometimes I’ll actually literally break into a sweat, but I’d be really excited, and may want to stand up, and I’d be really happy, you know, and (slight pause) and grateful.
John used this description of profound experiences he has had while writing in contrast to the poems he wrote during his session for this study, which he described more as “an exercise of craft for [him].” It appears that John’s sense of the origin of the profound insight of these rarer of occasions is from somewhere other than his conscious mind—perhaps the subconscious or unconscious.

John had other ways of describing his subjective sense of these profound experiences when he encounters them. He characterized his experience in the following terms:

> When I write a poem, it’s like…there is a God. I don’t believe in a God-like kind of a guy in the sky, or whatever—or Mother Nature talking to me, but it’s as if for a second, there really is a plan to everything, like everything kind of makes sense. It isn’t that I know the sense of it. It’s just that it’s like the universe winks at me. That’s what it’s like.

In the above statement, John interpreted his most outstanding experiences writing poetry in a manner that suggests that he gains an enormous amount of personal meaning from these writing occasions. He described a state of awe where “everything kind of makes sense,” even if only “for a second.” He then qualified the impact of the experiences by explaining “it isn’t that I know the sense of [a plan to everything].” But by going on to describe the experience as “it’s like the universe winks at me,” he does imply that the sense of knowledge that he has gained in such experiences is on a larger scale than the insights that he usually gains.

I asked John how often these types of experiences happen for him. He answered:

> An experience like that is a tremendously sustaining experience. And it does not only happen to me writing poems. So, in terms of writing poems, I would say some
version of that experience, some degree of that experience maybe happens once every couple of years or something. In terms of other kinds of experience, it probably happens about an equal number of times in other ways…. But as I say, that kind of experience just lasts and lasts, you know. I have a poem, probably in one of these books:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{hope} \\
\text{without knowing what for} \\
\text{autumn colors}
\end{align*}
\]

You don’t have to know. But if it keeps coming back, that’s good enough…and my experience is that it does. My experience of living is kind of that it’s a matter of cycles. All kinds of cycles [that continue to return over the course of years]. …with this sustaining experience…I don’t feel that it’s likely to come to me until I need it. But ‘sometimes you can’t be quiet enough,’ that was, for instance, that was a moment of need. That was, for me, answered sufficiently to be sustaining for years, since then.

John explained that he has profound moments of insight about once every two years through his practice of writing poetry. The important thing that John has stressed is that even though these experiences are relatively rare for him compared to the amount of time he spends writing, they are “tremendously sustaining,” and he is confident that he will have more in the future, so he doesn’t concern himself with worrying about if or when the next one will happen; it will likely happen in “a moment of need.” John also acknowledged that these types of insight also come to him at times when he is not writing poetry, but it is interesting that a full half of his most profound insights have occurred while composing poetry, given that he engages in many other types of activities.

At this point in the interview, I had the sense that I would interpret the extraordinary nature of the experiences John was describing as moments of epiphany. I performed a member check to verify my interpretation, asking if “epiphany” would be a fitting word for what he was describing. He replied:
It might be, although epiphany...is too fancy a word. Epiphany is a kind of a stained glass word. The experience to me is visceral. I mean, one version of it is I break into a sweat. Another version of it is I feel it’s safe to sleep. Another version of it is: “This is life. This is life. Right now, right here. Nowhere else, no other time. Right now. This is life.” There are other versions. They’re versions. So, yeah. Epiphany is a perfectly good word. But it wouldn’t be my word.

John had verified my interpretation that his profound experiences in writing poetry have the qualities of an epiphany. However, he also gave a few other descriptions of the experiences that show how important and meaningful he considers them to be. It is plain to see that John’s experiences of gaining insight while composing poetry have impacted him in many ways—physically, as he can “break into a sweat” while writing; emotionally, as he can seize a moment and truly appreciate it, thinking “This is life;” or cognitively, when his new insight calms his mind and he feels “it’s safe to sleep.”

**Inquiry on Expression**

I did not have any questions planned in advance to ask the participants whether they perform inquiry on expression because I had assumed that such was a normal course of action for them. However, since six of the poets spontaneously brought up the subject themselves during the interview, I collected their responses as best I could and offer them here as examples of how they perceive that their writing process unfolds, sometimes according to what genre they are writing in. (Miriam and Elaine’s examples are presented later in the chapter, in the subsection Writing as “Brain Exercise.”)

During her narrative about how she wrote her poem for her writing session, Elizabeth had said: “it’s difficult to translate that quick feeling into words, which is not
quick.” I asked her to tell me more about what she meant, and she said: “The instant feeling is fleeting. But then it takes a while to try to express that feeling. So the words sometimes come easily and often times you’re rewriting and rewriting and going over and over….‖ I asked her if she had any ideas why sometimes it’s not easy to put things into words, and she responded:

It’s just that words are so specific. Each word has a particular meaning, and sometimes the instant experience that you’re having is—well, it’s just not so specific…it could be a whole combination of things that it takes a while to sort out what it is that you experienced, and to come up with the exact word.

I then asked Elizabeth if she could go into more detail on how “it takes a while to sort out what…you experienced.” She explained: “You start asking yourself: Why? What is it that made you feel moved? Or: What impressed me?…whatever the experience is, you start to ask yourself why was this a memorable experience, and that’s when it starts to become a poem.” By Elizabeth’s explanation, we can see that the process of putting an experience into words and the process to “sort out what it is that you experienced” overlap for her: the need for a specific, appropriate word causes her to engage in deeper inquiry about her experience, trying to zero in on the most salient features of her experience. Elizabeth had not only characterized how her process of inquiry on expression tends to proceed, but she had also identified a mechanism by which inquiry on expression can lead to inquiry on the content of the poem: the need to choose specific words to describe an experience may first necessitate clarifying the experience to oneself.

On a related note, one of the consequences of the process of writing “often” being “not quick” is a somewhat mild problem that Elizabeth had identified in response to my
question of what the drawbacks to sustaining a practice of writing poetry were for her.

Her reply referenced her practices of writing both poetry and fiction:

Getting so involved in it that I neglect some necessary duties, like cleaning the house (laughs)…[Another] drawback is I’ll stay up late and then I can’t sleep because that’s all I’ve thought about before I went to bed, was plotting—or even poetry—something that I’m writing, instead of getting onto something that’s completely different so my mind can shut down and I can relax and go to sleep.

The time consuming nature of engaging in the activity of writing—particularly with preparing a book of poetry for publication, as Elizabeth had mentioned to preface her explanation, is a necessary characteristic of any activity that one participates in with continued enthusiasm. The ways in which engaging in writing stimulates Elizabeth’s thinking so much that she finds it hard to allow her mind to “shut down” so she can fall asleep shows that she gets “involved” in the writing process over sustained periods of time rather than the words coming to her instantaneously, completely without effort or attention.

Elizabeth also showed me the writing journal she carries with her in order to capture thoughts that she may later want to shape into a poem:

This is my scribble book, which I carry with me all the time, and I’m always jotting ideas in it. I’ll write in the car frequently, because we take long drives, and I’ll see something along the way that kind of sparks an interest and I’m not writing a complete poem, but I’m just jotting down something that I saw, and then I’ll come back to it later. …this is a lot of first drafts of things that I’m writing on the run: when I’m in the coffee shop, or when I’m in the car I jot things down—beginnings of short stories, which I will continue later, haibun, haiku, and you can see it’s all crossed out, but this is the way I work…
By referring to her journal as a “scribble book” and noting that her jottings are “all crossed out,” Elizabeth was showing that she conducts inquiry on expression on a regular basis. By recording her first impressions and then later working them into the form of a poem, Elizabeth displays the craft-like behavior of a poet who actively shapes an observation into a poem, rather than one who transcribes a poem in a single draft without editing.

Frank described his process in similar terms, noting that he also carries a notebook in which he records thoughts that may later be worked into poem form:

I have books—books; pages and pages of just scraps… But they’re fragments. I think I need to emphasize that. They are fragments…. Most of the pieces which find their way into my poems are fragments, not whole thoughts, until I have time to develop them. In my notebook, which I try to carry with me and have by my bedside, are many short phrases, or, if I’m lucky, at least a haiku/senryu that may be complete in itself, or be expanded into the initial form of a tanka.

In this statement, Frank has described the “fragments” that he writes in his notebook as something he needs to “develop” into “whole thoughts.” He explained that some of the shortest poems (haiku and senryu are traditionally up to three short lines in length, usually comprised of only a couple of short phrases) may come to him “complete in itself,” while the rest of the phrases need to be expanded into poem form.

Like Frank, Pearl related that only the shortest of poems “come in a flash” for her, while tanka and free verse must be shaped into a poem:

Usually [haiku] comes a lot faster to me because I usually get a bolt in the blue… and you get the whole poem in a flash…. tanka doesn’t come in a flash, usually for me. It usually is something where it’s a lot more wordy.
In order to confirm my interpretation that Pearl did perceive that she engages in inquiry on expression, I asked: “So there’s a point where your writing of poetry is not instantaneous that the entire poem comes to you fully formed?” Pearl replied:

It’s in a form (think of an experience as being a form such as the sea) and you wade into it and set down what is happening… to me we swim in our experience, life, being, time…you have to use the words that can carry your meaning as best they can…

By referring to the experience she wishes to capture in a poem as being in the form of the sea rather than in the specific form of a complete poem, Pearl shows that she considers writing to be an activity of immersion in an experience rather than a quick transcribing of experience as a poem. For poems longer than haiku she will “wade into” or “swim” in her experience, and then try to choose “the words that carry [her] meaning as best they can.”

At a different point in her interview, Pearl spoke specifically of her experience in writing free verse:

…When you’re writing a longer poem you really have to go back and edit, to get the rhythm right, to get the words right, and get the relationship of the words right, and to move them around and you keep moving them around and see: “Gee, well, does this say it better, or did that say it better?” And you start talking to yourself and you have that little voice in your head, and it’s telling you, and all the way through there—it’s all tactile sensations, on: “Does this connect? Does that connect? Does this say it? Does that say it?” And you’re dealing with something that can’t be said.

Pearl exemplified the intention of the poet who is conducting inquiry on expression when she characterized her thoughts as “does this say it better, or did that say it better?” Pearl later explained through email that the answers to the questions she asks herself about
whether she is communicating well will come to her through “tactile sensations / memory / intuition etc.”

John also reported that his usual writing practices involve the activity of inquiry on expression. He explained:

It’s pretty rare—I can tell you stories about the few times when I had a poem sort of just spring out, complete, and I wouldn’t be surprised if that was the story with lots of poets….I rarely have a longer poem come to me all at once. If I do, then I make time. I sit down and write it out, but most of it’s just a matter of I’ll write down like the couple of lines or the phrase or whatever it is that I’m going to start with, and come back to it when the time is right. And the time is right means when I both have the free time and when I feel that I’m ready to go on.

Like Elizabeth and Frank, John reported that his regular practice is to record the idea or phrase that sparked his interest in writing a poem, in order to work it into a poem later. John revealed that the process of writing a poem can be time consuming, since he will wait until he has “the free time” to be able to devote to writing. John also implied that the initial idea may need some time to develop in his mind by saying that he will “come back to” the task “when I feel that I’m ready to go on.” At a different point in his interview, John had mentioned that sometimes he needs to wait to gain more perspective on a situation before he will be able to shape it into a poem. During his writing session, he explained that he decided not to write about his son leaving to accept a dream job because it had happened a week ago and was “too new for me to have enough emotional perspective to be ready to write about it.” In this way, it appears that writing is very rarely an instantaneous activity for John—he requires time to develop both the ideas for his poems and the manner in which he will express them. The four poets above ended up describing their regular writing practices in ways that make it clear that they engage in
the act of inquiry on expression as the rule rather than as an exception to it. The other three poets did not address the topic in such a direct and explicit manner, but none of the poets claimed to create poems in a single draft on a regular basis.

**Inquiry on Expression Can Lead to Insight on the Content of the Poem**

Three of the poets expressed the perception that the inquiry that they were performing on the expression of their poems has led them to new insights on the content of their poems during their regular writing practices. For example, in response to an interview question, Frank reported that there have been times when he has changed what he was writing about while writing poetry, which shows that one’s ideas can develop in unexpected ways. I asked him if he could describe some of the times when that had happened, and he answered: “Hmm. (pause) I would say often. I can’t put a name on it, a date on it, a time.” In order to get more of a sense of his perception, I asked if he could characterize what would typically make him change what he was writing about, and he replied: “Word choice.” He then went on to describe the situation as one in which:

> You’ve gotten into a particular mood, emotion, whatever, and it doesn’t really appeal to you, so you either change it drastically, or chuck it.” [In order to make it appeal to me] I’d probably let it sit, for one thing. And come back to it. And all the time, I’m sure that, unconsciously, I’m playing with it. And sometimes in that unconscious process, something pops to the surface, and I’ll say: “Oh, yeah. That’s really what I had in mind. That says it better.”

By reporting that “word choice” was sometimes a catalyst for taking his poem in a “drastically” different direction, Frank has shown that his inquiry regarding expression can sometimes support his inquiry on the content of his poems. Like some of the other poets in the study, Frank will often let a poem sit for a while, with the expectation that his
“unconscious” will work on it until he finds a better solution for his poem, either in terms of its content or its expression.

When I asked Frank during his follow up interview how his inspiration shifts, if at all, as he drafts and edits a poem, he reported that his thinking does shift when he writes a poem. He elaborated:

Just through reflection…It’s feedback with whatever is there. It’s often a diction thing, again. I see a word and realize that’s misleading; that’s not to the point, it doesn’t work—the sound doesn’t work, the order doesn’t work, something like that...Reading one word sparks another image, and that’s where the image might get tucked in, rather than just a replacement for the word. Often this would be texture of some kind: feathers, cloth, grass—I don’t know. Reflections. Or finding a more comprehensive word.

Frank said that “reading one word sparks another image,” and he might then choose to include that new image into the poem instead of continuing to search for a replacement for a word that doesn’t work well in the poem. While this may be a subtle decision, it is nonetheless a very real way in which inquiry on expression can influence the poet’s approach to the content of the poem. In order to make sure I understood how the sequence of events that Frank had described represents how he perceives that his thinking shifts as he drafts and edits a poem, I related my interpretation to him: “So sometimes you see a word, and it makes you think of an image, and then that image becomes more important than the sense of the word?” He replied: “That’s exactly it. Yes, definitely, yeah.” In this way, Frank had confirmed that his inquiry on expression can shape his train of thought, and therefore the content of his poem, in unanticipated ways.

Pearl and John also gave descriptions of their usual writing processes in ways that revealed that their search for a better means of expression has led to insight on the
content of their poems. Pearl had been explaining that she needed to “listen to the silence” when writing poetry. She explained that when she writes she needs:

…to listen to the words to hear what they are saying on many levels. That’s why I couldn’t possibly do this in a library…I couldn’t possibly write in a public place. I might write down a line. But then I’d come home and wait until I came in and rewrote—and explored it, quietly…I have to understand what those words mean. Because words have deeper meaning than most people realize, sometimes.

In this explanation, we can see that Pearl perceives that she needs to be able to deeply consider the words she includes in her poems. In this statement, she describes writing poetry in a sequential order of thinking of words for the poem, and then exploring the meaning of the words as she rewrites the poem. In short, she has revealed that the inquiry she performs on the expression of the poem greatly impacts the meaning she attributes to the poem. Pearl then went on to identify political campaigns as an example of “how terribly misused language is.” By contrast, she explained, “when you find a community of poets that you can relate to and talk to…you realize how deep words can mean. And what they can mean to people; how much they feed people’s souls.” By referring to words as something that can “feed people’s souls,” we can see why Pearl takes such care in pondering the meanings of the words she uses in her poems, in order to make sure she has chosen well. To her, word choice is the means by which she is able to use poetry for the purpose that gives her so much meaning: to relate to others, as we have seen in the findings for Sub Question C1.

At another point in her interview, Pearl related her perception of the power of words, and the resulting reasons for carefully choosing the words that will appear in a poem. She explained:
…perhaps that’s why I search so hard for meaning [in my poems]. Because the way you choose your words, the way you choose your life. Each moment we are presented with choices. In communication we are also constantly presented with choices that will probably affect what is being said. In life these choices will probably affect your quality of life. Right choices: right words—you have to understand what words mean and what effect they have on each other. Words are actions…they bear the same responsibility as any action in your life.

In this statement, Pearl explicitly claimed that the reason why she will “search so hard for meaning” in her poems is “because the way you choose your words, the way you choose your life.” I interpret this statement to mean that Pearl believes that the choice of words she uses in her poems affects the meaning of the poem, and in turn, the meaning of the poem reflects and affects her views of her life. Pearl equates the choice of words that she uses in her poems with “the same responsibility as any action in life,” which shows how important she perceives the task of inquiry on expression is for her when she writes a poem.

When I asked John how his inspiration might shift, if at all, while he is writing a poem, he answered in a way that shows that his process of inquiry on expression has led to insights on the content of his poem. He said:

There’s always a possibility that I started out writing one poem out of one inspiration, but in the course of rewriting it or revising it, I get some other idea of like: “oh, with just this change of this word, people will read it this way,” and I might think: “and that’s better. That’s great.” With a slight change, it could be a completely different poem; yeah I’d go with that. But to me, that’s simply a new inspiration—as a new inspiration that happened while I was reading and revising another poem.

John’s example describes how he will consider changing a word in his poem, which he recognizes that his readers will interpret in a particular manner. When he claims that
such a change is “better,” and then explains that the “slight change” might yield a
“completely different poem,” he acknowledges that the content of his poem has changed
significantly, and that he considers the change to be an improvement. Whether he refers
to such a stroke of insight as an inspiration for a different poem or as advancement to a
more final draft of the current poem, the effect is that his inquiry on expression has
yielded insight on the content of his poem. Frank, Pearl and John had all given accounts
in which they described the process of choosing words for their poems. Furthermore,
each had revealed that the choice to change even a single word in a poem may yield new
insights or allow the poet to see that the poem might develop more satisfactorily if it were
developed along different lines of thought than what had originally been intended. In
short, a poets’ inquiry on how to best express a poem may end up affecting the content of
the poem.

**Extending the Findings:**

**How the Poets Perceive Writing as Exercise, Thinking and Sensing**

In addition to the ways in which the poets’ perceptions of their usual practices of
writing poetry directly address the findings from their writing sessions, the poets
characterized the writing of poetry in additional ways. This section describes various
manners in which the poets characterized how their minds work as they write poetry,
above and beyond the ways that directly align with what that I have been able to identify
from observation of their writing sessions.
Writing as “Brain Exercise”

Five of the poets claimed that the act of writing poetry keeps their minds active in some way. This occurred despite the very open-ended nature of my interview questions regarding why the poets write poetry, and the benefits and drawbacks to writing poetry. For example, when I asked Miriam what the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry were for her, she replied: “It keeps me alive and fresh, and keeps me alert. And (slight pause) it’s like a song that I sing.” I asked her how it keeps her alert, and she replied:

Because I have to mold it into a shape that’s a poem—that’s a tanka or that’s a haiku, so it keeps the architect in me—it’s not enough to just have an idea for a poem, you need to build it in a way, have a shape. A shape—and the finding of the words and the finding of the shape keeps me alert; keeps my mind working.

Notice that Miriam has described the process of writing as one in which she actively engages. By using such phrases as “I have to mold it,” “you need to build it,” and “the finding of the shape keeps me alert,” we can see that Miriam perceives that she actively engages in inquiry on expression when she writes poetry. I then asked her how writing poetry makes her feel “alive and fresh,” as she had said at the beginning of her response. She answered: “Because it’s a creative activity. And the opposite of that is dormancy or lethargy, and so those are the words I use for the way writing poetry makes me feel.”

Later, when I asked what sustains her inspiration as she drafts and edits a poem, she replied: “Well, a challenge. It’s a challenge to see if I can do it. To see if it comes out as a living thing…as a viable poem—something that I like, that a reader might possibly like and identify with.” By describing a successful poem as “a living thing” and her activity as “the finding of the shape” of the poem, Miriam shows that she regards the activity she
is engaging in as having unique challenges. In this regard, we might interpret that the uniqueness of the challenge that she perceives might be a key component in helping Miriam to feel that writing poetry keeps her “alive and fresh” and “alert.”

During the course of their interviews, Elizabeth and John also claimed that the active nature of writing poetry kept them alert. Elizabeth described her writing habits in this manner:

I think if a couple of days have gone by, and I haven’t written some haiku or tanka, then I’ll try to write something, when I feel like I’m getting stale if I don’t write something every day. At least one; either one haiku or one tanka. I wrote one haiku and one tanka this afternoon, and then I felt good, so I went back to my book. (laughs)

While Miriam had described her writing practices as keeping her “alive and fresh,” Elizabeth reported that she feels like she is “getting stale” if she doesn’t write at least one poem every day. For this reason, Elizabeth reported that she would actively try to find a source of inspiration on occasions where inspiration to write a poem didn’t arise spontaneously from her daily activities.

In response to my question regarding the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry, one of the benefits John identified was “I think it probably keeps your brain working. It’s good brain exercise.” I asked him how, and he replied:

I don’t know that I can explain how that is, because I’m not even sure it’s actually true. It’s just something that I feel might be true. My son showed me a video game that’s supposed to be good for keeping your mind healthy in certain kinds of ways. And it’s based on Sudoku, and then all these kind of games that you play that… stimulate your memory and certain faculties of the mind. And I just feel that probably writing poetry does something of that sort as well. I mean, there are a lot of old people who got to be very old and were still pretty sharp in their minds, who
were poets. So, whether it’s true or not, it’s really part of my image.

I then asked John if he had any personal connections with his observation that writing poetry keeps his brain working. He readily began to relate an anecdote to illustrate his claim. He explained that in the weeks and months after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, he noticed that the traumatic events had “affected [his] mind” in the following manner:

Here are some things that happened to me. I was more easily confused for a while. I was more forgetful for a while. I found it harder to do routine things for a while, like balance my checkbook. So little things like that, that I noticed. I found that (slight pause) the moments that I could write about it were moments of recovery for me, of some of these things—that once I could write about it, and I wrote something about it I think, the next day. And I’ve written other things about it in intervals since then, but it’s a process. It’s not like a switch. Then any writing that I was able to do helped me to become less confused, less unfocused, less affected. So in that sense, yeah, I think it’s possible that it—I mean this is both your mind and your emotions kind of working together, that this seems to potentially affect. Now, I wouldn’t think of, any more than I generally say “I’m going to sit down and I’ll write some poems,” I wouldn’t think of saying “I’m going to sit down and I’m going to write some poems to help me be less confused, or less this or that.” But I do think that the things went together; that that was the effect as I was writing some poems immediately after that, and for some time after that.

John identified the times when he had written poems during this period as “moments of recovery” for him, which shows that he regarded the creative writing process as being therapeutic. However, John’s perception that the act of writing poetry had “helped [him] to become less confused, less unfocused, less affected” showed that there were specific
cognitive benefits to writing poetry for him that helped him to not only cope emotionally, but to perform better in his daily activities, such as balancing his checkbook.

Elaine first likened the process of writing poetry to solving puzzles, and later went on to describe the process of writing poetry as one that keeps her mind active. In response to my question “Why do you write poetry?” Elaine included in her answer a description of the puzzle-like nature of fitting words together for a greater purpose:

…I thought that it was a lovely way to express oneself, it didn’t require a lot of research. It required getting into an event or something, and it was almost like a crossword puzzle. I try to take words and fit them together and make them come up with some kind of effect.

With this explanation, Elaine has described a way in which she perceives that a unique type of inquiry proceeds: “getting into an event,” rather than researching it. She then went on to spontaneously describe inquiry on expression in her own words: she would “try to take words and fit them together and make them come up with some kind of effect.”

When I later asked Elaine what has kept her writing poetry over the years, she explained her perception that the task “keeps your mind very active,” and then identified a specific way in which she believes that writing poetry keeps her mind active:

…it’s nice to feel a mood and then be able to write it down…and it’s a challenge to come up with something that’s worthwhile. It’s like painting a picture; it’s a challenge each time. And you do learn. You learn, and as you learn, you do a little bit better. Yeah. And I think that it’s good to work with words, especially when you get to be my age. I think that it’s good to work with words; it keeps your mind very active. And it’s (slight pause) helpful…It’s helpful; it keeps your mind working. So you don’t lose these words. Because you know, as you get older, you lose a lot of words. And you don’t lose these words. You’re
using them; you don’t lose them. Or at least if you’re trying to find them, it’s an active task.

Like Miriam, Elaine used the word “challenge” to describe the process of writing a poem. In keeping with her brief characterization of inquiry on expression, Elaine described the process of “trying to find” appropriate words for her poems as “an active task.”

In her follow up interview, I asked Elaine to tell me more about her idea of how people lose words when they’re older. She drew upon her personal experience to describe the phenomenon:

Well, I just have my own experiences then, that with time I lose words. I mean, I know there’s a word for what I’m looking for, but I can’t find that word, and I know I used to know that word, and it’s not coming to me. Sometimes it’s not coming to me, I feel, because I’m tired, but sometimes it’s not coming to me just because I’m losing it. I feel sometimes that I’m losing vocabulary, that I’m losing the names of people and things. Sometimes it’s better; when I wake up in the morning I sometimes find a word that I couldn’t find yesterday. In the morning my mind seems to be clearer. It contains better memory.

At this point in her interview, I asked Elaine if this effect was a temporary effect where she couldn’t find the word right away but knew that she would eventually think of it, and she explained that she was worried about losing words permanently:

No, I’m not sure that I will find it. No, I’m not sure at all. Sometimes I do find it. That happens, but I’m not sure I’ll find it, no. No. And I’ve heard that things you learned early—people’s names you learned early and words you learned early, you don’t forget as readily as things that you learned recently, or people’s names that you learned recently.

Elaine has made it clear that she views her occasional experience of difficulty in finding the precise word to describe her thoughts as a permanent and degenerative condition of the natural process of getting older. Therefore, she sees the benefits of deliberately
exercising her ability to express herself through writing poetry as an important and successful means of warding off the undesired effects of aging.

I then asked Elaine to say a little bit more about her idea of how writing poetry can change this progression that occurs as one ages. She answered:

Well, I just simply think that it keeps your mind active. I mean, when you’re into describing something you felt or something you saw, your imagination is functioning, and words are coming, and they’re lining up and they’re changing position, and your mind is very active and involved, and I think it’s always important for people to keep their minds active, all throughout their lives, but when they get older, there’s a tendency to let it slip.

Elaine had articulated some of the ways in which she perceives that she keeps her mind active when she is writing poetry. To get a more precise view of Elaine’s perception of this phenomenon, I asked her what she is doing with her mind when she is “keeping it active” in this manner. Her answer shows that she perceives that she is actively engaging in inquiry on expression when she writes, and that she attributes this form of inquiry as the cause for the active state of her mind. She replied:

I’m looking for a way of saying things, or expressing things—of expressing emotions, descriptions of things I’ve seen or felt…like right now, I’m fishing for a way to explain what you’re asking me. And so my mind is jumping around and catching on to different words or catching on to different ideas…you get into a word or a thought, like “somebody’s coming in,” and that leads you to think “ooh, maybe it’s so-and-so,” and so-and-so makes you think of something so-and-so said; there’s a chain reaction. It’s a kind of chain reaction, and it can lead you practically anywhere, and sometimes way off the track you should be on in order to resolve whatever problem it is you’re faced with.

Because Elaine had used an example to describe how she was “catching on to different ideas” in the context of our conversation, I asked her if it also happened that way while
she is writing poetry, and she said yes. Given that Elaine had given this answer as an
extension of her claim that writing poetry “keeps your mind active,” we can see that she
perceives a key mechanism in that process to be the specific ways in which her mind
works while she is engaging in inquiry on expression. In particular, she has characterized
an associative process in which one thought triggers another in a succession that has a
given logic in the immediate moment of how one thought is associated with the thoughts
that preceded and followed it, but that unfolds organically rather than according to an
overall plan that would allow each and every thought to contribute toward the successful
completion of the poem. The manner in which she characterizes the “chain reaction” of
thoughts can be interpreted as having both positive and negative attributes. Because “it
can lead you practically anywhere,” one might develop the poem in an unexpected
direction, leading to insights or expressions that were unanticipated but welcome to the
poet. On the other hand, the unpredictable nature of following one’s stream of
consciousness will sometimes lead one “way off the track you should be on in order to
resolve whatever problem it is you’re faced with.”

Toward the end of her follow up interview, I asked Elaine how she learned to
write poetry. She characterized the activity of writing poetry as a “challenge” again, this
time going into detail about what the challenge entails:

…I read some haiku of a friend of mine, and I thought it
was a challenge—an interesting challenge, and I thought:
“gee, maybe I’m going to try it.” [It’s] interesting because
you have to express in a limited number of words or lines
or syllables, a thought and...then a second thought that
either illustrates it, or contradicts it, or shores it up.

Elaine’s description of the challenge of writing haiku includes elements regarding the
content of the poem, such as “a thought” and its illustration, contradiction, or
reinforcement, as well as the expression of the haiku: the strict limitation of length.

Elaine also characterized including the various elements of this aesthetic as “a kind of
balancing act in a haiku,” which is presumably part of her challenge as well.

Elaine also mentioned that sometimes writing poetry would manifest as a form of
thinking where she would become so completely immersed in the experience of writing
the poem that she would lose herself in the activity. She described the process as:

…getting a certain mindset where you’re oblivious to the
outside world, yet you know it’s there…I have that process
both in painting and poetry. I find that I get lost in it. I get
lost in it, and it’s something about the power of
concentration, and in French they call it “the second state,”
…You’re not in your normal state; “état second,” it’s
called. And that’s when you really, I think, produce best, is
when you get into that second state…. It often happens
when I’m writing a poem. If I’m really deeply involved,
that happens. When I paint it always happens—always
happens.

Elaine also talked about the experience as if she was in “another place.” I asked her if
she could describe what it’s like to be in that place, when she’s in it. She responded:

I don’t know that you know you’re in another place, you
see. You are, but you don’t really know it. I know that
when I paint, for example, I think I know what’s going on
around me. I mean, if the radio is playing, people are
speaking, I seem to hear them, I’ve even registered what
they’re saying. But I’m not totally with what’s going on.
It’s hard to explain. Afterwards I realize that I did hear the
radio, and I did hear what the guys were saying or the
speaker was saying, but I was in another place. You’re not
totally unconscious, you’re just somewhere else.

Elaine summarized her experience of this state of mind: “I think you’re concentrating
without anything extraneous. I think you’re really deep into concentration.” Because
Elaine regards the experience as one in which she is “concentrating” on the task at hand,
we can see that she regards writing as a cognitive endeavor. While Elaine was the only
participant in the study to talk about her experience in this way, it is not an unusual
description of the way that people often get lost in their work when they are optimally
challenged by the task at hand. Elaine remarked that the French refer to this experience
of thinking as the “second state.” I interpreted Elaine’s characterization of her experience
at those times to be the state Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to as the state of flow.

Frank also characterized the process of writing poetry in terms of keeping his
mind active and as solving puzzles. When I asked Frank why he writes poetry, he
explained the ways in which he finds the activity satisfying:

...I think I enjoy being published. And being in groups
whose work I know is pretty high quality and it being
accepted. On a day to day basis, I’m amusing myself, and
that’s why half the stuff never gets sent out or polished, or
whatever. I’m always missing deadlines, anyway. But
tanka and haiku I enjoy because I can satisfy myself pretty
quickly...

I pointed out to Frank that he had used the phrase “on a day to day basis I’m amusing
myself.” In reply, he described how this happens for him with an example of the
challenge of communicating with concision, and how meeting such a challenge makes
him feel good:

Well I am if it produces anything... I got a big kick out of
walking up the driveway with the shadow in front of me,
bringing a cane. And [the poem] in a sentence: My shadow
now includes a cane. You can’t get much tighter on a
description of aging. So that pleased me...

When I asked him what aspect of the experience pleases him, he replied: “I think I’ve
solved a puzzle (slight pause), just the way my wife would do a [crossword puzzle in] the
New York Times...” Like Elaine, Frank had likened the process of writing poetry to
solving puzzles.
In answer to my next question, what has kept him writing poetry over the years, Frank began to fold in the idea that the activity is good for his mind. He answered:

The general enjoyment of having created something, but, that pleases me, that pleased me…. It’s something for me to do. I am retired. We’re not that active; we go to the Y twice a week and other things like that, but it keeps the rust off my head, I guess…—off my brain, yeah. It just keeps the machinery functioning. I have to think. And, as often it’s suggested to the elderly: do puzzles to keep your brain going. So it’s a lubricating the brain, I guess is what it amounts [to]—the machinery of the brain. And if I just didn’t think, I’d probably just fold.

By using a metaphor in which the brain is a machine and keeping the machine in use keeps it from getting rusty, Frank has used slightly different imagery than Elaine to convey the same sense: in order to maintain a high level of performance with the mind, it must be used regularly, or it will atrophy.

The way in which Frank regarded the act of writing poetry as solving a puzzle was very dominant for him. When I asked him what the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry were for him, he brought up the puzzle aspect of the experience again:

(pause) Well, I’ve used this term before. It’s a puzzle solving thing, and when solved, it pleases me…because there is an enigmatic aspect to these things that I wish I had more of, and they’re not just readily comprehensible, just from the words and all. One of [my poems] is something like: (slight pause) I enjoy a poem you can chew on / not just swallow. It was a mouthful, that’s the real mish-mash of my thinking, basically, something that you know you can chew on, such that it elicits some kind of reaction.

In this statement, Frank has specified that building in an “enigmatic aspect” to his work is an important part of solving the puzzle of creating a poem. It is a challenge to mold the content and form of the poem “such that it elicits some kind of reaction” in the reader.
I asked Frank what exactly the puzzle is that he’s solving when he writes a poem, and he answered:

Okay, coherence is one of the things that I’ve been trying to solve or to bring to the poem. Something more than just the words. Something that is a mix of experiences based on the form; the beginning and the end. It just feels like something that is more than just the words, I’m trying to think how to put it. And it’s just satisfying myself that what I’ve put down on paper I’m not embarrassed by.

By indicating that the puzzle that Frank viewed he was solving by writing a poem was “coherence” and “something more than just the words,” Frank has identified objectives for his poetry that could be approached either through inquiry on content or inquiry on expression. At another point in his interview, Frank also said that writing poetry “keeps my mind functioning above the quotidian level.” Frank’s perception that writing poetry keeps his mind in good working order is also reflected by four of the other poets, in one form or another, from keeping one’s mind “fresh” and “active,” to gaining “moments of recovery” in cognitive tasks, to engaging in a “challenge,” or as a means of “exercise.”

The overarching theme shared by these five poets is of a “use it or lose it” nature. By deliberately engaging in the challenging mental task of developing the content and expression of a poem, these five poets believe that they are engaging in an activity that will preserve the optimal functioning of their minds.

*Writing Poetry as Sensory Thinking*

*Rhythm in the Body*

Both Pearl and John reported that writing poetry entails a physical, sensory type of thinking. Pearl wove together the concepts of understanding and a rhythm that is felt
in the body in her description of how writing free verse helps her to understand and resolve difficult situations. Pearl gave a specific example to illustrate how this phenomenon has worked in her life, and she prefaced her anecdote with the condition of “when I’m doing free verse and things like that. I never write the longer verse unless it’s something that has got to be written.” Notice in her example how she highlights the sense of urgency of “something that has got to be written,” and how this sense of her need emerges in the form of a rhythm that she needs to perform through her poetry:

Tom had planted trees all around this place, and it was so sheltering. It kept the storms away, and it kept the sunlight out in the summertime, and it protected me in winter. It was wonderful. And the week after Tom died they came and cut them all down. I woke up in the morning and they’re cutting down the trees and they’re banging on my roof. I woke up hearing them cutting down my trees. I didn’t even know what was happening to me. Well, I just sat down and I wrote this long poem about it. And I sent it to [a regional poetry journal]. And she published it. She just loved it. It was wonderful, because that had to be written, and there’s a certain rhythm that you get. You get: dah, da dah, da dah, da da dah—(also saying the next phrases rhythmically) you have to get it down, and you have to get in that rhythm, and it’s your whole body reacting to fear and dealing with it: bing, bing bing—and I was trying to get myself in that position where I could understand what was happening and what was going on, and making sense of a crazy situation. And it’s: dah, da dah, da dah, da dah da dah.

In this example, Pearl spoke of how she felt the rhythm of fear in her body, and how she then used that rhythm to write a poem that helped her to “understand what was happening.”

I interpreted Pearl’s explicit claim that she was “making sense of a crazy situation” as occurring for her as she was writing her poem. I asked her if my interpretation was correct. She replied:
Absolutely. Because I mean, it was so filled with grief and terror and not knowing what was going on. I mean, I really didn’t know what was happening, because it sounded like they were tearing down the trailer around me, as I woke up. I was half asleep. So, I didn’t write it the day they took the trees down, but I wrote it, I think, very shortly thereafter. I was still caught in that—I had to write it in order to get out of that feeling of fear and grief, and to make sense; to gain understanding about the whole event.

In this explanation, Pearl revealed that not only did she perceive her experience of writing the poem as necessary for a cognitive means “to gain understanding,” but she also thought of it as a means of letting out the “fear and grief” she felt when she woke up to the sound of the trees being cut down around her. Pearl’s experience of writing this poem was one in which she gained both cognitive and emotional resolution to an event that had filled her with “grief and terror.”

Because her example was prefaced by the claim that she only writes free verse and other longer poems when “it’s something that has got to be written,” and the example she gave was of a free verse poem that she wrote, I wondered if the distinction that Pearl had made earlier still applied, or if she was speaking at a more general level now that she was characterizing the act of writing poetry as one whose purpose is “to make sense; to gain understanding.” I asked Pearl if her characterization of writing poetry “to make sense” of a situation was a distinction she was also making between her experiences of writing longer versus shorter poems. She replied:

I think that that basically is really when I write any kind of poetry; there’s something there that you’ve just got to make sense out of. You’ve just got to come to terms with it. You’ve got to deal with it. I think that’s why it’s something that’s impossible to teach in school, because it’s something part of the human spirit that comes up. I think that’s what caused the ancients to write poetry…it was something that has to be said. And it has to be said, and it
usually ended up in a rhythm, and there was usually a rhythm that was part of their body, part of their breathing; part of their body language.

In this statement, Pearl wove together her perceptions of poetry as a humanistic endeavor with her belief that writing poetry allows her to “make sense” out of the topic that she is writing about. Pearl then revealed her sense that a key mechanism through which “part of the human spirit” will “come to terms with” the understanding that is embodied in a poem is through the element of rhythm that is so important to the poem as well as to the human body, such as in the form of breathing.

Pearl’s sense of the way the rhythm within her body is tied to poetry came out during another part of her interview as well. She was explaining that she enjoys going outdoors for a walk when she said “and walking helps with poetry, too, because you get that rhythm of walking, that’s good. It also gives you time to think.” I asked her how the rhythm of walking helps her, and she replied: “You get a natural body rhythm that’s your own natural rhythm. And it feels natural for you.” Pearl’s sense of the way that poetry is formed in her mind is connected to the way her body responds to the world—both through the jaggedly staccato rhythm she performed to demonstrate the way her “whole body [was] reacting to fear and dealing with it” when the trees were cut down around her home, and through the more evenly paced “natural body rhythm” of walking.

Rhythm is a key element of poetry, the importance of which has been described by many poets, both within the current study and beyond it. Pearl’s descriptions of the way in which the rhythm of poems she was composing became a sensation in her body are observations that may have been uniquely identified by her in this study, but are echoed more broadly in the psychological research literature. Scientists have developed
techniques to microanalyze video of speakers and listeners engaged in communication, which have enabled them to determine that the rhythm of a person’s speech is not only performed in the speaker’s own body, but also in that of the listener (e.g., Condon, 1971). In fact, even infants less than a day old will move in synchrony to the rhythm of speech (Condon & Sander, 1974). The prevalence with which speech and gesture are synchronous and reinforcing has caused Kendon (1997, p. 111) to claim that speech and gesture are “two aspects of a single process.”

There are many promising topics for future research on the performance of rhythm in both in speech and body movement. In what ways are the rhythm of speech and movement from everyday speech and gesture called upon and emphasized in poetry? And how do cultural influences become manifest in these rhythms? As Howard Gardner (1983) pointed out, each individual is smart in a number of different ways, including one’s linguistic and bodily / kinesthetic intelligences. In what ways might poetry instruction include physical movement and expression to enhance understanding of others’ poetry, and to support innovation in one’s own writing process?

**Poetry as “another sense organ”**

John also reported his experience of writing poetry as a means of thinking was akin to the sensory ways in which he engages in the world.

Writing poetry is almost like having another sense organ for me. So, it’s really just part of the way that I sort of sense the world. You get the sense of the shape and the nature of what’s around you by looking at it, and hearing it, smelling it, tasting some of it, etcetera, and I poem some of it, as well...I suppose, in a way, that that sounds sort of fictitious, but to me, it doesn’t seem the least bit fictitious. I mean, it really is; it’s kind of a touch organ. It’s kind of
like touching, but it’s like touching with mind. It’s like picking up stuff and turning it around in my mind.

John’s description of writing poetry as “having another sense organ” is a completely unique way of describing the way in which poetry allows him to engage with the world. However, the part of his description where he refers to “picking up stuff and turning it around in [his] mind” shows that he considers this way of using poetry as a means of thinking about the content of his poem. By “turning it around” in his mind, he is presumably getting a better look at the object of his focus, from many different angles. In short, he is investigating that object, or performing inquiry in a way that he equates with using his other senses to gather information about the world.

**Overall Findings Summary for Sub Questions C1, C2, & C3:**

Sub Question C1 investigated how the poets perceive that their practice of writing poetry may have impacted their meaning making in other areas of their lives. There were primarily two ways in which the poets perceived that writing poetry brought meaning to other areas of their lives. The first way was through enabling the poets to relate to others in various ways, from a means of communicating valued experiences, emotions and ideas to their friends, to connecting with humanity at a more abstract level.

Many of the poets discussed ways in which writing poetry enriched their lives, allowing them to go above and beyond what they would normally be able to do in a certain area of their lives. Each poet specified a different way in which poetry enriched his or her life. For example, Sam described the experience of reading his old poems as “almost like a time machine.” I found that sometimes the poets spoke about the ways in which their practice of writing poetry was meaningful to them without going into much
detail, such as when Miriam implied that she considered writing poetry an extension of herself when she said she would be “putting a stop to myself” if she stopped writing poetry. At other times, the poets attributed their practice of writing poetry to very specific ways in which their lives have been improved, such as when Pearl credited her practices of writing poetry and painting with gaining an attitude that enabled her to discover and hone her abilities rather than dwell on her disabilities. John related very specific ideas on how he believes that, like any art, writing poetry amounts to an attempt to do the impossible. He explained how when he writes poems, he necessarily fails his objective, but he is able to celebrate life in ways that he would not have otherwise been able to achieve.

In addressing Sub Question C1, I also took stock of the ways in which the participating poets regarded poetry as a means of therapy. Three poets found that they did not use poetry in that manner, and four reported that they did use poetry therapeutically at times, and that they found this practice to be beneficial to them.

Sub Question C2 investigated whether the poets perceive that, through poetry, they have developed a mindset or skill set that they have applied to other areas of their lives. The perspectives of the individual poets varied greatly on this topic. Miriam expressed her belief that her poetry skills are only relevant within the domain of poetry. Elaine and Frank perceived a general sense that their practice of writing poetry brings “enrichment” to their lives, from being in tune with the feelings of friends who write poetry, to appreciating poetic language in movies and images from one’s environment. Elizabeth and Pearl specified that their practice of writing poetry has brought a certain level of awareness to their lives, through the sense of perspective that Pearl feels she has
from writing poetry, to Elizabeth’s habit of being particularly observant of both people and surroundings. Sam articulated his experience of using his knowledge from poetry and from the study of dreams in tandem to form a lens with which to view his life symbolically. Pearl and John relayed the sense that poetry is infused in every part of their lives, including social interactions, as a therapeutic process and source of comfort, and exploring the meaning in one’s life. In all, the perceptions of the poets were varied and suggested many ways in which their interest and skills in poetry affected other areas of their lives. In particular, the most common thread among the participants was the way in which knowledge and skill and regular practice of writing causes one to view one’s everyday occurrences through a different lens.

Sub Question C3 investigated how the poets’ perceptions of their regular practice of writing poetry could inform the findings from their writing sessions. Two of the poets portrayed the writing process as a sense of unknowing followed by their search for a suitable answer. A total of four poets described the writing process in terms of wandering toward an unknown destination, revealing that they considered the development of their the poems to be something that cannot be predicted beforehand, a view that is consistent with the findings that the poets conducted inquiry on both the content and the expression of their poems.

None of the poets mentioned specific strategies such as asking themselves questions or brainstorming as a means of guiding their writing process. Likewise, the poets did not relate any perceptions that would conduct inquiry by identifying or explaining the significance of an observed phenomenon, except for Pearl’s story of how she needed to write a poem to “make sense” of the disturbing situation where her trees
were cut down around her trailer without notice. A few reasons have been hypothesized for why the poets did not speak about writing poetry in this manner, most notably that this type of inquiry is likely rarely the primary reason for writing a poem, and the process is likely so tacit that it is often not consciously noted.

Only one poet characterized the writing process as one that is filled with experimentation, even though several poets demonstrated experimentation at various levels of subtlety during their writing sessions. It seems likely that the key elements of experimentation have been described through the use of the metaphor of *wandering* as a means of writing poetry. For example, the activity of wandering can also account for the initial feeling of uncertainty of the outcome of an experiment (which is similar to having an unknown destination, or not knowing if you will arrive at your intended destination), as well as the iterative nature of the process where assessment of one’s early efforts informs the choice of the next activity (which is similar to using one’s current position and orientation to the landscape to determine the next direction to take in one’s journey).

Five of the poets reported that the act of writing a poem has caused their thoughts or emotions to change. A few of the poets noted that they had gained insight while reading a draft or a completed poem that they had written by finding new ways to interpret it.

Although I had not directly addressed the issue, six of the poets described the manner in which they engaged in inquiry on expression during their regular practice of writing poetry. Furthermore, three of the poets related stories in which they explained how some aspect of their inquiry on expression led them to gain insight on the content of their poems.
There were two main ways in which the poets spoke of their writing experiences that extended the scope of the study beyond the types of findings that were found during the writing sessions. Five of the poets revealed a belief that writing poetry is a good means of mental exercise, and that the major effect of writing poetry on a regular basis is that it keeps one’s mind active, and can even ward off the deteriorating effects of aging. Inherent in this belief is the sense that the conscious mind is at work during the writing process, in whatever way it contributes beyond the ways in which the unconscious or subconscious mind may be involved in the writing process.

The other key finding that could not be obtained through the writing sessions was that two of the poets relayed their perceptions that writing poetry is a means of thinking that is very closely tied to their sensory awareness. This type of personal experience of poetry makes sense, given that a major objective of poetry (and many other forms of communication) is to relay information in a manner that allows the reader to vicariously experience the event being described, rather than to tell the reader what to think about it or how to feel. To meet this criterion of good writing, poets often include judiciously chosen sensory details to evoke the feeling of experiencing the content of the poem first-hand, rather than hearing about it from a witness. The strong manner in which Pearl and John have tied their cognitive activity with their sensory experience that is captured in their poetry highlights the importance of including sensory detail in a poem, either through descriptions that access the five senses, or through the stylistic effects of the poem, such as the rhythm that Pearl cited as being as central to poetry as it is to the workings of the human body.
DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Introduction

Generalization of the findings will necessarily be limited to the richly described experiences of the seven participating poets. However, the greater goal of this exploratory study is to characterize some ways in which the creative process can foster new understandings. It is the foundational study of a much larger body of work that will likely constitute my career path as a researcher. The findings of this and future studies should help to pave the way for added support for creative writing instruction as a valid and important method of teaching cognitive skills. In addition, this type of close look at expert engagement in the writing process has much promise for direct application to improve poetry instruction. Below I discuss ways in which this study and future studies of its kind can contribute to improving poetry instruction. I end the chapter with a discussion of how the findings of this study suggest promising directions for empirical research on the processes involved in writing poetry and conducting inquiry through the act of writing poetry.

How this Research Can Contribute to Solutions for Instruction on Poetry

Problem 1: Poetry is Often Viewed as Something that Cannot Be Learned

I have mentioned in the Methods and Findings sections that I have included additional findings on inquiry on expression in addition to those regarding inquiry on the content of the poem. Added to the examples of inquiry on expression that I have commented on in the Findings to Sub Questions A and B, some appear incidentally in
long quotes related from the poets’ writing sessions. I have included these sources of evidence for inquiry on expression to give the reader a flavor of the ways in which the participating poets showed they are sensitive to various poetic devices such as rhythm and diction. They illustrate not only how poets make aesthetic decisions as they write, but also that each poet has basic knowledge of the craft of poetry that he or she is then able to apply to a given draft to develop and improve it. The reliance of each poet in the study on this type of knowledge (and the skills to flexibly apply it to the poem at hand) was central to their efforts to produce the poem, in that they continually exhibited knowledge of the craft of poetry as they composed and edited their poems. This suggests that a certain level of knowledge and skill in poetry is an inherent part of their writing process, and that a basic understanding of poetry is necessary for a person to be able to conduct inquiry at this level. Other studies would need to be conducted to characterize how (if at all) novices use the writing process as a process of inquiry on the content or expression of their poems.

The attentiveness of all of the poets in this study to issues of craft shows that a certain level of education on poetry is necessary; writing poetry is, at least to some extent, a body of knowledge and set of skills that can be learned. I asked a few brief questions during the follow up interview to ascertain the extent of formal education in the poets’ backgrounds, and the various approaches that they have taken to learn how to write poetry. Only two of the seven poets have taken one or more course in poetry at the college level (one poet took one course, and another took about four courses where the main focus was either reading or writing poetry). None has taken graduate coursework in poetry. All seven of the poets stressed the centrality of self-study as the means by which
they gained the knowledge and skills that they draw upon to write poetry today. Reading poetry how-to books and the poems of their favorite authors were the most often cited methods of instruction that the participants used, and many belong to groups of local poets or online communities where they can “workshop” their poems and give feedback on the drafts of others.

The successful experiences of the participating poets suggest that self-guided study can be a very successful approach toward learning to write poetry, and that formal education on matters of poetry at the post-secondary level are optional with regard to gaining a level of expertise that enables one to publish frequently in small press literary journals of merit. Therefore, any novice who is discouraged by the results of his or her first few attempts at writing a poem would be well advised to continue to put effort into learning about poetry and how to write it before concluding that he or she simply isn’t good at—or will never be good at—writing poetry. Such would be a case where it would be wise to take the growth mindset, as described by Carol Dweck (2006).

Dweck and her colleagues have performed decades of research that have shown the value of engendering expectations that one will learn knowledge and skills incrementally rather than all at once (Dweck, 2000), which helps one to be more willing to take the risks necessary to achieve more ambitious goals, and provides a sense of resiliency when goals are not met on the first attempt. By viewing one’s own intelligence and abilities as something that can undergo “growth” through application of effort, rather than something that is primarily determined by genetics, and is therefore “fixed” at birth, Dweck (2000, 2006) has demonstrated that there is more potential that such an individual will take on new challenges, weather the inherent setbacks to gaining new skills, and will
ultimately have more of a chance of succeeding than those who attribute their successes to innate qualities of talent or intelligence that are unaffected by the application of effort and sustained practice. The messages of the importance of effort and expectation that sustained effort will cultivate new knowledge and abilities from Dweck’s research program are reflected in the self-study programs cultivated by each of the seven participating poets. The combination of Dweck’s research on mindset and the personal experiences of the participating poets suggest that regular exposure to published poetry of one’s own choosing, and sustained attempts at authoring one’s own poems are important aspects of a successful means of gaining sufficient mastery of poetry to become a published poet.

Problem 2: Poetry is Often Viewed as Inaccessible

Of course, while published resources and networks exist to support the judicious efforts of motivated adults to gain mastery of writing poetry, there is still plenty of room to improve the ways in which formal poetry instruction is designed, particularly so that it can make poetry more accessible and relevant to students. Many editors and poets have lamented the precipitous loss of a general audience for poetry during the past century (e.g., Astley, 2003; Barr, 2006; Gioia, 1992), despite the steady readership that contemporary fiction writers enjoy. Inaccessibility of poetry due to the shift of poets toward academic careers is an often cited problem in poetry circles (e.g., Barr, 2006; Gioia, 1992), with some citing the opaque, academically informed styles of contemporary poets as a key factor in the loss of readership (e.g., Kooser, 2005; see Astley, 2003 for a discussion on the inaccessibility of language poetry).
Others focus on the inaccessibility of poetry through the ways in which children are introduced to poetry in school (e.g., Astley, 2003; Padgett, 1999). In order to populate the world of contemporary poetry with more readers, if not more contributing poets, there have been several prominent attempts with making poetry accessible to wider audiences. Below I summarize two different strategies for making poetry more accessible, both of which have been deemed to be successful.

Kenneth Koch was a poet who found ways to introduce grade school students to poetry in order to make it accessible and relevant to them. His unorthodox writing prompts and other methods of engaging students to create their own poems elicited an amazing level of sophistication in the poems of young children (Koch, 1970, 1973/1990). For example, a lesson he refers to as the Lie Poem “worked out very well” (1970, p. 19). He explains the manner in which he presented the lesson, and why he believes it worked (1970, pp. 19-20):

> I asked the children to say something in every line which wasn’t true, or to simply make the whole poem something not true. I know “lie” is a strong word; I used it partly for its shock value and partly because it’s a word children use themselves. “Fantasy” is an adult word and “make believe” has fairytale and gingerbread associations that I wanted to avoid. The Lie Poem, like the Wish and Dream Poems, is about how things might be but really aren’t—though…it can lead to surprising truths.

Careful to introduce different elements of poetry (such as the use of metaphor, above) in accessible yet novel ways, Koch was able to tap into the children’s creativity and bypass the conditioned responses that children have learned to associate with English lessons, even as early as elementary school. Koch similarly found ways to reintroduce nursing home residents to the art of poetry in ways that enriched their lives and enabled them to
write about personal experiences and feelings that they had not been able to fully express for decades (1977).

Ted Kooser is another poet whose name is synonymous with making poetry “accessible” to a wide audience, as noted by James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress, referring to Kooser’s direct and approachable writing style in the press release issued to announce the appointment of Kooser as the next U.S. Poet Laureate (Library of Congress, 2004). He appointed Kooser for a second term, lauding Kooser’s deliberate efforts to make poetry more accessible in his position as Poet Laureate. Billington’s remarks, taken in the context of announcing Kooser’s reappointment, could imply that Kooser’s work toward making poetry accessible may have been the reason that his tenure in this prominent role was extended (Library of Congress, 2005): "His dedication and initiatives are already attracting new audiences to poetry." The key initiative of Kooser’s term in office was to establish a program called American Life in Poetry, which is a free column that is offered to newspapers. The column consists of a short poem (up to 20 lines) showcasing a different poet each week, along with Kooser’s very brief commentary. The brevity of the poems make them more approachable to readers as well as less of a space commitment for newspaper editors, making them more likely to carry the column. See Appendix I: A Postmodern Approach to Validity for a discussion on how the brevity and aesthetic of the tanka form makes it a useful way to introduce novices to poetry.

**Problem 3: Creative Processes are Often Viewed as Inaccessible**

There is a certain mystique associated with creative processes, and one could argue that this aura of mystery is perpetuated by the fact that there is so much we don’t
understand about how creative processes work. Such a perception may make reading and writing poetry appear as an insurmountable obstacle to the novice, and therefore contribute to the perception that writing poetry is an inaccessible skill. Either you have it, or you don’t.

While the aura of mystery surrounding the creative process may appear as daunting to novices, it may appear in a much more positive light to experts. As John explained during his follow up interview:

The phrase that people often give is that it’s a gift, and it really feels like a gift to me. And I feel it, I have it. I feel that I have it in my hands, at times. But I wouldn’t know where to exchange it if I wanted to take it back. (laughs) I don’t want to take it back, but I wouldn’t know how to, if I did.

Even though John had described the years of deliberate practice he had put into discovering the elements of poetry and how to use them effectively as an adolescent, and even though he had described his Lego-like strategy of building poems after he had written his session poem, John was still influenced by his experience of (and belief in) the mysteries of the creative process.

Ironically, the positive way in which poets often regard the unobserved or hidden influences and processes that operate in tandem with poetry writing can also be an obstacle toward examining writing processes in a way that can inform instruction. For example, during his follow up interview, John expressed that he initially had ambivalent feelings about whether he would participate in the study, as he felt that whatever his writing process was, it worked well for him. He related that he was concerned that in this study I may end up reducing the writing process down to a “1-2-3-4-5-6 step process” and that, if that were the case, he would no longer be compelled to engage in it. I am
happy to report that the data do not support such a conclusion (nor did I anticipate they would); while each of the poets exhibited knowledge and skills of poetry that aided them in developing their poems, each session was unpredictable. The poets were influenced by unique combinations of their life experiences, surroundings, the mood of their day, and such. Moreover, in one form or another, all of the participating poets stressed that their methods of writing poetry would unfold organically according to the particular host of issues concerning any given poem they were working on. The poets’ use of their poetry knowledge and skills was therefore not in a lock-step manner of: \textit{when I do this first and this next I always get a poem I like}, but with a flexible approach in which they demonstrated a sensitivity to knowing when it might be productive to shift their focus, try rearranging their lines for better effect, or simply discard an idea and find another topic to pursue. The manner in which each poet engaged with the writing process was unique, and those poets who opted to draft more than one poem went about writing each poem in a different way.

Knowing the rich quality of the data I would collect using a think aloud protocol while poets composed a poem on a topic of their own choosing, from the beginning I have designed this study to accommodate future analyses with regard to characterizing the poets’ attitudes and behaviors with the purpose of finding trends in them for novice writers to emulate. I have already begun to notice some emic themes across the poets in attitudes and behaviors they employed to make progress in creating a poem that satisfied them, and I plan to conduct formal analyses of these data to develop a grounded theory to characterize how poets approach their work in such a productive manner. Such a study is beyond the narrow focus of this thesis, but will be invaluable for identifying proven
attitudes and techniques that can be used to teach novices how to write poetry. However, I have begun to assemble characteristics of the participating poets’ writing processes into a prescriptive format, based on the strategies and techniques that the poets appeared to use to promote progress and overcome obstacles in the writing process. For details, see Appendix L: Guiding Principles for Novice Poets. In addition, I have been able to find evidence of at least one educational curriculum that appears to have been able to successfully support students in engaging in inquiry on the content of the poems they write. In Appendix M: Description of a Curriculum that Supports Inquiry through Poetry, I provide a summary of how the curriculum deliberately encourages and guides inquiry on issues of identity for high school girls of color, and I suggest a few possibilities for adapting such a curriculum for guiding inquiry on additional topics and with other specialized groups of learners.

A handful of promising prescriptive measures have been derived from these data. However, the more important contribution of this study to poetry instruction is that the combined use of think aloud protocols, drafts of the poets’ work, retrospective reporting (the poets’ narratives of their writing session), and qualitative interviewing has shown that the creative process is not as inscrutable as many have come to believe. By employing these types of qualitative data collection strategies, we have access to small windows into the creative process. These windows don’t reveal obscured processes of the unconscious mind. But they do provide a clear enough view of conscious processes to characterize expert behavior and stream of consciousness and even to suggest methods of engaging in the writing process that are likely to aid individuals in acquiring and/or mastering the skill of writing poetry, when they are combined with thoughtful practice
and other common activities of self-guided study, such as reading a lot of published poetry and an occasional book or article on elements of craft or poetry criticism, and belonging to writing groups or participating in writing workshops.

**Directions for Future Research**

*Poetry as Qualitative Research Tool*

This study has found that composing poetry can be a rich set of cognitive exercises for engendering new understandings in poets. Further research along these lines may find ways to enable novices to reliably use poetry writing as a cognitive tool for inquiry. Furthermore, applying poetry composition skills to shape and ultimately interpret qualitative data is already being used as a formal investigative procedure in the analysis of data used in social science research (e.g., Furman et al., 2007; Langer & Furman, 2004; Shapiro, 2004). Others have worked to establish theoretical arguments for creative writing (e.g., Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), or specifically poetry, as a valid method of qualitative inquiry (e.g., Brady, 2005). For example, Laurel Richardson (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) offers a variety of creative writing exercises to help researchers to conceptualize and practice new ways to approach one’s data and the research process. Viewing elements of one’s study from unique perspectives can surface assumptions and orientations that might otherwise have been left unexamined.

While some social scientists have begun to promote poetry as a means of inquiry and/or representation to enhance qualitative research, the movement to use poetry as a research tool is in its nascent stages. To deal with all of the issues surrounding such a complex topic is beyond the scope of this paper. My purpose here is to acquaint the
reader with enough of a perspective on the emerging field in order to illustrate possibilities for this study and future studies of its kind to contribute to the field. Some overarching concerns of this emerging field are briefly addressed in Appendix N: Issues Pertaining to Art Presented as Research. Because this thesis investigates how inquiry can be manifested in the writing process, rather than how the final poems may or may not represent knowledge or insight in and of themselves, I restrict my remarks here to how poetry writing might be used in the process of research and leave aside issues of embodying one’s research in poem form as a means of representing and communicating the research to others.

The specific characteristics of how writing poetry can be a method of inquiry for poets can shed light on possibilities for expanding and refining how the inquiry that naturally occurs in writing poetry can inform the development of analytic techniques that can be used in qualitative research methods. For example, the finding in this study that some poets use a sense of unknowing as a promising starting point for developing their poems could be translated into the first step in identifying puzzles the researcher has in his or her qualitative data. The researcher would then select these puzzles to investigate in a reflexive or phenomenological way through the creation of a poem. (For a discussion of the ways in which writing poetry align with phenomenology as a social science research method, see Willis, 2002). Writing poetry directly about puzzles in one’s qualitative data could lead to novel perspectives that might inform interpretations of the data. The researcher would then write an analytic memo or process journal entry to record the ways his or her thoughts shifted to focus on different aspects of the puzzle while writing the poem, and note any insights that might have been gained through the
process. Alternately, the researcher could use a think aloud protocol, recording the
thoughts that guide the drafting and editing of the poem for later inspection.

The capacity of poems to express, unearth, resolve, or even intensify emotions
makes poetry writing a natural medium for exploring issues of researcher reflexivity,
especially given that the poet would be expressing his or her own emotions as a focal
point of the work. For example, researchers who are already comfortable with the
activity of writing poetry could write autobiographical poems about their longstanding
interests in their topic, encounters with participants, and frustrations in working with the
data in an effort to deeply examine aspects of their reflexivity. In addition, brief
introductory lessons on writing poetry could be designed to augment writing prompts
specifically designed to help focus the inquiry of the writing process on relevant elements
of the research process. In this way, researchers would be supported in their attempts to
refine their poetry writing skills in addition to having specific tools to apply to their
investigations.

Emotion as a Key Element of Writing Poetry

Whether describing therapeutic benefits of writing poetry or singling out
emotional insights or resolution that can be achieved through writing a poem, several
poets in the study spoke directly of their experiences of conducting inquiry on their
emotions through the vehicle of writing poetry. The key to Elaine’s ability to make
meaning during the writing process in order to avoid writing “a nothing poem” was when
she recalled the emotions she had experienced as well as those she had witnessed in
others while attending an outdoor jazz concert, and “some emotion got into [the poem].”
John also reported emotion to be a key part of his criteria for raw material has the potential to become a poem. John expressed in his interview that when he’s trying to convey something in a poem, it is something “that seems true and that I have some emotional investment in, in the moment.” Emotion is an integral part of creative pursuits such as the visual arts, performing arts, and literature (e.g., Astley, 2003; Lubart & Getz, 1997). Poetry critic Helen Vendler (1995, p. 2) claims: “What I wanted [from literature] was a mirror of my feelings, and that I found in poetry.” Because emotion is such an important part of poetry, a promising area of future research would be to study how poets draw upon and explore their emotions as they write, and how this process contributes toward making a successful poem. Also, Lubart and Getz (1997) summarize ways in which emotion has been thought to play a role in creativity, and they theorize specific mechanisms by which emotion aids in the generation of novel metaphors. Studies could be designed to characterize how various emotions may influence the creation of poems (or the level of creativity achieved).

**Poetry Therapy**

As some of the poets in this study perceived that they gained emotional insight or resolution through poems they have written, future research may bring about innovative approaches to poetry therapy which would enable mental health patients engaging in poetry therapy to gain even fuller insight into their lives. For a detailed discussion of how this study could inform the practice of poetry therapy, see Appendix O: Connections to Poetry Therapy.
The Subconscious and the Creative Process

Although this research is expressly intended to characterize the learnable (and more easily studied) conscious thought processes that lead to the creation of a poem, I have been careful to acknowledge instances where it appears that the poet’s subconscious has contributed substantially to a given aspect or stage of the writing process. I have also noted the poets’ perceptions of how their subconscious has contributed to the creation of their poems, such as through Sam’s use of dream material, Pearl and Elizabeth’s meditative states, and Frank’s use of self-hypnosis. These more enigmatic influences that shape poems do not necessarily support a claim that more resources should be given to instruction of poetry, because there are a number of different possible causes for subconscious influence, as well as manners in which it manifests. These include:

1. Sustained thoughtful practice of engaging in the task of creative writing which might lead to the automation of processes that were once conscious;
2. Genetic predisposition toward intuitive thinking;
3. Recent preoccupations and immediate environmental influences;
4. A culling through and synthesis of understandings from the vast repository of long term memories of personal experience and established belief systems;
5. Direct description of elements of dreams.

The above list of possible sources of influences on poems that arise outside of one’s consciousness is by no means comprehensive. But it does illustrate that there are many ways in which the poet’s creation of a poem may be subject to a very complex web of meaning making, of which many component processes are not well understood.
With regard to ways in which the subconscious mind is accessed while creating poetry, I have received correspondence from Robert Kusch, a published poet and professor of poetry. He described his perception of how his mind works when he writes poetry (personal communication, August 30, 2008):

Mostly, I’m trying to reach the condition of “no mind,” artless and unselfconscious, where anything can happen. Outwardly, I’m the same person, but inwardly I’m so far from communicating this condition of being that I might as well be in Patagonia. It could be said that I’m courting some sort of “expectancy,” but even “expectancy” is too strong a word. It’s more like a state of complete openness and receptivity.

In this description, Kusch had described a state of mind that is quite similar to the way in which Pearl described an inner state of “silence” which she tries to cultivate to produce her best poetry.

Kusch continued in his description of how he believes that the subconscious (or unconscious) mind is involved in the process of writing. He related an anecdote that has gained in symbolic meaning over time (personal communication, August 30, 2008):

I once had a student who arrived for the first day of a poetry class with a butterfly net, and I thought how right that was, even if the net was for the class after mine. That net haunts me—thin, translucent, flexible, almost aeriform—the shape of consciousness before thought.

By the coincidence of a student’s enrollment in other coursework, Kusch was exposed to a new metaphor for the frame of mind that he believes is necessary to “catch” poems. In what ways might the dream state, meditation, and self-hypnosis engender this type of receptivity to inspiration and insight? And in what ways does cultivating this state in which the mind is “translucent [and] flexible” like a butterfly net require a base of knowledge on the craft of poetry to allow the person to translate these thoughts into the
form of a poem? The answers to such questions might suggest that meditative techniques
be taught alongside aesthetic principles and elements of the craft of poetry.

**Conclusion**

The key findings that poets conduct inquiry on the content as well as the
expression of their poems show that, for the well practiced expert, the activity of creating
literary art is such a rich experience that it cannot be simply thought of as a means of
expressing understandings and emotions that have already been crystallized. Sometimes
the inquiry results in insight, which has the important implications that, in addition to
creating an expressive work of art, writing poetry can also function as a means of inquiry
that is guided by the poet’s sense of aesthetics and knowledge of the craft of writing
poetry. Developing proficiency in the craft of writing poetry can be beneficial in terms of
what occurs during the writing process, as well as the poem that results from it.
APPENDIX A:

Inquiry on a private vs. public scale

This study restricts its focus to the meaning making of the poet, and therefore to how the process of writing a poem serves as a process of inquiry for that poet. So this research is of inquiry on a small scale; at the level of an individual.

However, it can be argued that the poet's inquiry in the process of writing a poem is not limited to the private world of the poet's mind. When a poem is published, it enters into a larger sphere of influence, and therefore can affect the various meaning making of all who read the work. Upon publication, the poet's initially private process of inquiry, crystallized in the form of the poem, contributes knowledge and understanding on a wider, public scale—to all who encounter the work. In this way, the poet's process of writing has become inquiry in a more general sense; knowledge or understanding that can benefit others.

Once a poem has been made public, tracing the shape of its influence is not a straightforward task. Readers often interpret poems in ways that are unique to their individual experiences, predilections, and interests. The ways in which reading poetry constitutes meaning making in the reader is a separate, but also important line of research that should be conducted to investigate how the personal inquiry of the poet, as it is encapsulated in the poem, is transformed into inquiry in a more general sense upon publication, in that it can help others to gain insight, as well.
APPENDIX B:

Procedures for Collecting Data: The Poet’s Writing Session and Interview

Materials to bring:
- large pads of paper and pens (for those who like to compose on paper)
- 2 digital voice recorders (one as backup in case the other malfunctions)
- extra batteries
- watch with a second hand
- a copy of the think aloud protocol and interview questions

Introduction:

I’m conducting a study on how poets experience the process of writing a poem. You will be asked to write a tanka on any subject of your choosing, using think aloud protocol to record your thinking. I’ll need to take all drafts of the work and the finished copy with me, but I will send you copies of your drafts and final version of the poem.

Participation is anonymous, and can stop at any point. Present participant with informed consent form and answer any questions.

Think Aloud Protocol:
People think it’s going to be difficult, but then they often find that it’s easy. It just takes a few minutes to get into the rhythm of it, so you’ll have a little time to practice before writing your poem.

Principles for succeeding in using a think aloud protocol:
1. Say whatever’s on your mind. Don’t hold back hunches, guesses, wild ideas, images, intentions.
2. Speak as continuously as possible. Say something at least once every 5 seconds, even if only “I’m drawing a blank.” Also, when you start writing, you can say “I’m writing now,” and you can voice the words that you’re writing as you write them.
3. Speak audibly. Watch out for your voice dropping in volume as you become involved.
4. Speak as telegraphically as you please. Don’t worry about complete sentences or eloquence.
5. Just voice your thoughts as they happen; you don’t need to explain, analyze or justify your thinking.
6. Don’t elaborate past events. Get into the pattern of saying what you’re thinking now, not of thinking for a while and then describing your thoughts.
Practice using think aloud protocol for a 5 minute warm-up. This activity will be a brainstorming, idea-generating exercise for thinking of a topic or starting point for writing a tanka. I’ll encourage the brainstorming session to go on for at least 5 minutes, at which time I’ll signal the poet that he or she is free to either move on to drafting a poem, or continue generating ideas as needed.

**While the poet is writing:**

- If the participant doesn’t speak for 5 seconds, say “What are you thinking now?”
- If the participant’s voice becomes quiet, say “Can you speak louder?”

**When the poet signals the poem is finished, the interview begins:**

**The Poet’s Narrative:**

Please recount the story of how you created this poem, beginning with your initial inclinations before beginning the draft, describing key decisions and developments along the way, ending with what you find important about the final version of your poem. It is fine to go off on tangents while telling the story of how your poem came into being. You can keep exploring elements of the story until you feel that your story is complete.

**Questions to elicit a narrative**, as needed (most of these I probably won’t have to ask, but they’re at the ready, just in case the poet gives a thin account of the process in his or her story of how the poem was created, or is not sure what I’m asking.):

- What did you start writing about at the very beginning?
  - What images came to mind? Was there a mood or emotion you were trying to capture?
  - Were there any ideas or abstractions you wanted to communicate?

- Can you describe how the theme of your poem developed?
  - How did you come up with this topic?
  - What are some of the things you thought about writing, but didn’t? Why?

- What were some of the possible directions that you considered taking this poem in?
  - I noticed that the poem began to take a different direction when you said ….. Do you remember what you were thinking when you made that transition?
  - I noticed you said the word/phrase “….” a few times. What made you decide not to use it?

- How did you decide that the poem was finished?
  - What were some of the things you looked for in your poem before deciding that it was finished?

- Can you identify some of the most important aspects of this poem?
  - For you, what are some of the salient features of this poem?
What makes this poem unique to you (What makes it stand out from others you may have seen or written)?

**Follow-up Questions:**

**Questions of clarification:** specific things may need clarification in the poet’s process, poem, and narrative.
- Ask for definition of terms that are unclear or may have more than one meaning.
- Ask the poet to recall what they were thinking during a particularly interesting or enigmatic part of the process.

**Questions to capture the poet’s perspective on the writing session:**
How does your experience of writing this poem compare to others you have written?

How does this poem fit into the larger collection of poems you have written?
(If not covered in answer: Do you see any thematic continuity between what you wrote today and other poems you have written?)

How does this poem fit into your life more generally?

Can you identify which parts of this poem are autobiographical and which are borrowed from other sources or from the imagination?

While you were creating the poem or reading the completed version, did you have any thoughts or emotions that seemed particularly new to you?

Would you say that the poem you wrote today is characteristic of the types of poems you have written? In what ways?

**Questions to capture the poet’s perspective on broader issues:**
Why do you write poetry?

And what would you say has kept you writing poetry, over the years?

What are the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry for you?

What are the drawbacks of sustaining a practice of writing poetry for you?

Have you ever found yourself using what you know from poetry at other times, when you’re not actually writing a poem?

What genres of poetry do you write in?

How often do you write poetry?

How many years have you been writing poetry (overall, and for publication)?
Roughly speaking, how many of your poems are published?

Is there anything else you’d like to say about your poem or about this process that I didn’t already ask you?

**Upon conclusion of the session:**

If you edit this poem further after this session, please take a few notes on your thinking processes, so you can share them with me later.

In order to make sure I’m interpreting you correctly, and to see if you’ve made any further changes to your poem, I’d like to conduct a very brief follow-up by phone in a few weeks. Would that be okay with you? What phone number can I reach you at?

____________

I will share a written transcript of your session with you to allow you to decide if any part of the session should remain anonymous in the event that you elect to have your real name accompany the final draft of your poem. May I email it to you? Email:

____________

*Make sure the participant has my contact information and encourage him or her to contact me with any questions or concerns.*
APPENDIX C:

How representative are the participants of other poets?

While seven poets can generate hundreds of pages of rich data for a qualitative study, such a group is quite small compared to the body of at least hundreds of poets who write and publish tanka in the English language. Are there any indications that the participants for this study are likely representative of the larger group to which they belong? I have come across sources of information that suggest that the interests in poetry genre are strikingly similar to other poets who write in the tanka form in English, and that the observations that the participants have made about how their thinking unfolds as they write a poem has been reflected in accounts spontaneously offered by a few tanka poets not participating in the study. Below I discuss both ways in which the participants of this study appear to be similar to other poets in two key ways: reports of using the writing process to develop insight, and interests and/or practices concerning writing in other genres.

Tanka Poets Outside the Study have Claimed to use Poetry as a Means of Discovery

In an interesting synchronicity apart from my research, evidence of inquiry that accompanies writing and reading tanka is increasingly being reported by poets who write in this genre. For example, Marilyn Hazelton, the current editor of red lights, a literary journal that publishes tanka and tanka sequences, invited her subscribers to complete this statement: “When I read or write tanka…” She published some of the responses that she received on the back cover of the June 2009 issue of the journal. Despite the completely open-ended nature of the prompt, three of the four responses by poets that Hazelton published involved claims that the poet had gained insight. Denis M. Garrison responded (Hazelton, 2009): “…each poem is a lesson to me. When I write, insights which I could not otherwise enunciate reveal themselves in the verse. Others’ tanka give me completely new perspectives and insights.” Jeanne Emrich responded (Hazelton, 2009): “…I find out who I am.”

Dorothy McLaughlin replied to Hazelton’s (2009) prompt with an answer that shows how the form she is writing in influences her thought processes: “…I listen for the music of its words singing the soul’s melody. What I write may start as a haiku, and then the third line pivots like a dancer, directing me to the reactions or wonderings that become the poem’s fourth and fifth lines.” McLaughlin has described how her tanka often begin as haiku and then develop further by engendering reactions to the haiku, when she then captures these reactions in the final lines. This pattern of thought characteristic of authoring tanka is an echo of the experiences of Elizabeth and Pearl, which are described in the Findings for Sub Questions A and B section.

Similarly, Ribbons, the quarterly journal of the Tanka Society of America, also has an outlet for tanka poets to share their observations on writing poetry. Each issue of the journal has a column titled: Poet and Tanka, an open format article that showcases the thoughts of a single poet. The column is authored by a different poet each issue, so one
can obtain a pulse of the tanka community’s preoccupations, mood, and experiences by collecting the columns over time. Because the format is open, the authors understandably discuss different aspects of poetry in their lives, so comparing the columns directly with one another wouldn’t be appropriate. However, some of the visiting poet authors for this column reveal ways in which they experience inquiry as they write.

For example, in a recent issue of the journal, Kathy Kituai (2009, p. 38-39) wrote:

> Thought and feeling come together in an instant and this is a signal that I’m about to write a poem. Most times I only make sense of what I write by writing it down as it appears. If an idea arrives only as a thought, it is often too linear. If only as an emotional response, it can be too sentimental. What I treasure most about a unified approach is the change of consciousness this also creates in daily life.

In her description of her typical writing experiences, Kituai described how she senses thought and feeling coalescing as inspiration for a poem, and then claims that she usually will “only make sense of what I write by writing it down as it appears,” which suggests that she views the writing process as playing a pivotal role in her comprehension of the significance of the inspired thought that sparked the poem, similar to ways in which Pearl has described her writing practice as a means of gaining understanding (see Findings for Sub Question C for details). Furthermore, she claims that marrying her emotions and thoughts in poems also causes a “change of consciousness,” or affects her meaning making, “in daily life,” when she is not directly engaged in composing a poem, as several of the poets in the study have concluded (see Findings for Sub Question C1 for details).

Kituai’s description of emotional response as a necessary ingredient to her poems is reminiscent of Elaine’s report that she needs to become emotionally “involved” in a poem she is writing for it to come out well (see Findings for Sub Questions A and B for details).

**Comparisons of Study Participants with the Larger Haikai Writing Community**

Poet Curtis Dunlap has posed open ended questions to poets who write in the haikai genres (all types of poetry related to tanka and haiku). He posts their responses on his blog, Blogging Along Tobacco Road (http://tobaccoroadpoet.blogspot.com). The scope of this project is international, and has netted replies from 97 poets as of January 10, 2010. This section of his blog is known as “Three Questions,” which include the following: “Why do you write haiku? What other poetic forms do you enjoy? What do you consider the top three haiku that you’ve written?” While the questions were originally formed to solicit responses related to haiku, a few poets have spontaneously begun submitting responses to these questions with regard to tanka. One interesting effect is that a majority of the poets (regardless of whether they responded specifically in terms of haiku or tanka) identified that they enjoy both tanka and haiku (57 total), and a good portion also list free verse, while the percentage of poets interested in other genres is still higher if additional forms of poetry are considered, as well. Because the question stated uses the word “enjoy,” we cannot be sure that all of the responses to this specific question mean that the poet is also published in these other genres, only that the poet...
appreciates reading and possibly writing in these genres. Therefore, I conducted Google searches on the poets who were not clear on whether they wrote or simply read free verse (along with those who used a less specific descriptor, such as “longer poems”), and concluded that 59 of the 97 poets also write in free verse, and 40 of these poets wrote in both free verse and tanka.

The postings on this blog constitute a resource that offers a view into the breadth of poetry interests of a much larger sample of poets than has been included in this study. By comparing the poets in this study to the responses of the larger group represented on the blog, we can see that the poets in this study are rather representative of the varied nature of interests in different genres within the greater community of poets who write in haikai forms. Furthermore, this resource (paired with prudent Google searches) shows that 70% of the poets who report that they write tanka also write in free verse. This is a strikingly similar percentage to the 71% of participants in this study (5 out of 7) that write free verse. Concerning genres of interest, the group of poets in this study very closely resemble the larger, world population of those who write tanka.

Why use free verse as a marker of interest? Simply put, the most popular genre of poetry (among critics, poets and readers) in contemporary times is free verse. Knowing that a full 71% of the study participants also write free verse poems shows that even though the study participants write in genres that are less populated, their experiences are not completely distinct from the largest community of contemporary poets. By the participants’ interest and practice in writing free verse, we can begin to see the ways in which writing free verse is similar to writing tanka, and how it is different. For example, while Pearl explained that she does not usually edit and revise her tanka extensively, she considers editing and revising activities to be a given when she writes free verse. And, while the participants are not likely to use a haiku-followed-by-personal-reflection sequence in building a free verse poem, the participants’ attention to rhythm, diction, metaphor and other basic elements of poetic craft as they wrote their tanka during their writing session is likely characteristic of some of the ways in which they conduct inquiry on expression in their free verse poems. In short, the current exploratory study appears to be relevant in orienting researchers’ minds to promising areas of study in the processes involved in writing free verse poetry, as well.

An Uneven Age Distribution

One final consideration on the characteristics of the participants in this study is that I estimate the majority (but not all) of the poets to be relatively advanced in years. This can be seen in the themes of aging that can be seen in a number of the poems written during the writing sessions. It is possible that some of the participating poets determined that they could make time to participate in the study because they were retired. Or, perhaps older poets feel more comfortable with their writing process, and therefore are more likely to volunteer to make a process that is usually private visible so it can be studied. Given that younger poets were not equally represented in the study, there are two important questions to ask: Does this constitute a difference from the larger
community of poets who write tanka? And: In what ways might one’s age affect one’s writing process?

First, it appears that the tanka (and greater haikai) writing community, like my sample of participants, is characterized by a majority of poets who are advanced in years—many of whom are retired. This is reflected in the prominence of tanka written on aging themes published in the main tanka literary journals. I selected an issue published in 2008 (the year in which all of the writing sessions were completed) from each of: Ribbons, red lights, Eucalypt, and Gusts, four major journals that publish tanka in the English language. I read each tanka submitted in the main section of each publication (not including the Tanka Café themed section in Ribbons, Featured Tanka Poet section of red lights, tanka sequences, or tanka quoted in essays or book reviews). I then tallied a rough estimate of the proportion of tanka containing themes on human aging (other than growing up), memories of bygone eras, or death (excluding deaths of young people or due to accidents). The proportion of aging tanka compared to other themes and images ranged from a low of 18% in red lights to a high of 29% in Ribbons. The weighted average across all poems in the four journals was 23%.

Nearly a quarter of all poems in these issues of English language tanka journals revealed themes of aging, but this figure only represents the number of poems that were selected for publication. I have heard from an editor of a journal that publishes haikai forms (including tanka) that the proportion of tanka on aging themes received as submissions to the journal are even higher. It appears, at least in approximation, that the poets and poems written for this study are representative of the larger English speaking haikai poet community, as well.

While I have not performed a similar study of the age distribution among contemporary free verse poets, given the popularity of poetry slams and open mike events among the college crowd and early adults, it is likely that the population of published poets is more even across age groups. However, many young participants participating in poetry slams and open mike events may not have any poems published in literary magazines, so more research would need to be done to even perform an informal estimate of the age ratios of published poets who write free verse in English.

At any rate, it would be useful to ponder the types of ways in which older poets might engage in the writing process differently from younger poets, apart from a likelihood of writing about the topic of aging. First, older poets have a larger collection of personal experiences and have had more time to reflect on the significance of these experiences. For this reason, older poets might have already come to various conclusions about the topics of their poems before sitting down to compose the actual poem, so they might use the writing process as a process of inquiry less often. (However, it may also be the case that inspiration, by definition, contains novelty of perspective. Therefore, using inspiration to launch the writing process, as most of the poets in the study reported they do as their regular practice, may entail an exploration of content as well as expression of the poem.)
Older poets are likely to be much more experienced in writing, both in poetic forms as well as in prose. If practiced experience translates one’s expertise into the form of tacit decision making and intuitive hunches, then one would expect that poets who are more experienced would rely on techniques such as Pearl and Elizabeth’s call for silence when hitting a snag in the writing process. John explained that his approach to the writing process was different in his adolescence than it is now, partly because he was deliberately experimenting with poetic devices and expression as an adolescent, as well as using poetry as a means of self exploration. Therefore, care should be taken when translating the lessons learned from the expert behavior of these poets into lessons on how to write poetry aimed at an adolescent or younger audience.

Another way in which the collective age of the participants in this study may affect the findings is in the ways some poets reported their writing practice as therapeutic. As we gain more life experience, we also presumably gain coping skills that enable us to weather hardships with increasing ability. While older poets may be more likely to report the use of poetry as helpful in dealing with difficulties outside of therapy, it is important to take into consideration that, over time, they have also likely found additional means and networks of support. Certain individuals, and very young poets more predominately, may not have developed skills in using various practices of making sense of difficult emotions and situations that promote wellness. Therefore, care should be taken to avoid implying that writing poetry be used as a substitute for obtaining professional help for those whose problems and ways of orienting toward them suggest that they should seek a more intensive or comprehensive means of approaching issues of mental health.
APPENDIX D: List of Published Poetry for Becky DeVito

In Press  May dusk.  bottle rockets, issue 23 (Aug 2010)
2010    which part of me is ready.  Presence, 40 (January), 8.
2010    yellow lace.  Presence, 40 (January), 8.
2010    look how the maple is misshapen.  red lights, 6 (1).
2010    another card carrying prayers.  red lights, 6 (1).
2009    Grandma’s needlepoint.  red lights, 5 (2).
branching widely near its roots. *red lights*, 5 (2).


the willow. *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka*, 10 (Fall/Winter), 5.

these few pages of poems. *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka*, 10 (Fall/Winter), 12.

perfection; a simple desire. *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka*, 10 (Fall/Winter), 23.

this void, all around. *Presence*, 38 (May), 4.


meteorites. *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka*, 9 (Spring/Summer), 5.

in the warehouse district. *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka*, 9 (Spring/Summer), 17.


rain, almost blue. *red lights*, 5 (1).

not a cloud in sight. *red lights*, 5 (1).


after the snowstorm. *bottle rockets: A Collection of Short Verse*, 10 (1), 27.


gardening in October. *Presence*, 35 (May), 5.


the first of spring. *Frogpond, 31* (1), 33.


I have gone walking. *American Tanka, (17).*


tired of moping. *red lights, 4* (1).


if only they had eyes. *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka, 6* (Fall/Winter), 7.

past the crows. *Gusts: Contemporary Tanka, 6* (Fall/Winter), 17.

we were just friends. *Ribbons: Tanka Society of America Journal, 3* (3), 10.


a dusting of snow. *Presence*, 33 (September), 27.


the maples have grown. *Presence*, 33 (September), 4.


under the watering can. *bottle rockets: A Collection of Short Verse*, 9 (1), 50.


The Date of Your Return. *red lights*, 3 (2).


the only movement. *bottle rockets: A Collection of Short Verse*, 8 (2), 35.


checkout line. *red lights*, 3 (1).

a message from you. *red lights*, 3 (1).


first week of January. *Presence*, 30 (September), 27.

story time. *Once Upon a Time*, 17 (2), 5.

leaving the doctor’s office. *red lights*, 2 (2).

another trip. *red lights*, 2 (2).


leaving the doctor’s office. *red lights*, 2 (2).

another trip. *red lights*, 2 (2).


as I continue. *red lights*, 2 (1).

pointing out creatures. *red lights*, 2 (1).


winter’s end. *Frogpond*, 28 (2), 8.

light. *red lights*, 1 (2).

fading more quickly. *red lights*, 1 (2).


Winning the War. *Once Upon a Time*, 14 (4), 3.
APPENDIX E:

Guide for the Follow Up Phone Interview

I. High Priority Questions:

A. Following up with any individual concerns

1. In your transcript, I included notes on any aspects that I am already planning to omit to protect your privacy. Is there any part of the transcript that has not already been noted by me that you do not want included in publications?

2. I wanted to ask you about something you said during your writing session/interview….

3. Have you made any changes, even minor ones, to the poem after your writing session (or since the ones that you have last shown me)?

4. Have you shared this poem with others, and received any feedback on it? Have you made any changes, however small, based on any feedback you’ve received? *Please feel free to seek feedback and advice from others if that is what you would normally do. If maintaining your anonymity in this study is a priority for you, you may wish to refrain from sharing the poem(s) you wrote during your session.

5. Do you ever read your drafts or poem aloud to yourself, in your process of writing or deciding that the poem is in an acceptable form?

B. Cognition and writing poetry

1. Have you ever found your understanding or emotion about the topic of one of your poems to change in any way through the process of writing the poem? Can you describe some of the times that this has happened?

2. Are there any ways in which your poetry knowledge and skills have been useful in other areas of your life? Can you describe any times when this has happened? *Clarification, if needed: Are there any ways in which you have drawn on your poetry knowledge or skills in the context of other activities or areas of interest?

3. How, if at all, is silence a part of the writing process for you? Can you give some examples of how you have used silence while creating a poem, and what results have come from this action? *Clarification, if needed: Have you ever found that being silent has helped you at some point in your writing process? *Follow up, if not already answered: Can you describe your experience of how silence has benefitted your writing process—how does it work for you?
(*If needed: For example, clearing your mind and not concentrating on anything, setting the poem aside for a while, finding a quieter location to work in, etc.)

4. Have there been times when you sat down to compose a poem before having a specific source of inspiration? (For example, for an assignment for a class, in response to a prompt from a writing group or publication, or from choosing to write at a certain time of day?)

How have you gone about finding a source of inspiration on those occasions?

How does your inspiration shift, if at all, as you draft and edit a poem?
*Clarification: Has your inspiration ever changed or evolved while writing a poem? *Follow up, if not addressed: What sustains your inspiration as you draft and edit a poem?

Roughly speaking, how often do you actively try to find a source of inspiration rather than waiting for it to come to you?

5. Some poets have described writing poetry as personally beneficial or therapeutic. Has that ever been your experience? Can you give any examples?

We’ve covered the most important questions. I also have developed some more questions about how you learned to be a poet and your writing experiences in general. Do you have time to answer more questions? (If not, skip to Part III: Closing.)

II. Lower Priority Questions:

A. Early experiences in learning to write poetry:

1. How did you learn to write poetry?

Looking back, what are some of the things that you did when you were first learning how to write poetry that really benefitted your efforts? In what ways did your poems improve?

What have you done more recently that has benefitted your efforts in writing poetry?

2. Have you taken any college level courses in either reading or writing poetry?
   How many?

B. Writing in general:

1. Other than poetry, in what writing genres have you been published?
2. What types of writing activities have you done in your career?

III. Closing:
Is it okay with you if I contact you in a few weeks/months to see if you’ve further changed or published the poem? (If not, then ask now if the poet has sought to publish the poem that was written during our session, and if so, if it has been accepted by a journal.)

Extended Follow Up (several months after the initial session): (conducted by email)

Have you made any changes, even minor ones, to the poem since we last talked? If so, can you read/send me the current version?

Have you sought publication for this poem?

Has this poem been accepted for publication, (and if so, to which journal)?
APPENDIX F:

Similarities Between Literary Criticism and Qualitative Methods

As literary critic Helen Vendler (1988, 2004) has argued throughout her highly respected career, a close reading of a poem, meaning an analysis of the particular way in which a poet expresses his or her ideas through whatever known literary techniques or other pragmatic devices, is more important for understanding the work than whatever literary theory is currently in vogue. Her description of aesthetic criticism brings to mind key aspects of qualitative research methods in the social sciences:

The aim of an aesthetic criticism is to describe the art work in such a way that it cannot be confused with any other work (not an easy task), and to infer from its elements the aesthetic that might generate this unique configuration….Aesthetic criticism begins with the effort to understand the individual work (aided by whatever historical, philosophical, or psychological competence is necessary for that understanding): it is deeply inductive…. (1988, p. 2, italics in original)

Vendler’s call for careful description of the poem in order to make inferences, and characterization of the process as inductive is very similar to Strauss and Corbin’s (1998, pp. 16-19, 136-137) depiction of the way in which analysis proceeds from description of the data to valid interpretation in qualitative inquiry. This epistemic similarity between aesthetic criticism and qualitative methods shows that a close reading of the poems fits neatly among the ways in which I used qualitative methods to examine the more commonly obtained forms of data in educational research, such as think aloud protocols and interviews.
APPENDIX G:

Addressing Validity Through the Writing Process Vignettes

Constructing the Writing Process Vignettes

I asked a number of interview questions to get a sense of how writing a poem for the study may have represented a different type of experience than writing poetry during the participants’ regular writing practices. They were:

During the First Interview:
- How does your experience of writing this poem compare to others you have written?
- How does this poem fit into the larger collection of poems you have written?
- How does this poem fit into your life more generally?
- Is there anything else you’d like to say about your poem or about this process that I didn’t already ask you?

During the Follow Up Interview:
- Do you ever read your drafts or poem aloud to yourself, in your process of writing or deciding that the poem is in an acceptable form?
- Have there been times when you sat down to compose a poem before having a specific source of inspiration?
- How have you gone about finding a source of inspiration on those occasions?
- Roughly speaking, how often do you actively try to find a source of inspiration rather than waiting for it to come to you?

I constructed a writing process vignette for each participant which was comprised of the answers to each of these questions. In addition, because two of the participants claimed that they needed to sit in silence in order to overcome a specific hurdle in their writing session, in the vignettes for these two participants I included answers to my follow up question regarding how, if at all, silence is a part of the writing process for them. The other participants’ answers to this question were not relevant to their participation through the think aloud protocol. Below I give a detailed summary of the results of asking the above interview questions, along with an interpretation of how the poets’ answers impact the validity of the study.

Poems from Writing Sessions Characteristic of Their Work

All of the poets testified that the poems they had written for the session fit into the larger collection of poems they have written, often citing aspects of the style and topic of their session poems as characteristic of their other work. As Miriam noted, she believes her session poem to fit “snugly” into the larger body of poems she has written, and explained of the poem she wrote for the study: “It has my fingerprints, I would say.” Similarly, all of the poets indicated that their session poems fit into their lives more generally because
the poem reflected either their current preoccupations or longstanding beliefs. In this manner, all of the poets judged the poems they wrote during their writing sessions as characteristic of poems they have written on their own. (Frank had expressed some dissatisfaction with the quality of the poem he wrote during his session, but he readily admitted that it was characteristic of his poetry. He considers it to belong in the third level of poetry he writes. Later in his interview, when asked how the poem fit into the larger collection of poems he has written, he directly stated that “It’s typical. It fits in perfectly.”)

**On the Spot Poem Writing Not an Unfamiliar Task**

All of the poets could list occasions where they chose to write a poem on the spot, rather than waiting for inspiration to initiate the writing process. Most of these occasions involved either writing a poem on a given theme for a poetry journal or Internet contest, or sitting down to write poems of their own choosing either because they hadn’t written any lately, or because they wanted to have enough poems to offer an editor by the journal’s submission deadline. Participating in poetry writing workshops was also cited as a reason for choosing to write poems apart from having a specific inspiration to jumpstart the process. Pearl’s example of how she had composed poetry without a specific inspiration to begin the writing process was the most unique among the poets: she responded to poet postings on a poetry blog, crafting her replies into poem form. Additionally, Pearl, Elizabeth, Frank and John had said that they engage in writing renku and/or rengay, which are types of poetry that are written collaboratively, where each author responds in some way to previous verses that appear in the poem, rather than waiting for an internal source of inspiration to initiate the writing process. Therefore, even though the task of writing a poem on the spot was not related by most of the participating poets as their usual method of initiating the writing process, this aspect of the poet writing sessions was not unfamiliar to any of the poets.

**Hearing their Poems in Their Voices vs. in Their Heads**

Poetry is a writing form that pays special attention to sound, and therefore we might consider that the act of thinking aloud may sensitize the poets to aspects of their poems that they may otherwise not have noticed, depending on whether reading their work aloud is part of their normal writing process. The poets were split in their practices of reading their drafts and finished poems aloud while composing and editing their work. Three reported that they frequently engage in such a process, while three reported that they listen to the sounds of their poem in their heads instead. I do not have data on whether or not Sam usually reads his drafts aloud during his writing process, but he noted that he does regularly pay attention to the “rhythm or singability” of his poems as he repeatedly chanted lines of his session poem, exaggerating the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables by elongating the stressed ones. He also tapped out the syllable counts for each line later in his writing session. So while three of the poets regularly speak their poems aloud as a part of the writing process, at least three do not. However, all of the poets reported that they pay attention to the various sound qualities in their
poems on a regular basis, in addition to demonstrating their concerns on the rhythmic structure of their poems, and issues such as consonance and internal rhyme.

Observer Effects

Perhaps the knowledge that they were being observed might have affected the poets. After all, voice recording and close observation of an action that is usually performed privately may interrupt the process in important ways. Self-reporting from the poets indicates that this problem did not occur. Given that each of the poets knew they would be writing a poem while under observation, we can assume that this self-selecting group of volunteers for the study represents a subset of poets who are less likely to be unduly bothered by the knowledge that they are being observed. Another explanation is that the poets appear to have been well enough practiced at their art that they could become thoroughly engaged in the task despite my presence and the knowledge that they were being studied. Miriam had reported that she felt “a little nervous” when she learned that she had to come up with a topic, but she fixed on a topic for her poem within the first few minutes of practicing thinking aloud, and reported that once she thought of a topic to write about, the process unfolded in the same way as when she is inspired to write a poem in her usual manner; when the inspiration comes “from within.” And while he didn’t express any concern over being observed, John had also described how the very initial process was different when going to “find” a poem as for this study, but the process itself is the same as his usual writing practices once the writing process gets started. “I went out and found that poem, rather than let that poem find me. But that I more often wait for the poem.”

The only other mention that was made regarding mild feelings of self-consciousness due writing a poem under observation was from Elaine. Elaine said that at given times during her writing session, she was aware that I had written something in my notes and wondered what I was thinking. During her interview, she revealed that she was a little self-conscious of the apparent lack of progress she thought she was making at certain points while crafting her poem, thinking: “Gee, Becky must think that I’m crazy, or, you know, not serious. I’m not getting anywhere.” While these thoughts flitted through her mind at times, Elaine must have been very good at multitasking because she kept up a constant stream of speech to describe her thoughts relating to the composition of her poem. She explained that she overcame this obstacle and was able to fully enter into the writing process: “when I started doing this exercise…my emotions weren’t involved. I was just conscious of myself and my emotions weren’t involved…but when I finally got to the jazz concert and started getting some of those things down, some emotion got into it.” In the end, Elaine reported that she was pleased with how the poem turned out, and that she considered her writing session, which lasted 54 minutes, to represent the amount of time that she spends when things go smoothly: “I can sometimes work on them for hours. But this one, I got something that I like very quickly.” Elaine also reported that the other types of thoughts that she had voiced during her session, such as the specific ways in which she paid attention to the rhythm and diction of her poem, were very characteristic of her regular writing process.
Sam’s Case: An Illustrative Example

To give a more detailed view of how a poet described the ways in which participating in the study compared to his or her other experiences in writing poetry, we might look at the remarks of Sam. Sam’s sentiments on how the context of writing session differed from his usual writing practices were reflected by most of the poets in the study. Sam characterized his experience of the writing session as “a little less organic” than when he usually writes poetry, “rather than searching for a poem, something will spark a poem: a feeling, a picture, a poem itself, a dream or something, or a dream-state.” Notice that “a poem itself” is listed as one of the natural sources that “will spark a poem” for Sam, which shows that even though Sam was asked to write a poem on the spot, the source of inspiration for his session poem came from a usual source of inspiration for Sam’s poetry: a book of haiku that he had brought with him to the writing session. Several other poets in the study also identified the way in which they found a topic to write about as being a usual source of inspiration—either observing objects in their immediate surroundings or using images from memories.

Immediately after listing the frequent sources of inspiration for his poems, Sam acknowledged that writing a poem on the spot was not an unfamiliar experience for him: “…although I’ve been in a workshop or two here or there where something maybe not too dissimilar would prod me to write a poem.” Sam’s observation that the requirements of participating in the writing session were not outside of his experience were likewise acknowledged, in varying degrees, by each of the other poets.

Sam explained that the main way in which he found the experience of writing a poem for the study to be different from his usual method was a subtle difference imparted by engaging in thinking aloud. He characterized his usual experience of writing poetry:

> It’s an internal monologue, and often it’s—might not even be verbal, it might be just more feeling, it might be—you know, I guess there’s an internal monologue playing, on mute, if you will…so it’s like a band. Normally my band might have no singer, just some emotional music going on, and the drummer, if you will, the hand, you know, churning out some haiku notes or tanka notes. And here I had a vocalist with the band. So it was like a three man band, and normally it’s a two man band.

In this way, Sam has identified the difference he perceives between using the think aloud process for his writing session and his usual means of writing poetry. Sam was one of five poets who did not in any way characterize the act of vocalizing his thoughts as a distraction or impediment to his creativity.

Two Poets Indicated They Needed More Silence

However, both Pearl and Elizabeth reported that the act of verbalizing their thoughts aloud did end up affecting their thinking processes—particularly at a time when they felt they would have been able to intuitively solve a specific problem in their poems by
sitting quietly and waiting for an inspired answer to enter their minds. For this reason, I made sure that I included their responses to my question “How, if at all, is silence a part of the writing process for you?” in Pearl and Elizabeth’s writing vignettes, in addition to the other times that they had mentioned how silence contributes to their writing process.

Pearl characterized her shorter poems as usually developing more quickly than the tanka she wrote for the study. She said that the think aloud protocol with put her in a mindset that didn’t allow her to be quiet and allow the intuitive part of her mind to contribute to the same degree that it usually does:

I think I would have been able to reach a different level of writing poetry. I would have been able to reach that level of instantaneousness without having to go word by word by word. You lose something. It doesn’t slow down; it doesn’t wait for you, kid. (laughing) It’s there. In fact, sometimes I even lost a poem, not being able to write it down fast enough. And by the time I got to the end, I said: “Now, wait a minute. I missed something there.” It’s so fast it’s like a bolt of lightning. You don’t even know what’s happened to you.

In the above statement, Pearl characterized the way in which the writing process works for her during optimal circumstances.

During her follow up interview, when I asked Pearl about how, if at all, silence was part of the writing process for her, she responded: “Totally. Everything comes from the silence. I’m not really an expert on whether other people do this or not, but the silence is where the things all form. It’s where you go to understand things.” When I asked her if she could remember any examples of how she has used silence while creating a poem, Pearl replied:

Oh, it’s all. It’s all. That’s exactly it. All of the poems come to me from silence. I mean, that grief [of my husband dying], it’s buried so deep in silence that it’s going to take me the rest of my life, probably, to understand it. I think you can only deal with it in the silence. When there’s too much around, everything else is distraction; it takes you away from that. Just talking about it, it takes you away from it because you’re shifting to another part of your mind and your functioning.

In this manner, Pearl had described the way in which she believes that her intuitive thinking guides the formation of the deep understandings that she aims to convey in her poems.

Elizabeth found that the think aloud protocol didn’t interfere with her writing process until she reached a snag in developing the last line of her poem:

…now that I’m struggling with the last line, I find saying it aloud a big distraction…[I didn’t feel distracted] for the first part; that seemed to come. But at this point, I think I
need to sit in quiet, and give it some quiet thought, and just play around with the phrases and words.

Elizabeth then characterized the think aloud protocol as becoming “a little inhibiting, and a distraction” toward the end of her writing session. It became clear to me that the way in which participating in the study was likely affecting Elizabeth’s usual processes was due to what she said next: “Whereas, at this point I would require either time to let this sit or time to let me sit without having to talk, and just to think about whether I like that last line.” By suggesting that the best solutions to overcoming the obstacle of an unsatisfactory final line were to either let the poem sit and come back to it later, or to sit in quiet contemplation, I believe that Elizabeth’s problem was that the constraints of the study—that she try to complete her poem in a single sitting, and that she voice her thoughts as they occurred—interfered with her usual methods of accessing her intuitive mind.

When I asked Elizabeth how silence is a part of the writing process for her during her follow up interview, she listed a reason that Pearl had given for why using the think aloud protocol may have become cumbersome:

…It’s just silence within me…I was too much aware of the need to speak out loud, to say every single thought, and not just let the thoughts flow, because it slowed me down, having to say everything out loud.

Thoughts, even the ones we encode as words, can travel through our minds at a very rapid speed. The act of physically speaking the same words is much slower. A simple demonstration of this effect would be to read a paragraph silently to oneself, and then to read the same paragraph again, this time out loud. Timing both efforts with a watch with a second had should be sufficient to see the disparity. In addition, to say almost every thought, even the ones that one rejects immediately, is to put a more equal emphasis on all thoughts that are voiced. The thoughts that one might have discarded more quickly inside one’s head now require a bit more attention. So there are two factors that Elizabeth’s explanation has brought to attention: the slowing down of thinking to voice speed, and the requirement to pay a little more attention to thoughts that might have been quickly rejected, which amounts to a slight shift of focus.

Pearl and Elizabeth’s explanations are helpful in identifying optimal conditions that might be cultivated in future studies. For example, while think aloud protocols might continue to be useful to employ as the primary means of gathering data of this type, slight modifications could be built into the protocol when poets need a bit of silence to come to some form of insight that is not readily accessible through their usual means application of skills and strategic problem solving in writing poetry. For example, a poet could announce that they need silence, and take a minute or two to abstain from reporting all of their thoughts in think aloud fashion. When the poet comes up with a bit of insight, he or she would then engage in providing a retrospective account of what had been going through his or her mind. The observer would allow for a 2 minute silence, and then request a brief summary if the poet did not break the silence first. For a discussion on the benefits of retrospective reporting for creativity studies, see Collins (2007). While I had not planned on implementing such a procedure, pragmatic reasons induced me to create a
somewhat similar situation for Pearl, as is discussed in detail in the Findings to Sub Questions A & B.

Another option to surmount the problem of some poets feeling constrained by the think aloud protocol would be to send the poets voice recorders and instructions to practice the think aloud protocol, using it during their usual writing practice. Then, if a poet requires some time away from the draft to approach it with a fresh mindset at a later date, the poet would then be able to take a break and resume thinking aloud when revisiting the poem.

At any rate, the problem of interference with engendering a perfect state of inner silence does not appear to be a major issue for this study. Both Pearl and Elizabeth characterized their poems and writing process as being characteristic of their usual work in all respects except those explicitly noted. Engaging in the think aloud protocol may have been enough of a distraction to keep them from coming up with a poem that represents their most insightful work, but the type of data sought for this study is simply representative work, rather than the best examples of work, from these experts.
Appendix H:

Examining and Reporting on Issues of Researcher Reflexivity

Issues of Researcher Bias

While I have discussed how my own beliefs and presence have shaped the study throughout the thesis and within the validity section, here I have collected into a single discussion an accounting of the ways in which I have explicitly revealed key ways in which my involvement in the study has influenced the planning, data collection, interpretation, and ultimately, the findings of this study.

Planning the Study

No research is conducted in a vacuum, completely absent from the beliefs and influences of the researcher. That is why it is necessary for researchers to examine their reflexivity to make explicit the ways in which they influence the various aspects of their research. Throughout the thesis I have noted the experiences that I have had as a poet that have a bearing on the planning, data gathering and interpretation, synthesis and dissemination phases of this study.

When writing the proposal to conduct this research, I briefly described the ways in which my personal experiences as a published poet have led me to gain insight and emotional resolution on the topic of my poems. In turn, this belief in the link between creative writing and insight have led me to conclude that, whether intending to or not, at least for some poems, I was essentially engaging in inquiry on the topic of those poems. My conception of the possible mechanism by which I gained insight through writing poetry led me to envision and plan a study on exploring the ways in which poets may conduct inquiry as they engage in the creative writing process that they have mastered. A brief statement of how my personal experiences in writing poetry and informal communications with other poets have influenced my decision to conduct such research has been retained in the Introduction to the thesis to convey how my experiences and beliefs have contributed to my purposes for engaging in the study. Furthermore, I have disclosed my values and hopes for how this study will contribute toward planning future research as well as for educational pursuits in Appendix I: A Postmodern Approach to Validity.

Gathering the Data: Issues of Reactivity

Reactivity is the phenomenon by which the researcher’s involvement in a study affects the phenomenon that is being studied. By asking the question: “How does your experience of writing this poem compare to others you have written?” I directly solicited responses from the participants that would identify ways in which my presence and the situation invoked by the study might have affected the participants in ways that would be beyond my notice. I also asked the participants a particularly open ended question at the end of each interview: “Is there anything else you’d like to say about your poem or about
this process that I didn’t already ask you?” This question was designed to encourage the participants to share any concerns that they had, regardless of whether they seemed relevant to previous questions I had asked.

In this study, the way in which my presence at the writing sessions may have affected the writing process of the poets constitutes the main way in which researcher reactivity may have threatened the validity of the study. There were three instances in which it is clear to me that my presence in some way affected a poet’s writing process (above and beyond engaging in a think aloud protocol without another person present).

The first and most potentially impactful way in which my presence affected a poet’s writing process was related directly in the text of the findings in order to allow readers to determine the extent to which my involvement affected the poet. That case was when Pearl fixed upon a word from an unrelated statement that I had made as a solution to expressing the idea that she was trying to put into words for her poem. The exchange is related in detail in the Findings for Sub Questions A and B, along with Pearl’s insistence that her intuitive mind works in such a manner that she always finds a solution to her problems when she sits in silence and waits for the answer to come to her. To Pearl, everything in her environment and in her memories of her environment and experiences is fodder for the insight that comes to her when she is able to access the “silence” within herself.

The second way in which my presence affected a poet’s writing session was when Elizabeth chose her first impression of meeting me as the inspiration that started her poem. I have likewise described that situation directly in the findings where I describe the way in which Elizabeth’s writing session unfolded, from beginning to end. However, it is unlikely that this impact was very meaningful in terms of the writing process, which was the focus of the study. Elizabeth did not study my appearance as she was writing the poem, and nor did she attempt to incorporate other aspects of my identity into the poem. By the way in which she looked at her paper (rather than looking at me, as an artist might continually look at the subject of his or her artwork) throughout the drafting and revision of her poem, and the way in which she reported she took on a persona and fictionalized a scenario to explain the first two lines, it appears that my involvement in the creation of Elizabeth’s poem is limited to the feeling of youth that she expressed she had felt upon seeing the shade of blue in my eyes and the sweater I was wearing.

The third issue of reactivity that became apparent was when Elaine revealed during her interview that she was peripherally aware of my presence as she worked on her poem. I described this while reporting on how the writing process vignettes addressed issues of validity, in Appendix G. She reported that she would periodically wonder what I was thinking, particularly when I was writing in my notebook. (During each writing session, I wrote down phrases of interest from the think aloud utterances to follow up on during the interview. While it may have appeared to be a slightly distracting practice, this technique was immensely helpful in creating a more complete view of what the participants were thinking at key points during their writing process.) Elaine was apparently very good at multitasking, because she kept a remarkably steady reporting of
her thoughts as she worked on her poem, and reported that she was pleased with the way her poem turned out. She also reported that both the process by which she created her session poem and the poem itself were characteristic of her work, with the exception that this particular poem came somewhat more quickly than others, which she can work on for hours before she is satisfied with the poem.

**Interpreting the Data**

A researcher’s interpretations of the data begin to form at the earliest stages of data collection. While attending the writing sessions and conducting the interviews, sometimes the poet made a statement that I would immediately interpret as possibly being relevant to answering one of the research questions that guide the study. When I found myself interpreting their statements in such a way, I asked further questions to clarify the participant’s intended meaning. I conducted similar member checks once I had become more familiar with the data by transcribing it. Member checks were performed by follow up phone interviews and by email.

I have also been careful to build into the analysis process a focus on finding and reporting on negative cases and discrepant data. A primary way in which I have done this is by reporting at a fine level of detail the chain of thoughts that each poet had from the beginning to the completion of his or her writing session. In this way, I have been able to provide an in depth description of the ways in which the vast majority of Miriam’s writing process was apparently not focused on inquiry regarding the content of her poem, as well as detailed characterizations of the different ways in which the other poets shifted back and forth between (or conducted simultaneously) inquiry on the content and expression of their poems.

One way in which I have encouraged the development of alternate, and possibly competing, conclusions was by creating Sub Question C3, which specifically asks how poet perceptions may differ from my own observations of their engagement in the writing process. Another way in which I demonstrated respect and value for alternate or competing conclusions was by explicitly acknowledging instances where it seemed plausible that a poet’s writing process was being significantly influenced by his or her subconscious or unconscious mind (sometimes referred to as intuitive thinking). Issues concerning the subconscious influences on conscious thinking are, at present, not readily addressed by methods of direct instruction of poetry (but may be addressed by instruction on meditation, self-hypnosis and similar techniques). Therefore, my calling attention to subconscious influences in the poets’ poetry is in the service of understanding and characterizing the creative process at a deeper level, but not necessarily in the service of my more immediate purposes of supporting education efforts for teaching poetry.

**Synthesis: Knowledge Building and Dissemination**

In the Findings for each Sub Question, I was careful to report the data and the immediate context in which it arose with a high level of detail. This means that I very often explicitly noted specifically how each segment of data was obtained (whether through a
spontaneous utterance in the writing session, the poet’s narrative, or during an interview), particularly when participants were responding to a specific question of clarification or when I performed a member check for confirmation on an interpretation. By disclosing large amounts of data, along with descriptions of any apparent meaningful context in which the pieces of data were obtained, I have made it possible for readers to generate alternate conclusions.

I developed analytic memos whose purpose was to develop conclusions to answer each Sub Question. In specific, the way in which I organized the data in the analytic memos relating to Sub Question C3 was a purposeful means for encouraging discrepant evidence to emerge. By organizing the data in analytic memos for Sub Question C3 according to each major point of the Findings for Sub Questions A and B, I have been able to ensure that any relevant poet perceptions of their writing practice would be able to weigh in on the conclusions I drew from my observations of their writing sessions. Ultimately, this strategy has been retained in reporting the Findings to Sub Question C3, which have been formatted to highlight the ways in which the poet perceptions do or do not speak to the conclusions I made in addressing Sub Questions A and B.

In Appendix I: A Postmodern Approach to Validity I have also outlined the ways in which I plan to disseminate this work beyond submitting my thesis to my academic advisors and educational institution. In those discussions I have also revealed the ways in which my values are intrinsic to my intentions and forthcoming efforts toward publication.
APPENDIX I:

A Postmodern Approach to Validity

As Steinar Kvale (1995, 1996) notes, we are in a postmodern age in which we view knowledge and truth not as an objective mirror of reality, but as being socially constructed. According to a postmodern view, we cannot separate ourselves from our observations and understandings, so our views always incorporate the influences of our own personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, theories we espouse, etc. Kvale (1995) argues: if we orient ourselves toward knowledge in a different manner than we did during the age of modernism, then it follows that our conceptions of what constitutes valid knowledge should also change. Therefore, he posits construct validity as a new yardstick with which to evaluate research studies. Construct validity is made up of three components: quality of craftsmanship, communicative validity, and pragmatic validity.

The first measure, quality of craftsmanship, is quite similar to conventional ways in which qualitative studies have been reporting validity in recent years. One could view the Methods and Validity sections of this thesis as addressing the concept of quality of craftsmanship, including “theoretical presuppositions built into the very observational procedures leading to the construction of social facts,” one of Kvale’s (1995, p. 25) key distinctions of how a postmodernist conception of validity acknowledges the importance of researcher reflexivity.

Kvale (1995, p. 30) explains that the second measure, communicative validity, “involves testing the validity of knowledge claims in a dialogue.” In the present study, communicative validity has been addressed by performing member checks on my interpretations of the participants’ data through immediate, on-site questioning, through questions posed in the follow up interview, through sharing the transcripts of the writing session and original interview with each participant to receive their feedback on them, and by communicating via email for any additional questions that arose throughout the study (such as questions of clarification on any part of the follow up interview, and questions about further edits of the session poems). I have also created a dialogue between the observational data from the writing sessions and participant perceptions gained through qualitative interviewing in order to address Sub Question C3.

Another way of addressing communicative validity is simply by publishing the study results and noting the way in which it has been received, in order to determine whether others see the findings as a plausible representation of reality. I plan to distribute copies of this thesis to each participant in the study, as well as to publish it more widely in the form of research articles. The reactions of the various audiences of readers will inform my views of this study and help to shape my orientation toward conducting future studies.

Kvale’s (1995) third strand of construct validity is pragmatic validity, which posits that the justification of knowledge is in its usefulness. He explains (1995, p. 35): “A pragmatic approach implies that truth is whatever assists us to take actions that produce
the desired results. Deciding what are the desired results involves values and ethics.” In order to ascertain whether the present study addresses pragmatic validity, we might ask: What are the desired results of this study, and are they ethical? How does this study encourage application of its findings, and therein, reveal its values?

The desired results of this study are to determine whether poets use their creative writing practice as a means of inquiry, and if so, to characterize the ways in which the writing process proceeds as an act of inquiry. Through direct observation of the writing process and interviews with seven published poets, this study has found that at least six of the poets have likely used the writing process as a subtle process of inquiry (Miriam appears to either not use the writing process in such a manner, or conducts the bulk of her inquiry in the initial moments of contemplating and choosing a poem topic). A couple of the poets reported coming to deep insight as a result of writing a particular poem, but this level of insight was reported as a much rarer occurrence. Furthermore, specific ways in which the poets have used elements of the writing process to investigate the content of their poems have been characterized in the Summary of the Findings for Sub Questions A and B. As any exploratory study, the expressed purpose of this study is to pave the way for future studies on the ways in which the process of writing poetry interacts with the cognitive processes involved in thinking about the content of the poem. By encouraging further research on how the writing process can constitute a process of inquiry, this study supports the value of inquiry, as manifested in the creative processes that were studied, and through the encouragement of scientific inquiry on the cognitive processes involved in creative writing.

Is the promotion of studying the types of inquiry that occur during creative processes ethical? To me, this appears to be a rhetorical question. Those biased against such research are likely to subscribe to objectivist notions of scientific experimentation as the only “true” way to discover knowledge, and would likely consider philosophical inquiry, personal reflection and similar modes employed during the creative writing process as inferior. However, even such critics would likely agree that there is at least a personal benefit to engaging in the types of reflection that are stimulated by the act of creating a poem. So while objectivists would likely take issue with the wider implications of identifying creative acts as a potential for inquiry, they would likely approve of a more limited interpretation of the usefulness of these findings for encouraging individuals to engage in activities that are likely to enhance self knowledge. Members of the artistic community, however, are likely to view this study as highly ethical in its aims to illuminate and value the ways in which engaging in acts of creation stimulates cognition and represents new ways of knowing the world.

The detailed characterization of each poet’s process of writing a poem for the study serves another pragmatic function: providing a new means of instruction for novices. I have gathered key elements of the poets’ approaches to writing their poems into a set of principles to guide novices in their attempts to write poetry (see Appendix L). And, given the finding that inquiry on expression can lead to insight on the content of a poem, the ethical implications of offering instruction on writing poetry are twofold: the
instruction of poetry as an art which is valid in its own right, and the instruction of poetry as a means of conducting inquiry and, on occasion, gaining personal insight.

The selection of the genre of tanka as the type of poetry composed while the poets were being observed also enhances the pragmatic validity of the study. Tanka, as an extremely short form of poetry, is more likely to be viewed by novices as an approachable art form. The themes conveyed by tanka are often less complex than they might be treated in a much longer poem, for the simple reason of limited space: five short lines, totaling not more than 31 syllables. Tanka originated through the streamlined Japanese aesthetic that guides the form (a judicious selection of very few images, possibly paired with a direct statement of sentiment or comprehension to interpret the images). Whether contemporary poets are writing with an intention to promote this aesthetic or not, the limitation of space puts an upper limit on the amount of complexity that any one poem can contain. Therefore, these poems are often considered as accessible both in terms of reading and writing.

In fact, John elaborated on the phenomenon of the perceived accessibility of haikai forms compared to other forms of poetry during his interview. He explained how the accessibility of the form is part of the Japanese aesthetic:

We, in the West, have all of our arts dominated by what I describe as an aesthetic of displays of brilliance. And we all love displays of brilliance and we all admire displays of brilliance, but the thing that’s attractive about haiku and tanka and those genres is that they also incorporate an aesthetic of modesty. And so an intended impact of a lot of the art that we’re used to making, and certainly what I tried to make for many, many years before I encountered haiku and tanka and so on, the impact was: you present something for your reader, your viewer, your audience, and the reaction you want from them is: “My God, how did he do that? I mean, I could never do that. That is so great.” Okay? Which is great. And certainly, we love to get that reaction, and so on. And it can be fun to have that reaction. But nothing is good all the time. The reaction to most really effective haiku and tanka is like: “Wow, I knew that all along. Why did I never bother to write that down? I could have done that if I just thought of it. I could do this. I will do this.” That’s the difference. A lot of art says: “Don’t dare step foot through this doorway until you have proven yourself.” Haiku says, basically, “Of course you can do it. Anybody could do this.”

I’ll tell you the edge of that. …[The Japanese] still want to be brilliant poets; wonderful, amazing poets. But they don’t want that to be first effect of reading the poem. They want that to dawn on people after the eighteenth time they’ve read the poem, to go like: “Oh, my God,” after
about eighteen readings. The first eighteen, they want people to be thinking like: “Of course, I always knew that. Why didn’t I think to write that down?” Because we all know that. (laughing)

Books on how to write haiku have also stressed the accessibility of haikai forms (e.g., Gurga, 2003). The perception of haikai forms of poetry as being accessible has also been related to me by other poets who write in these forms, as well as non-poets that I have shared my tanka and haiku with. Tanka and other very short forms of poetry therefore make a good starting point for instruction on poetry. The guiding principles created to enhance the poetry writing efforts of novices are therefore likely to be an effective means of supporting education, particularly for those who are not already avid readers of poetry. Additionally, the ways in which tanka are similar to free verse (as unrhymed poems that need not adhere to a fixed meter, and that regularly contain metaphors and convey subjective states of being) make it a useful stepping stone for mastering many techniques that are also used in free verse, the most popular genre of poetry in contemporary times.

Ways in which the poets have reported their writing practice as being therapeutic have been gathered in Appendix J: Extension of Findings to Sub Question C1, and the more subtle ways in which these poets engaged in inquiry regarding their emotions during their writing sessions have been commented on in the Findings for Sub Questions A and B, and have been noted in Table 8 for easy reference. Ways in which some of the participants reported benefitting from the social function of using their writing practice to relate to others (and to humanity more generally) have been identified and illustrated in the Findings for Sub Question C. While many poetry therapists report case studies on how writing poetry has helped their patients (e.g., Mazza, 2001; Williams, 2000; Tilly & Caye, 2004), I have not been able to find reports within the psychological body of literature on how expert knowledge and skill in poetry might enhance the therapeutic applications of poetry. By offering a detailed characterization of expert writing process, along with testimony of how four poets have experienced writing poetry to be therapeutic at different points in their lives, it is my hope that this research will present a unique view of additional possibilities for using poetry as a means of enabling individuals to better comprehend and resolve difficulties that arise throughout their lives. The only way I can imagine such a desired result could be unethical would be to recommend the practice of writing poetry indiscriminately as a substitute for therapy, rather than as a more subtle means of identifying and managing emotions (that is likely a single option within a vast array of strategies appropriate to maintaining an already healthy state of mind). Of course, any person who is inclined to seek therapy is encouraged to do so, and to consider broaching the topic of how poetry might augment the therapeutic process or be used once the need for therapy has passed, with a qualified mental health professional.
APPENDIX J:

Extension of the Findings to Sub Question C1

Writing Poetry Affects Meaning Making in Other Areas of Life

Miriam’s Perceptions

It was clear that Miriam considers her practice of writing poetry to be a meaningful endeavor. When I asked Miriam why she writes poetry, she answered:

Oh; well—well, why do I breathe? I have written all my life. I came a little late to poetry, but I’ve written a lot. I’ve written thirty [fiction and nonfiction] books for young readers, and I was an editor professionally…and words were always very important to me. And writing was always very important for me...

The importance of writing poetry to Miriam is underscored by the emphatic nature of her response. By asking the rhetorical question “Why do I breathe?” Miriam has shown that she considers writing poetry to be a necessity for her rather than a perceived option for spending her free time.

I then asked Miriam what she would say has kept her writing poetry over the years. She answered with similar enthusiasm:

I cannot stop. I cannot stop. Even if nobody ever hears it or sees it or reads it, I need to do it. It’s something that needs to come out of me. It’s just part of my nature, I would say. I don’t know how else to frame it. (slight pause) Maybe I wasn’t sufficiently heard, to my mind, but I don’t think so, no, no. Because I could very quietly and happily write by myself to myself for myself.

In this answer, Miriam directly claims: “I need to do it.” She considers the common notion that maybe she wasn’t sufficiently heard earlier in life as the reason that she feels she needs to express herself in this way, but immediately rejects the idea because she would still “happily” write even if she didn’t share her poems with others. While it appears that Miriam hadn’t thoroughly examined her reasons for writing poetry before I had asked the questions during her interview, she had no question in her mind as to whether writing was a worthwhile activity for her.

In order to get a better sense of the ways in which Miriam found her practice of writing poetry to be personally meaningful, I decided to probe further into the response she had just given. I pointed out that Miriam had begun her reply by saying she “cannot stop.” I asked her if there was anything else she could tell me about that. She answered:

Well, I don’t know what I would do instead. (slight pause)
No, it’s a conversation I’m having all the time. (slight pause) I mean, what would I do with those observations and those thoughts? (slight pause) No, I can’t. I can’t stop.
Thank God I can’t stop. Because if I stop, that means I’m putting a stop to myself. So, I’m very happy that I can’t stop. I don’t know what the physiological dynamic is, but—(slight pause) keeps me amused. I can laugh aloud sometimes at something I’ve written. Keeps me interested. (pause) I have a good time by myself, sometimes.

Miriam expressed several reasons that she “can’t stop” writing poetry. The most fundamental reason appears to be that she believes she would be “putting a stop to” herself if she stopped writing poetry, which implies that she views the act of writing as an extension of herself. While she remarked that the activity “keeps [her] amused,” she also indicated a reason that she writes that emphasizes the cognitive stimulation that writing provides for her: “Keeps me interested.”

**Pearl’s Perceptions**

At different points in her interview, Pearl related her feeling that writing and reading poetry are a means of forming relationships with others and of understanding humanity better. While she was discussing the way in which one’s needs are fulfilled in life, just as she had alluded in the poem she wrote during her session, she also talked about the ways in which poetry acts as a relationship with others:

To me, life isn’t just me. I’m not an isolated creature. It’s a relationship with others. And that’s why we write and that’s why we try to share it with others. It’s a relationship…I mean, if we try to find out the answers ourselves, we’ll run around in circles all day, never find the answer.

In the above statement, we can see that Pearl perceives that one part of the relationship that poetry helps us to maintain with others also helps us to understand the world, by not having to “try to find out the answers ourselves.”

Still discussing the poem she wrote during her session, I asked Pearl how the poem fit into her life more generally. Her reply again wound around to the topic of how poetry helps to fulfill the need we have to communicate with each other:

…And if it meets a need—it’s like when I started writing poetry and sending it out [to get it published], it didn’t seem to meet any need as far as [my husband] was concerned, when I sent it out, but the editor seemed to think it filled a need, because she has to fill a certain need in her publication. And so when it started getting published, there was a need that was filled. I guess we need to talk to each other. (laughs)

Pearl expressed her belief that “we need to talk to each other” to explain how a poem “meets a need” for others when it is selected for publication.

Later in the interview, I asked Pearl about when she had started submitting the poetry that she was writing for publication. She answered:
In 1986, that’s when I started sending it out, because I wanted to (pause) say things...after you do a few years of writing them in the book and trying to make them into a form, it’s a form of talking you want to share. You don’t want to talk to yourself your whole life. (laughing) You know what I mean? You want to send it out, see what somebody else says about it. …

In this manner, Pearl highlighted the way in which poetry helps to communicate, so you don’t have to “talk to yourself your whole life.” At another point in her interview, Pearl also claimed that poetry “helps you reveal yourself” to people. Miriam, Elaine and Frank had expressed that witnessing the reactions of others to one’s poem is perceived as an important part of the writing process. Pearl acknowledged that she also finds a meaning or purpose to this aspect of writing when she said that she wants to “see what somebody else says about it.” These poets have expressed that it is not only important to share the poem with others, but also to gain a sense of how the poem was received; what type of effect it had on others.

In addition to talking about how poetry helped her to relate directly to others by sharing her poems with them, Pearl also talked about how poetry helps one to get in touch with humanity at a more abstract level. Pearl first talked about how poetry helps her to connect with humanity by reading it:

...And when I read poetry—because there’s no place else in the world where you can find out what’s going on in the world, except in poetry. I mean, you really understand the working of the human nature by reading…

Pearl then talked about how sharing her poetry with another disabled poet friend has been a sustaining force in her life: “You realize how deep words can mean. And what they can mean to people; how much they feed people’s souls.” Pearl’s poetic use of language in this explanation hints at the profound level at which she regards the sharing of poetry can foster relationships.

When I shared Pearl’s transcript of her writing session and first interview with her, she expanded her remarks on how the arts have helped her to reframe her disability to better explore the many abilities that she has. She wrote in an email to me:

When you are creative you learn to reach inside yourself to work with what you've got…with who you are...you learn that's all you've got to fall back on, and THANKS BE TO GOD that is enough. So when an artist stares at a blank canvas and after that artist realizes that they can only paint what they can do, it becomes an exploring into just [what] is it you CAN do. You learn about yourself in relation to the paint. There's no one there to help you. You don't think about what you can't do because you've got this idea in your mind of what you CAN do. My mom told me I'd never be a Picasso when I wanted to leave high school art classes. It hit me like a ton of bricks...of course I couldn't
be a Picasso...how silly...and I answered her, "I don't want to be Picasso, I want to be me!" and that's the point where an artist arrives at their style. That's where they start to discover what and who they are in the world and in relationship with the world.

People who are not disabled seldom reach this point at a young enough age to appreciate what has happened to them if they don't have art or some form of creativity that makes them face who and what they are in this world and what they CAN do.

During Pearl’s follow up interview, she confirmed for me that while she used painting as her example in this explanation, she also meant that the same process applies to her practice of writing poetry. As we can see from Pearl’s explanation that “you learn about yourself in relation to the paint,” disability has led her to experiment with the raw materials of the arts to develop her own style. Pearl credits the arts with not only helping her to discover what she “CAN do,” but also in helping her to “discover who [she is] in the world and in relationship with the world.” As we can see from her rejection of the idea that she should “want to be a Picasso,” Pearl holds in very high esteem the ability of the arts to help one to form his or her own identity.

When I asked Pearl what the drawbacks of sustaining a practice of writing poetry are for her, she quickly dismissed the notion by stating “there aren’t any drawbacks, really.” (While I had asked each of the poets this question, most answered as Pearl did, or only identified trivial concerns that they then brushed aside. In the few cases where a poet has identified a genuine drawback that he or she perceives, I have noted those testimonies in the relevant part of the Findings for Sub Question C.) Pearl then went on to tell of the importance of art (using the general term to speak of both poetry and visual art) in her life:

…To tell you the truth, my whole life is art. I couldn’t imagine being without it…I mean, art to me is breathing. It’s a way of life. It’s just something you do…I can’t even imagine life without art. It’s a way of functioning. No matter how disabled I’ve gotten, there’s always been something that was enabling. And I’ve been pretty well disabled for a long time, so that you’re still a human being. You’re still fully human. I think people that don’t have art could become very, very poor. Very poor, indeed. (slight pause) So I guess it’s my little secret treasure. My secret garden, or whatever. (laughing)

Pearl’s claim that art “is breathing,” and is “a way of functioning” shows the way in which she has integrated the ways in which she thinks about art into the details of her daily living. Pearl’s characterization of art as “a way of life” shows that she finds her practices of writing poetry and creating visual art as infusing every part of her life.
John’s Perceptions

In the course of discussing how he knows when a poem he is writing is finished, John introduced a theory that he subscribes to that offers a window into the different purposes that his poetry sometimes attempts to fulfill:

It’s not entirely my own theory, but it’s my operating theory that art fails. And that it is necessary that art fail. The reason that art fails is that art is an attempt at the impossible…I mean, at one time in my life I had the idea that art was the closest you could come to immortality. And it does some things in terms of extending your life in the sense of extending your life by communicating with other people, and extending your life in the sense of becoming memorable for other people in some ways, and so on. But it doesn’t really fundamentally alter my mortality. And even what it does do has its limitations. So that’s an impossible thing. But you get some wonderful results by failing, and attempting something that’s impossible. To completely and clearly and utterly communicate to another person is impossible in some ways. But you can go in that direction and do some quite beautiful and wonderful things. So I’ve always thought of art, in a sense, as kind of beautiful failures. And so an important part of it is a moment of acceptance, where you’re saying, with this particular thing, that’s all I can do. That’s as much as I can do. And that’s what I mean by finished. I really don’t mean finished—ever, really. I just mean there’s a point where I just sort of accept: that’s as much as I can do with that.

In the above explanation, John gave two examples of purposes of writing poetry and the ways in which these aims are impossible to achieve, yet worthwhile in their own right. One is immortality, and the other is perfect, clear communication. He later added to the list of impossible goals: “Truth—finding Truth, and expressing it. Unfettered beauty—experiencing and expressing that in some way…you can name many, many things that are beyond our reach that we strive for, and in the process, create some fascinating art.” Because John defines art as “an attempt at the impossible,” we can see that the fact that he believes that even his best efforts will ultimately fail at reaching his objective must mean that reaching the objective must not be his ultimate goal in creating art. Instead, the meaning of engaging in the activity is that John finds that by attempting to achieve the impossible he “can go in that direction and do some quite beautiful and wonderful things,” quite possibly things that he wouldn’t have been able to achieve (or even predict) if he hadn’t been reaching toward such lofty goals. Perhaps another of the great draws toward creative activities for John is to find and test his limits, which he does when he determines and accepts: “that’s as much as I can do with that.”
Of the possible goals for a poem that he listed, the one that most interested me was “Truth,” as the present study concerns itself with whether and how poets go about the process of making meaning—and possibly encountering truths—as they engage in the act of writing poetry. Because John had spoken about “truth” in different ways during his interview, I asked him a few follow-up questions about his sense of the word. He explained:

…what happens with any truth is that it’s like a fruit; it’s only fresh for so long…[I’ll] not pretend to have the answer for everything; if I just could do this on a day to day basis, I recognize, within that scope of living, you can say there are things that are true. And they’re likely to stay true for my whole lifetime, and some of them for lifetimes beyond. But they all have limits.

Through this clarification and other moments when he talked about truth, I discovered that one of the reasons that John speaks of truth as an impossibility is due to his sense that nothing stays the same eternally, so there is no single and eternal Truth, but only things that seem true in the moment. It is the latter which he believes one is able to find and express in a poem.

In his first interview, before John defined his sense of the nature of truth, when he was discussing different purposes that writing poetry has served at different stages in his life (see details in the findings for Sub Question C2), he went into detail about truth as an impossible objective that he strives for in writing poetry:

I think, as an adult, what’s been the common thread about this is…I have wanted to have a sense of true things, and have been kind of restless about accepting anything as “the truth.” And what I would like to attempt to do with writing poems is to suggest truth that actually can’t be expressed in words. So, I said [earlier], in my mind, art necessarily fails, because it has objects that are impossible. And so what I’m trying to do with poetry is to do something beyond what words are actually capable of doing. And I know I won’t get there, but as I said then, you get some very interesting things out of the attempt.

John begins his explanation with a claim that communicating “a sense of true things” is a common goal for the poetry he has been writing throughout his adult life. He then reminds us that he considers such an act to fall into his category of impossible objectives.

John then followed his explanation with a metaphor that describes the poem in relation to his attempt to achieve the impossible: “So it’s always a matter of reaching toward something that is beyond my grasp, and the poem is the gesture of doing that.” Later in the interview, John offered a reflection on this statement:

… I thought about the difference between attempting to grasp and then resignation—making that motion into a gesture of ‘there it is’…pointing toward something that I can’t quite reach. But that gesture on the stage…that’s a
gesture of “let us applaud this.” At the end of a play, you gesture like that to the orchestra. In a sense, that’s one kind of poem. It’s like I start out with this desire to have something, to take it, to grasp it, to keep it. And in fact, how it works for me is I come short of that, but my hand is still out there, and my hand is sort of saying, like: “That. That’s something. That’s wonderful.”

In his explanation of “the gesture” that he makes when he writes a poem, John reveals an important way in which the act of writing is a form of making meaning for him: as an acknowledgment and celebration of elements of his life that he feels deserve recognition.

In fact, in response to a follow up question about what types of things John gets when he makes that gesture, John characterized his poetry as “a celebration, often.” He continued, further explaining his idea of how art fails:

…If you only loved people who were perfect, you couldn’t love anybody. And the same thing applies to other things that you can love. So I will often have a real sense of love for a poem as it falls short. Wallace Stevens said, “Death is the mother of beauty.” If these things could stay the way they are forever, they wouldn’t be beautiful…whatever it is that we find as beautiful, it’s also something that’s sort of fleeting. Well, a poem is…an experience of that, in words….It’s a flash of beauty…and the effect of it might be many other things, I mean, it might be a glow of beauty, it might be a darkness of beauty, it might be a long trumpet note of beauty. It could be all kinds of things of beauty. But it’s something fleeting that is very beautiful. I don’t write out of a theory of writing things that are going to last forever, because I don’t believe that. I don’t believe that even of the things that have lasted thousands of years already. I mean, my belief is that I won’t be around to see it, but the Bible will be forgotten, that Shakespeare will be forgotten, that anything you want to name will be forgotten. And then, if it takes a long time, that’s wonderful. But it’s an illusion to think that you’re writing something that is going to last forever. That doesn’t happen.

With this further explanation, John has shown why he loves poems despite their ability to “gesture” toward, rather than “grasp” their objectives. He believes that the “fleeting” nature of beauty, whether as the object of a poem or as the poem itself, is the paradoxical prerequisite for beauty. Above, John had expressed a similar view on truth—that it’s “like a fruit; it’s only fresh for so long.” Because John regards truth and beauty as necessarily temporary phenomena, it appears that art and poetry are well suited as a vehicle for expressing them, despite his theory that “art fails;” neither the object of the poem nor the poem itself “is going to last forever.” John’s solution is to appreciate truth and beauty in the moment, which is why he “will often have a real sense of love for a poem as it falls short.” From John’s explanation, I interpret that the “fleeting” nature of
the moments in which he experiences and appreciates poetry (whether writing or reading
the poem) is one of the ways in which John uses poetry to make (or find) meaning in his
life.

John offered more insight into how he finds meaning in the act of creating art, even as art
fails. He spoke more about what he means by the beautiful “illusion” that occurs when
art fails:

The illusion I’m talking about, I think, is the illusion that
you’re achieving these impossible things. And it has to be
sort of instantaneous, or brief, because…I’m sane enough,
and sensible enough to realize that I haven’t done
impossible things. There is a moment, though, when you
can kind of feel as if that actually has happened. And it’s a
nice feeling. It’s a nice feeling even if it’s an illusion in
terms of that being an actual fact, you know, that I’ve done
something impossible.

In this statement, John has explained how he enjoys the “moment” when he feels “as if
[an impossible thing] has actually happened. In this way, we might interpret John’s sense
of achieving the impossible as a sense of beauty that he experiences much like the
ephemeral qualities of beauty that he had listed above.

John later further clarified the relationship between the gesture of making a poem and
truth: “It’s a gesture toward something that I find moving in the moment, beautiful in the
moment, and necessarily some kind of true thing.” He then gave more perspective to his
sense of truth in the relation to the nature of poetry:

…I will acknowledge, though, that [poems] come out of
my real experience and my real personality and so on, so
there are things in there that reveal truths about me and
about my experience… I’m just saying that that’s not the
point of it for me. That’s not what makes them poems.

With this statement, John has indicated that even though his poems contain truths from
his experiences, the truth that is an object of his poems is not the defining characteristic
of the poems: there is something beyond truth that is more important.

It was during other parts of his interview that I glimpsed what it was that John did
consider important about poetry. In fact, when I asked him what were some of the most
important aspects of the poem that he wrote during his session, he replied: “I don’t think
it needs to be important at all. I mean, it isn’t important…the best poem I’ve ever written
is not important, you know. And it doesn’t matter. It just doesn’t matter.” While at first
it might seem that such a claim directly contradicts all of the wondrous ways he referred
to the importance of poetry in his life, it turns out that John was simply making a
statement about his relative priorities. At another point in his interview, he revealed what
I interpret to be the most important aspect of poetry to him: “To me, it really isn’t what I
have written; it’s the writing that’s the point.” With this clarification, John revealed that
engaging in the process was his first priority, which brings a sense of cohesion to all of
his other explanations.
John immediately followed his statement that for him, the experience of writing is more important than the resulting poem with a sentiment about using poetry to relate to others, a sentiment that Pearl, Miriam, Elaine and Frank had articulated. John said: “And then, the other point, of course, is sharing it with people, particularly sharing it with people directly, like reading to people, and reciting things to people.” At another point, John said: “I want to have my writing be close to daily living. Because that’s where you meet people.” The use of poetry to allow poets to relate to others is one of the more common claims among the ways in which the poets in this study claimed that writing poetry was meaningful to them.

In addition to his two part statement that identified “the point” of writing poetry for him, John spoke more about the relationship between the importance of the act of writing and the work it produces, naming a couple more salient characteristics of poetry for him:

Bob Dylan was a big deal when I was young, and I really liked his attitude about all this stuff, and I guess that I’ve adopted it myself, which is: these things don’t necessarily mean anything at all, you know, they’re just kind of what I’m doing. I don’t think of them as really having large meaning. I think of them as being effective in some way or other. Then, there’s something that performs, either on the page, or as something to recite, but I don’t think of them in terms of being coded messages or something. I think that any of my poems, if the question was “what do they say,” well, the answer can only be “the poem.”

In this explanation, John has also identified as important the ability of the poem to be “effective” in some way—as serving some purpose, and also as “something that performs,” which we might interpret as a nod toward his background in theater. I interpret that the act of performing may be similar to the act of writing to him in the sense that engaging in the activity yields more satisfaction than the tangible product of his efforts. Whether he was speaking of the act of writing a poem or experiencing one that has already been written, John’s sense of appreciation for beauty and truth, however momentary, appeared to be the salient way in which he described that he finds meaning in poetry and other forms of art.
APPENDIX K:

Writing Poetry is Therapeutic for Some Poets

Testimony from the Poets

Sam’s Perception

The first example of whether and how writing poetry was experienced as therapeutic is from Sam, who brought up the topic during his first (and only) interview. Therefore, I didn’t get a chance to directly ask him if he found writing poetry to be therapeutic, but he mentioned it of his own accord. I had asked him how the poem he had written for the study fit into his life more generally, and he answered:

Well, as I mentioned, I guess this week or whatever, there are some family matters—a little bit challenging to deal with, so (pause) I don’t know if, to a degree I feel like a horseshoe crab floating in a pool of water or a broken kite, on maybe some level there may be a little…externalization of those feelings into the poem. …but I do believe this also in the sense of a dream interpretation…and also maybe from experiences going further back, can also come into a poem. So—but generally, it’s been a little bit of a bumpy week, and so my haiku I think, and tanka can be a little therapeutic in the sense of—as keeping a journal almost, of (slight pause) the emotion, just letting it out, kind of just in one artistic form or another. (slight pause) Let it be.

While Sam had likened himself to the kite and the crab in his poem, he qualified his experience of using symbols to represent himself in his poetry: “Not all my poems are so consciously self referential in the sense that an image or a subject is a metaphor for myself…so it’s not always (slight pause) a diary, per se, but I guess at this instance it is.” He also specified that his perception of how poetry can be therapeutic is by the way he can release emotion; “just letting it out.”

The importance of the therapeutic benefits of writing poetry were highlighted again in Sam’s answer to my question “Why do you write poetry?” Sam responded:

I guess it’s a way of dealing with feelings, turning emotion into art, (slight pause) there’s something therapeutic about it, about just jotting down whatever random feelings or images are floating in the mind…I guess it also is a sense of control, because you can control your poem. You can’t necessarily control the people around you, or the events that happen to you in your life, but your artwork, you have some control over it and you can (slight pause) take a feeling and bring it into some cohesion or poetic sense.

In addition to directly claiming that writing poetry is “therapeutic” for him, Sam explained that an element of the writing process that he feels he benefits from is the sense
of control he has in authoring his poems. Furthermore, one of the ways in which he feels he gains control regarding situations that he wouldn’t otherwise have a sense of control over is that he can bring “cohesion” to the emotions that he expresses in his poetry. By bringing “cohesion or poetic sense” to his emotions, Sam is using poetry to make meaning in ways that he finds therapeutic. Toward the end of this section, we will see that John also spoke about poetry as if it gives him “an illusion” of “control.”

Miriam’s Perception

When I asked Miriam the question of whether she found writing poetry to be personally beneficial or therapeutic, she replied: “Well, I imagine that it is. I mean, it kind of validates a life if you’re doing something that you think has meaning. So, from that point of view, yes.” I confirmed with her that her statement reflected the category of “personally beneficial.” I then asked her specifically if she had “ever found it to be therapeutic to write about a certain topic.” She said she had not.

Elaine and Elizabeth’s Perceptions

Like Miriam, Elaine and Elizabeth also found that writing poetry was personally beneficial, but that they hadn’t used it for any therapeutic purposes. Elaine answered: “Well, in so far as it’s a sense of satisfaction, it’s personally beneficial. Therapeutic? I wouldn’t go that far.” Elizabeth reported that she had “never needed to use it as therapy,” even though she had heard that others have used it in that fashion:

Therapeutic, well I don’t know. I’ve heard people say that it’s very therapeutic, especially if they’re going through a bad time, if they have deaths or illness or something. I guess I’ve never used it that way, as I’ve been fortunate. I’ve never needed to use it as therapy. But beneficial, I feel like I’ve accomplished something. It makes me feel good. So I guess it’s beneficial in that way.

While we will see that four of the poets in this study reported that writing poetry was therapeutic for them, three of the poets claimed that they didn’t use writing poetry in any therapeutic manner. However, all three poets who said they didn’t use poetry therapeutically did claim that it was personally beneficial, either in “doing something that you think has meaning,” having “a sense of satisfaction,” or feeling like they’ve “accomplished something.”

Frank’s Perception

In response to my question of whether he ever found poetry to be personally beneficial or therapeutic in the follow up interview, Frank began his reply by identifying types of poems that he has written that represent moments that have been personally beneficial or therapeutic to him:

Yeah, in a couple of situations: mostly if I’ve written a socially responsible poem, like I did a thing on abortion once. It was cloaked, but that’s basically what it’s about, or
political poems, or deeply, deeply personal poems…I feel I’ve somehow made a statement that others should understand is very personal, and that they may find therapeutic also. A lot of the time laughter and humor, I find myself tucking in.

By describing the types of poems that he finds therapeutic and describing all of them as being “very personal,” Frank showed that his approach toward broader issues that he considers “socially responsible” or “political” is through writing at the personal level. And through this “very personal” route, Frank feels that “others…may find [the poems] therapeutic also.” By explaining how he believes his poetry can be therapeutic in such a relational way Frank has underscored the importance of using poetry to relate to others that five of the poets identified as being an important way in which they found their practice of writing poetry to be meaningful.

I then asked Frank if he could give any specific examples of poems that he has found to be beneficial or therapeutic. He replied, referencing a poem that he had found to be beneficial in a number of ways:

Well, again, we’re talking ego, so the political poem that got translated in Hungary, got a very good reaction here. When I did any readings, I almost automatically tuck it in. And I felt good about that, because I felt that I had taken a stand on a particular thing, that it was pretty well—I mean, it’s all metaphorical—pretty well understood by most people. In fact, the last time I did it, I guess at [a local] library, some guy said: “Would you mind reading that again,” and my first thought was: “Well, he’s old; he can’t hear.” (laughs) And then, later, because he came up to me and we talked, I realized that he really appreciated the poem.

In this example, Frank has identified at least three ways in which writing a political poem has made him feel good: he felt he “had taken a stand,” that he had communicated it well because it was “understood by most people,” and he learned that an audience member “really appreciated the poem.”

Frank had briefly mentioned that he considered “laughter and humor” to be something that he incorporated in his poems that made them personally beneficial or therapeutic. Earlier, in the course of answering a question on a different topic, Frank had stated that he had sometimes used humor and writing poetry as a “coping device” in dealing with cancer. I reminded him of what he had said in order to elicit a more detailed description of how this phenomenon had worked for him. He replied:

Well, I should expand that a little bit. The coping device was something stated by my oncologist when I said: “I’m interested in humorous things at the moment, and humoring myself about a lot of things.” He said: “Well, it’s a pretty common coping device.” So that’s where that one came from.
In this statement, Frank clarified that he has identified humor as a particularly important facet of his life at present, and that it was his doctor who had labeled it as a coping device, a term that he had then appropriated and used to describe how humor has been helping him during his illness.

Frank said that he has been using humor “just in my life, mostly,” but also in poetry: “I definitely—humor almost sounds too big, but most of my senryu are humorous. Or, I don’t like the word cynical, but they’re observant of human foibles.” Frank was speaking of senryu, which are very similar to haiku, but with an explicit focus on human nature. In this way, Frank had shown that incorporating a wry sense of humor into his short poems was a regular practice for him. While Frank reported that he writes about “human foibles,” John had also related an anecdote about a time in which writing a wry senryu made him feel better about an experience that was bothering him. In this way, it appears that the genre of senryu has some inherent therapeutic value in that poets have often used its sharp wit or ironic tone to express their frustrations with aspects of human nature.

Frank then spontaneously brought up a different way in which he was using poetry as a means of personal benefit.

I don’t know what’s happened recently, but I have been writing, or at least putting in notebooks, dozens and dozens of haiku, senryu and tanka. I’m not exactly sure what sparked it, because it’s not saying: “Oh, geez, I’ve only got so many months to live,” or something like that, they just happened. Part of it was I got all juiced up about an international erotic tanka competition.

In this statement, we can see that an open invitation to contribute to an anthology of erotic tanka has sparked a new spate of prolific writing for Frank. He has lately been using poetry as an outlet for celebrating life, when he might otherwise be tempted to write poetry of a more downcast tenor. The fact that Frank’s writing spree was started by an opportunity to submit for publication poems on a given theme is one way in which published poets likely benefit from their practice of writing poetry in different ways than those who only write for themselves.

**John’s Perception**

John first began speaking of ways in which poetry was therapeutic to him when I asked him what the benefits of sustaining a practice of writing poetry were for him. He answered: “The immediate first thought that came to me is: ‘Well, the benefit is I keep living.’” Not sure how literally he meant this statement to be taken, I asked if he implied that he would not keep living if he didn’t write poetry. His next response went into more detail:

I think that if I didn’t write poetry, that it would be hard for me to resist sort of drinking and drugging myself to death, or something. Or just, somehow—I mean, (slight pause) to me, it would be a really ugly life. I don’t judge that other people experience it that way, who are not writing poetry,
because it’s just not their thing, but for me, that would be a really ugly life, a really hard life to live. And I’m not suicidal, so I don’t think I would directly kill myself or something, but in effect, I would feel dead. I would just—yeah, I would feel like I just died. And the same thing would go, by the way, if I felt that I had no other opportunities to do theater in any form. …other than when I was being a father, really, full time for the first five years of my son’s life, I’ve always been doing theater and poetry, more or less regularly, in some form or other.

At first, John implied that his practice of writing poetry keeps himself away from vices. Then, as he got more specific in envisioning what his experience would be without poetry, he described it as “a hard life to live,” and that he “would feel dead.” By these descriptors, we can reasonably conclude that John perceives writing poetry as an aid to his mental well being. The fact that he said he would have the same experience if he weren’t to engage in theater suggests that these two creative pursuits to him are central to his sense of perceiving beauty in life (instead of “a really ugly life”), and that his participation in these arts makes him feel alive.

Another benefit to sustaining a practice of writing poetry that John listed was: “Grief is really good for writing poetry, and poetry is really good for grief.” Before we go into John’s perception of how poetry and grief benefit from one another, it is important to have a clearer idea of how John views grief. Earlier in his interview, he had characterized grief in the following manner:

My experience of living is kind of that it’s a matter of cycles. All kinds of cycles. Like grief. Let’s say it’s grief over something big; somebody that you really love dies. The first wave of that is likely to capsize your boat. It’s huge, it’s overwhelming. It obliterates everything else. But, at some point, you begin to recover sort of a normal experience of some kind. But it was an important loss, so it’s going to come back, but it’s not going to come back as high as it was before. There’s some degree of diminishment. And that pattern will continue. And that loss will be there with you all your life, but, down the line somewhere, it will be subsumed in a lot of other things. That, to me, is natural.

In his description of how he experiences grief, John related two core ideas in his belief: that grief follows a cyclical pattern in which it recurs after the initial incident, and that the return of grief occurs over extended periods of time, even though the intensity of the grief may lessen over time. These two aspects of grief in John’s earlier description became central to his explanation of the symbiotic relationship between poetry and grief, as is illustrated below.

Right after John had claimed that grief and poetry were “really good” for each other, I asked him how poetry is good for grief. He replied:
Well, I think if you make any kind of a piece of art out of some experience that you have the illusion that you’ve mastered that experience. That you’ve got enough distance from that experience to be able to control it; to manipulate it and to make it into something. (slight pause) So I explained my wave pattern of grief for you, so I say illusion because anything that’s really a loss in life, I think, is an ongoing wave pattern, and all that. But at some point you can actually get on top of these kinds of waves and ride them a little bit. Initially, they’re the kind of things that will swamp your boat. But later on, they get to be something that you can actually travel on.

Note that one element of John’s reply refers to poetry as allowing him to feel some sense of control over issues that are beyond his control, much in the same way that Sam had characterized poetry as being therapeutic for him. However, John also explicitly qualified his remarks about his sense of control as being an “illusion.” Because the word “illusion” sometimes has negative connotations, I clarified with John my interpretation that he was speaking of “the illusion that [he has] mastered” the experience as if it was a good thing, and he replied: “Illusions can be great things.” And while he may believe that it is an illusion to think that he could directly control the situation that has brought him grief, he implies that his subjective experience of the illusion brought on by writing poetry is that he gains a sense of “distance” from the situation (or from his emotional reaction to it; it is difficult to tell whether he is speaking of the experience as the actual occurrence of events or the experience of his emotions due to the event). It is important to note that he reported that his subjective experience has been changed in a very real way. John’s description of how his subjective experience to an event beyond his control has changed due to writing poetry may be similar to Sam’s sense of “cohesion” that he acquires through writing poetry. Both of these men had spoken of how their experiences of their situations tend to change within the greater context of gaining a sense of control, so it seems reasonable to conclude that they were implying that the control that they gained in the real world (as opposed to the worlds represented within their poems) was not over the situations that bothered them but of their own perception or experiencing of these situations.

As we will see below, being able to control his subjective experience is an important component of John’s sense of well being. Later in his interview, John related the following insight that he had acquired during adolescence, at least in part due to his explorations through writing poetry:

Another general insight I kind of had at that point [as a teenager] was—and all this kind of was being explored while I was writing, among other things. Another insight was what we describe as quality of life now, I just sort of realized at that time that that’s entirely a matter of my experience of things. It’s not the things themselves, it’s how I respond to them. It’s how I experience them, and that I have some choices in that. I mean, there are some
things—someone that you love dies, you’re going to feel sad, among other things. You’ll feel a lot of things, but of course you’re going to feel sad and angry, probably. But exactly how you do that, and exactly what you do with that—exactly what you think of that, exactly how much you fight that or accept that, a lot of things about that are within my grasp and are things that I can do something about. That’s an insight that works both in terms of just how I live, but also how I write about stuff like that.

So…now I don’t always see this as much myself, but one of the things that people have commented about on my work a lot is that I will often write about situations that would be hard situations, and were for me in some way or another—that might be sort of shameful or might be sort of terrifying or might be sort of sad or whatever, but I do them without suffering, and without being sentimental about it. I think that that quality in my writing is a product of learning to live like that, and I’ve learned to live like that by writing, among other things.

When John said “things that I can do something about,” he is again referring to a sense of control he has, of his “choices” in how he decides to experience his emotions and what he will do with his emotions. Some of the subjective experiences he has reported he has choices in, such as “exactly how much you fight…or accept” the emotions evoked by situations beyond your control, are choices he can make in the process of writing poems, such as conveying difficult situations “without suffering.” As we will see later, John reported in a different part of his interview that the experience of writing poetry has changed his emotions at times. And while John didn’t directly claim that his experience of writing the poem was the primary cause of decreasing his suffering in the above statement, he did report that his regular practice of writing poetry helped him to “live like that” in general.

Earlier, in the course of presenting an extended metaphor to explain his sense of how grief operates in his life, John had referred to grief as waves that “initially…will swamp your boat,” but because the grief diminishes over time, the waves “get to be something that you can actually travel on.” He had initially given this explanation in the context of explaining that through making art he gains “the illusion” that he has mastered the experience, that he can “make it into something.” I interpreted that John’s metaphors paralleled each other in implying that by making art out of grief he gains a sense of control of the experience, which enables him to make his experience useful to him in some way. His explanation seemed so laden with meaning that I wanted to hear him discuss it a bit more, but I didn’t want to influence his answer. So I read the extended version of his quote back to him during his follow up interview, without suggesting my interpretation. He responded:

I guess to say it more mundanely, an important experience of grief—you know, my dad died, my marriage breaks up, those are things that actually happened. I could make up
other things—so, when they first happened, the grief was pretty overwhelming. And at some point it begins to go away for a while, and it comes back pretty quickly, but it comes back—however slightly—diminished. And goes away again, and comes back again, and maybe a little bit later, and a little bit more diminished. But my feeling is that if it’s important; if it was my dad, or my marriage, that that kind of pattern is going to continue indefinitely through my life. And, in terms of writing, that’s really what I meant by riding it. All I simply meant is: these are the kinds of experiences that I’m going to write about, from my perspective, because these are the kinds of experience that will connect me to other people. These are the kinds of things over which I can communicate, because whether it’s the matter of somebody else’s dad died, or whoever it is, a lot of people reading my work are going to have lost somebody that they loved—maybe most people reading, certainly most adults. Many of the people reading it, if they haven’t actually lost their marriage, will have lost some kind of an important relationship along the way. So that’s good material for writing. I think somewhere in there I said grief is good for poetry, and poetry is good for grief. So that’s really all I was saying about that, I guess, is that I’m not afraid about grief anymore, in my life. I’ve grieved enough things that my feeling is that there’s a sense in it; there’s a pattern in it that I can trust, and what’s more, I can even use it to reconnect myself with people.

In this explanation John directly equates his metaphor for “riding” the wave with connecting with other people, which he does by writing poetry about his experiences. John has reemphasized a key way in which poetry is meaningful in his life in the context of speaking about how poetry is useful for grief: he is able to transform his grief by using it “to reconnect [himself] with people.” Therefore, I conclude that my interpretation was correct in the sense that John does believe that he is making his experience into something useful by writing about it; he reported that he uses the experience to connect with other people through his writing. However, John doesn’t appear to credit the sense of control that he earlier reported he gains with being the cause for how he is able to make the experience useful. He had only referred to the sense of control he achieves as being a benefit of writing in its own right, but not as the cause for the benefit of making his poetry useful in connecting him with others. Either John perceives his sense of control as being the cause of other (unmentioned) ways in which he finds poetry can help him to make his experience into something useful, or he perceives the sense of control as being useful in its own right and not in ways beyond that. Regardless of how John views his sense of control in relation to other ways in which he benefits from writing poetry while grieving, he has reported that a major way in which he can make the grieving process useful through poetry is by using it to “connect” with other people.
During the follow up interview, I read John the account he had given about how he discovered that he has choices in how he experiences events, and that this insight affects both how he lives and how he writes about his experiences. In order to check my interpretation of how his perception of how he deals with grief might have represented an example of how he can exercise his choice in how he experiences events, I then asked him if the part where he said “are things that I can do something about” was what he had meant when he had said that the waves “get to be something that you can actually travel on.” He replied: “Yes. That would be an example of making use of something that was otherwise useless, in terms of experience.” Because John had used the word “illusion” earlier to describe the effects of how writing poetry sometimes helps him to deal with adversity, and at other times he seemed to have described very real ways in which his situation was improved, due in part to his writing of poetry (such as describing difficult experiences with a lack of suffering or sentimentality), I wanted to determine whether my interpretation was correct in that he perceived that his practice of writing poetry influences how he engages with the difficult situations he writes about, or with the world in response to those situations. With his most recent acknowledgment of the connection between different parts of his previous interview, I sought to confirm that he had expressed a non-illusory way in which writing poetry had helped him. I asked: “So there is some way that through writing poetry you can make use of something that was otherwise useless?” He replied in the affirmative, and went on to explain a mechanism that he perceives as enabling poetry to have impact in his life:

Yeah, it really has to do with the power of words. Here’s a tiny example. I don’t know if this will be clear or not, but: when my marriage was breaking up, the first time that I was talking to somebody and they simply said, “yeah, divorce can be really difficult,” simply reducing it to that one word made the whole thing so much more manageable for me. I mean, I hadn’t been saying that word. I hadn’t been saying the word “divorce.” I’d been avoiding the word. But once somebody else said it, and it was kind of reduced to this one word, then I realized: “Oh yeah. I know so many people who have gone through divorce.” And I could talk to them about it, now that I knew what the word is. The power of words is extraordinary. I guess any poet knows that. And one of the powers of words is reducing things to words so that they become things that we can manage. …So some of my poems have—for a short time—really made me feel so much better. And I think some have had the power to make other people feel better when they’ve read them. Temporarily, you know, because it’s just a poem. It didn’t solve anybody’s problems. It didn’t change the world. But it may have changed somebody’s experience for an instant, as it changed mine for an instant.

Because John had shared so many ideas about how poetry is meaningful to him, much of my follow up interview was focused on clarifying earlier statements and finding
connections among them in order to determine how some of his statements that might seem contradictory on the surface likely fit together as a coherent view of how poetry functions in his life. I sought to confirm my interpretation that he intended the most recent explanation to address what he had said about how he can change his experience of things. John replied that it was “an example.” So in this example of how poetry can help John to deal with difficult situations, he highlighted the way in which “reducing things to words” by naming them makes them into “things that we can manage.”

In his most recent statement, John had characterized the way that poetry can “temporarily” change his experience, but some of his earlier quotes had left me with the impression that his experience could be changed more permanently, such as when he learned to live in way that avoids sentimentality, or when he is able to travel on a wave of grief rather than allowing it to “swamp [his] boat.” I then asked John if such an effect was always temporary, changing his experience for an instant, or if he had read or wrote a poem that had “changed [his] mindset about something.” His reply indicated that the effect of reading or writing a poem is not always temporary for him, but that he considers the ability for a poem to change his experience for an instant to be the mark of “a real poem:”

In terms of duration, sure, I’ve had experiences with writing poems that have changed my mind or my experience for quite a long period of time. But it’s a real poem if it does it for a flash of a second—to me. And it might be a better or a different kind of a good poem if it did it for a longer period of time. I think some of this discussion we’re having had to deal with me ruminating about how when I was a teenager and writing, that the process of writing poems and the process of discovering a little bit about life as I would come to understand it, were mixed up. They were part of the same process. They were the same moments. …I certainly remember some of the writing experiences. One of them was really, in a large way, the idea of anesthesia, I suppose. Which is: I am in a situation where I’m mortal, and I’ll have to die, but I don’t have to think about that all the time. And I can decide in what ways thinking about that might be helpful to me, and in what ways thinking about that might be unhelpful, and begin to form patterns and to learn to behave in a way that would be best for me. So I don’t change the outward reality; it’s beyond my ability to change. But I can change the immediate temporal experience of it for myself, from time to time. But I don’t look upon that as something permanent, because, I don’t know, but my feeling is that I would be somehow spiritually, if not mentally and psychologically, damaged if I could completely forget that I was mortal. That wouldn’t be a good goal. But on the
other hand, feeling, every once in a while, an alternative to that is good for me.

In the above explanation, John gave an example of insight gained through an adolescent writing experience in which he stressed both a permanent manner in which an idea from poetry might change his life, and also a temporary but recurring manner in which the same idea might manifest in his life differently. When he said: “I can decide in what ways thinking about that might be helpful to me, and in what ways thinking about that might be unhelpful, and begin to form patterns and to learn to behave in a way that would be best for me,” he was describing how such an insight might catalyze a new mindset and new ways of engaging with the world on a daily basis. When he said “feeling, every once in a while, an alternative to [being mortal] is good for me,” he gave an example of a way in which poetry can temporarily change his experience of reality temporary but recurring ways that enhance his life.

Later in his interview, John gave more examples of poems that had temporarily made him feel better. In the following example, he shares a few specific poems that have temporarily made him feel better, as well as a couple of reflections on why they worked in such a fashion for him:

[My ex-wife] used to chide me about the fact that I wrote all these poems not showing her at her best—or not showing us at our best…[such as:] Christmas day / the exchange / of custody; moving day / the other men / in her life…. When I wrote a poem like: Father’s Day / she tells me / I’m not the father, I thought: I really put that right outside of myself. I mean, if I explain the reality of the experience, it’s not as good as the poem [John had earlier told me stories of how close he is to his goddaughter, who is his ex-wife’s daughter by a different marriage, which yields a more prosaic interpretation for this poem]. So, writing some of those poems made me feel better, at the time. …One element of that [poem] might have been having a little bit of revenge or something. But another element of it was just getting that out of my mind. Putting it in the past by putting it into words…these were illustrations of poems that made me feel better, and were useful in that way for me.

While John acknowledges that his “Father’s Day” poem might have yielded temporary benefits from “a little bit of revenge or something,” he relates that there is another reason why he perceives that the poems where he showed low points in his relationship with his ex-wife helped him. He explained that writing those poems, at least in part, served the purpose of “just getting that out of my mind.” When John said he was “putting it into the past by putting it into words,” we might interpret that John has the mindset that once he has addressed an issue there is no need to dwell on it, and he is free to move on and engage his attention elsewhere. Whatever the specific mechanism that John perceives to underlie the process, it seems that John credits the articulation of an experience in the form of a poem as a means of allowing himself to stop dwelling on a painful situation.
At one point in his follow-up interview, John was telling me about how he had regularly had the experience of writing poetry change his thoughts or emotions when he was an adolescent. He then summarized the experiences in a manner that showed that he considered them to give him insight into his emotions: “It’d be a fairly ordinary experience for me to start out writing something that seemed to be sad and to find out that underneath that was “angry,” and underneath that was fear. That would be a fairly ordinary thing.” I asked if he would be consciously aware of those connections among his emotions as he was writing, and he speculated:

No, probably not as I was writing. More in the process of reading what I’d [written]—when I reached the point where I’d said: that’s good enough, that’s the end of this poem, at some point after that, and probably not long after that, because I was going over things again every day, pretty much. At some point shortly after that, I might read it, though, with enough detachment to start thinking about—or not even really thinking about, but just noting what the emotional content of the thing was. Again, as an adolescent, I wasn’t terribly articulate about those things. It was much more instinctive.

In this way, John had sketched a typical scenario of how, as an adolescent, he became aware of emotions he had experienced through the process of writing and then reading his poems. In the model for emotional intelligence developed by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (as summarized in Goleman, 1995), a basic requisite for acting intelligently with regard to one’s emotions is to simply become aware of one’s own emotions. If John’s experience of writing poetry as an adolescent is in any way representative of a larger trend, then opportunities to learn how to write poetry in high school gain an added importance to the well-being of young adults as well as incorporating skills that may serve their mental health throughout their adult lives.

Given that John had specifically identified his portrayal as describing the process he went through as an adolescent, I asked him if that same phenomenon applies when he writes poetry now. He replied:

Now… I have the experience and the wherewithal to be aware of my emotional experience while I’m writing, but I don’t do it, because I’m engaged in writing. (laughs) I think that that’s the way it is for me in life in general, it’s that if you ask me what I’m feeling right now, I’d probably give you a pretty good answer, but I wouldn’t have thought of it unless somebody asked me, or it came up somehow. I’m just feeling it, you know, just feeling it. From user’s experience of examining my emotions, I’m aware that I’m having lots of feelings all the time, and that they really succeed each other rapidly. But no, I don’t examine that while I’m actually writing.

John’s explanation shows that he perceives his primary connection between emotional insight or resolution and writing poetry in his adult life to be a focused experiencing of
the emotion rather than a conscious thought about the emotion. Given that when John reread the poem he wrote for this study and noted how the mood he had been feeling about his upcoming birthday had appeared in his poem, it is possible that some of these fleeting experiences of awareness may have gone unnoticed because they were not recorded the moment they occurred. Another interpretation is that, as an adult, John may not regard recognizing his emotions in his poetry as being a significant experience because he would be able to identify his emotions at any given moment, if the thought occurred to him to do so. It is possible that John noted the experience of becoming aware of his emotions through his poems as an adolescent because he wouldn’t have been able to identify some of his emotions without looking through the lens of the poems he had written. Either interpretation—whether John gains insight about his emotions through his poetry even as an adult, or if he gained insights that he would not have otherwise achieved as an adolescent—shows that writing poetry can be useful in providing a means of support for one to gain awareness of one’s emotions.

In order to check my interpretation of John’s statement about his process of recognizing his emotions when he was writing as a teenager, I told him my understanding of his experience by paraphrasing his explanation: “You read your poem, and you said: ‘oh, I was feeling that way;’” [and it] kind of gave you insight into your emotions.” John agreed with this interpretation. I then asked, “Have there been times when your emotion has actually changed because you wrote a poem about something, maybe because you saw it in a different way after having written a poem?” In response to this question, John expressed a perception that when his emotions changed due to writing, it wasn’t necessarily due to a conscious awareness of his emotions that his poetry may have catalyzed. He responded: “I do know that I’ve had the experience of writing poems change my emotions. I don’t know that I would put it quite the way you’ve put it, in terms of looking at things.” So while John had confirmed that he had gained insight into his emotions through his poetry, and that the act of writing poetry has changed his emotions, he does not view these two effects of writing poetry as being causally connected. Taking into account the perceptions that John had explained earlier, perhaps he views the changes in emotion as occurring due to the effect he described of “putting it in the past by putting it into words,” or through “the illusion that [he has] mastered that experience.”

By the time we had gotten to the point in the follow up interview where I asked John directly if he had ever experienced writing poetry as personally beneficial or therapeutic, he had already explained many of the ways in which poetry has benefitted him in such a manner. He confirmed that he would describe as therapeutic his poetry writing experiences where he gained “the illusion” that he had mastered the experience of grief, such as when his father had died. He then went on to explain that poetry is not the only way in which he has dealt with difficulty in his life:

> It is true that the poems are helpful to me in incorporating these kinds of big experiences into my life. But it’s also true that I’ve learned other methods of doing that, and that the poetry is part of an array of things now.
John then listed a number of types of creative, social, nature, and therapy activities that he engages in. He summarized his sense of how he deals with any turmoil in his life:

I mean, if I have a problem, there are people I can call, and there are things that I can call upon. And simply the repeated experience in the past of having done one thing or another and had it work in that way is kind of sustaining in terms of my expectations that there’ll be resources for me, when needed.

In this answer, John shows that while he considers writing poetry to be therapeutic and beneficial in helping him to face adversity, it is joined by many resources and activities that he has engaged in when faced with difficult situations.

**Pearl’s Perception**

Pearl had begun her description of how she had started her practice of writing poetry to cope with the death of her son (as described in the text of the Findings to Sub Question C1). She also reported that she has used poetry to grieve the death of her beloved second husband, Tom:

[Tom died] in 1999….It’s going on ten years now. And I keep telling myself: “Well, I mean, it’s ten years now. Come on, get over it.” And I always think I’ll be fine, and then that day comes and always—(laughs) you’re taken to another level that you have to learn as a human being. And then I relax and I say this is part of being human, this is part of being alive. And you have to learn these things as human beings…I have [written poems about his death], but each one takes me to a deeper level of facing it. Some of them were lighter…but I find that I’m focusing more and more on that grief; that it’s taking me ten years to really face and deal with.

In her account of how writing poetry has helped her to deal with the death of her husband, Pearl explained that her poems have progressively taken her “to a deeper level of facing it.” We might interpret this type of therapeutic use of poetry as a means of coming to terms with the difficulties of reality. In her account of how she has used poetry as part of her grieving process for her husband, Pearl also shows that using poetry in such a manner is a viable strategy to deal with grief over a very extended time frame.

Pearl described the ways in which the act of writing poetry has been a centering activity for her, that helps her to keep her calm amidst her busy life. First, she articulated the hectic nature of her life, and the way in which she believes writing poetry can be an antidote to that:

Well, this last year hasn’t really been a good year for writing poetry…my life has gotten extremely crazy-busy…I’ve been just saying no to everything lately, trying to cut down. I have so many things going on in my life, I just don’t know where I’m coming or going half the
time…but as you see, I just come in and write this stuff down because it’s important. All of a sudden there’s something came out of the blue, and it was important to me to write it down. I came in one day and: “the kite / caught in the tree limb / red leaves” and it kind of caught the feeling I had of being caught in the tree limb, like a kite caught in this tree; …I felt like I was being caught with all the demands that my life was creating… so that’s why I’ve been turning everything down…trying to simplify my life, and get it back down to some place where I could write again. Because otherwise I’ll start screaming again and start writing gibberish again. (laughs) But I’m still writing it because it’s necessary. I think it’s better than screaming.

By the end of this quote, we can see that Pearl regards the act of writing poetry as “necessary” in her life, and as a means of keeping away from the actions that she claims she has engaged in, but doesn’t think highly of: “writing gibberish” and “screaming [on paper].”

Despite her earlier claims of the ways in which poetry had been therapeutic for her, during the follow up interview I went ahead and asked Pearl my standard question of whether she had experienced writing poetry as personally beneficial or therapeutic. Her answer reflected her earlier sentiments:

Well, yeah; coming to sanity is therapeutic, I would imagine. (laughs) Coming to terms with the world we are living with, finding a place in it, and sharing your humanity with others, and opening up light for each other, finding a creative rather than a destructive way of dealing with life, I think that’s very therapeutic. Right. Actually, when I was paralyzed, my life was really crazy because my husband was dying of congestive heart failure for ten years. I mean, we didn’t have money, and we were getting into debt, and it was absolutely—living in insanity, really. And Tom had moved my [reclining] chair way back in the back room there and I spent practically ten years back there and I got a notebook and I’d listen to the birds. And there’s something about—a bird is flying and I understood what wings meant—just saying the word “wings,” what it does to the human body, and I’d write down all this gibberish, and slowly it started to take into some sort of form, and slowly it came into poetry, where I could actually express it and deal with it. But you go through those stages there before you come to it; just writing down what you have to write down.

Pearl’s experience of using poetry first as a means of expressing feeling in an unstructured way and then finding how to make it into poetry was one that intrigued me since I thought it might be useful for others who are in need of a means of expression for
their pain, but who are not already practiced at writing poetry. Pearl’s focused concentration on how the sound qualities of words such as “wings” underscore and reinforce the meaning of the words was one way in which her self guided exploration of the meaning and sounds that comprise common words led to understandings about poetic expression. John has also described ways in which he experimented with poetry during adolescence to make discoveries both about poetic craft and about the topics of his writing (regarding the John’s inquiry on the topics of his poems, see details in section C3).

I asked Pearl how she would take the gibberish that comes at first and change it into poetry, and she replied: “Oh, you don’t change it. That’s gibberish; it’ll be gibberish forever. (laughing).” I tried a different take to understand the transformative process she was describing. I asked her an even broader question, “What do you do to make a poem, after you’ve written some gibberish?” She replied:

You leave the gibberish when you realize the words no longer are gibberish but start to become poetry. Each night you put it away. Yesterday’s gibberish is gone. Today we start a new poem. Each morning a new life and new beginning. Slowly but surely, the words start connecting and start meaning something. And the first poems I sent out, Tom thought I was nuts. And then when I started getting published, he didn’t think I was nuts. Because he’d see I connected with somebody else; somebody else had read the words and understood what I was saying.

We must keep in mind that Pearl had already explained that she had spent her whole life reading poetry before the death of her son, so her efforts to write poetry were performed in the light of her existing knowledge and aesthetic sense of poetry. From the cohesiveness of her account of how writing gibberish over time can yield effective poetry, Pearl appeared to have a nuanced understanding of her perception of how the process had worked for her. So I then asked her to go into more detail, specifically about the process of how she went from “gibberish” to when “the words start connecting.” She explained:

Well, you write something down; you just sit down with your notebook. If you take a notebook every night and just write down words that come to you, and then you’ll go back the next morning…you start reading it back and you say: “What was I trying to say?” And you realize you can’t tell what you were trying to say. You understand that that’s gibberish. But then when you start reading it back to yourself and you understood what you were trying to say, you say: “Wait a minute here, I’ve got something here I can say to something.” I’ve captured something in those words because the next morning when I read them they mean something to me. That’s why they tell a poet sometimes to put a poem in the drawer and pull it out in nine months. Because then in nine months if you don’t know what you
were talking about, it’s not a good poem. And if you pull that poem out in nine months and you can read it and you know what you were talking about, you’ve got a good poem.

Pearl then explained that the next test for her poem is to “send it out to somebody else;” to submit it to an editor to see if it is good enough to get published. Pearl then further clarified that when she identifies a sample of writing to be gibberish, she will “leave it and move on to the next day’s writing.” In this manner, Pearl reported that she had engaged in a regular practice of writing, much of which she decided to leave by the wayside after reading it. However, reading through her writings appears to have been an important part of the process; perhaps in identifying the subtle ways in which she was not adequately communicating her experiences and emotions, she was progressively honing what she would eventually say, and forming ideas of how to say it. That is just one interpretation of how this rich experience might have proceeded for Pearl. Studying how poets review, react to, and learn from their own previous writings would be a promising component of a future research agenda.

Pearl also related that there was a period earlier in her life when circumstances didn’t allow her to write poetry. But she felt that knowledge she had gained from her love of poetry and art as a schoolgirl had benefitted her greatly:

I had that terrible trauma in my family where I was seventeen when I was a battered wife and I almost got killed, and I had three children, two of whom were disabled. And I had to deal with that. By the time I was twenty I was already raising a whole family of disabled children and a single parent and dealing with that. There was no room for poetry in my life, believe me. It was sheer trauma. But I think deep poetry did help me in dealing with that, because I always had that part of me that I could escape to that was part of it. I never really wrote anything down…but I always kept that little secret place of art there that was an objective way of looking at things, so through that whole terror, I think it saved me from sheer insanity. Because it would have been sheer insanity if I hadn’t learned that little secret place of art in my soul and in my mind, in my heart.

Specifically, Pearl had pinpointed the “objective way of looking at things” that she identified with creating art and poetry as a habit of mind that helped her through her ordeal.

To get a better sense of how Pearl believed knowledge of the arts was connected with the objectivity she perceived had ultimately “saved [her] from sheer insanity,” I asked her how art helps her to be objective. She answered:

Well, you are able to look at a situation outside of yourself. You’re able to understand yourself in this situation around you as being (slight pause) able to look at it—when you’re
a battered wife, there’s no place to go. It’s like being a cornered animal; you’re caught in this thing, and there’s no relief. Year after year after year you’re dealing with this terror of somebody trying to kill you. And in your family there’s no relief either. There’s no place for you to go, there’s no way of dealing with it. I mean, that is one way to cause insanity, and unless you’re able to put that into perspective and try to keep yourself from falling into the terror of the situation—and I think having that frame of mind, of being able to realize that you had to keep your wits about you; you had to be able to deal with this thing in ways that you constantly had to be aware of what was around you; an awareness. I don’t know any other way of explaining it.

In her explanation of how art helps her to be objective in her life, Pearl was communicating an idea based on personal experience, and she used a few different phrases in her effort to clarify her idea. The similarity of some of the phrases she used seemed to converge toward a common meaning for the skill she perceived she had learned from the arts: being able to put her situation “into perspective,” having “that frame of mind,” and “an awareness.”

I thought perhaps I might be able to better understand the idea she was conveying if she gave an example to illustrate her idea. I asked if she could describe “an awareness” that she had that she was pretty sure she had because of being an artist or a poet. She replied:

Yes—being aware, that’s exactly what being a poet is, is being aware of things…I think it’s something that you develop in your subconscious. It’s something that’s almost in your whole being. It’s something that develops in your subconscious. It’s something that happened to me when I was very, very young, in the way I was formed. As people grow up and enter the outer world they are required to deal with many things that seem to be antithetical to poetry…and so some people lose their poetry. I had to deal with that grief of losing poetry when I was a child, and being able to find a little place to hold it, because I didn’t want to lose it; maybe I was holding onto it….And then I remember coming home, walking home from the train station one time from work, and all of a sudden it was beginning to snow and I found myself saying poetry, and it was almost a silent little guilty trip I had, saying poetry all the way. And I kept that to myself, and I tucked that away. I guess I’ve always had that little place that I had developed, of holding this stuff that was so precious. I didn’t want to lose it. I might not have expressed it all those years…
Pearl began her explanation about the “awareness” that she has as a poet by equating “being aware of things” with being a poet, similar to the way in which Elizabeth reported that writing poetry causes her to “just keep going through life with [her] eyes open,” and being observant has helped her practice of writing poetry. Pearl’s specific example of “an awareness” that she had was in response to how the beginnings of a snowfall had reactivated her knowledge of poetry and elevated her mood as she recited poetry to herself on her way home. As we will toward the end of this section, Pearl’s experience in unexpectedly gaining “an awareness” due to her knowledge of poetry is similar in function to an experience John described in which his knowledge of poetry emerged to help comfort him, which was also triggered by the onset of falling snow.

Pearl spoke of the way that poetry helps her to see her world objectively as something that occurs on a regular basis, so I consider Pearl’s perception of the objectivity she gains through poetry to be a mindset or skill set that she has applied to other areas of her life. Therefore, I offer continued discussion of this phenomenon in section C2 of the findings, where I offer another example that Pearl gave in which she perceived that poetry helped her to be objective in a frustrating situation at the Department of Motor Vehicles. However, to better clarify Pearl’s claim that poetry has helped her to look at elements of her life objectively, I offer a more concrete illustration of the phenomenon below. After she received my debriefing letter, Pearl emailed me to report another benefit from using the skills in objectivity that she learned through poetry:

> These last months I've been dealing with trying to find a medication that can treat my osteoporosis. It has been extremely painful since it turns out I am allergic to them all. During these last months—having to deal with haiku and writing—has removed my mind from the downward spiral that uncertainty makes while going through something like this. Just this weekend the reaction was so violent I couldn't tell if it was a back ache or a heart attack. Today I was at the doctor's office and I was able to detail for him every little thing that was happening to me. This is the training you get when you write. You are able to remove your mind from what is happening to your body and sort of watch it...and take notes. If you get sucked into the downward spiral of depression, you can't help yourself at all. You can't even give reliable information to your health care providers. So I feel it is a valuable tool for helping people with chronic disease and the elderly for dealing with the decline of their bodies. This time it's probably saved Medicare at least two trips to the emergency room! So you can see it is valuable in dollars and cents as well.

In the above testimony, Pearl has articulated her perception of how a poet’s practice in recording sensory details helps to not only avoid the more emotion laden repercussions of pain, but to articulate those perceptions accurately to better diagnose the problem and obtain appropriate treatment. While this particular example was given after Pearl had
been debriefed on the purposes of the study, the added information she chose to offer was in keeping with claims she had already made, and offered a fresh example that had occurred within her very recent memory. Overall, Pearl had reported extensively on the ways in which she finds poetry to be both personally beneficial and therapeutic, from the skills she had learned in observing her situation from a more objective perspective to finding ways in which to re-experience the time she had spent with her son, it is plain to see that Pearl perceives that her practice of writing poetry has served her well being in many profound ways.

**Connections Between Poetry and Therapy are Not Always Perceived as Beneficial**

Four of the poets in the study have spoken at length about the ways in which they perceive that poetry has been therapeutic for them. The other three have remarked that they find it beneficial, but have not used it therapeutically. While there are many ways in which it appears that poets may benefit from a possible therapeutic side to writing poetry, one of the poets in the study (who did not wish to be further identified) related an anecdote that reveals that not all of the connections between therapy and poetry are positive. This poet cited the following example when I asked if there were any drawbacks to sustaining a practice of writing poetry:

**Drawbacks:** the stereotypes of poets, and that we’re all neurotic, or (slight pause) being psychoanalyzed by your poems. One time one of my poems I had published, and I was asked about it and this person I just recently met, her response to me was: “Oh, does that poem mean [you’re diagnosed with this particular affliction]?” And, I’m not, and I was just—(slight pause) and first of all, I’ve studied psychology and it wasn’t a good analysis to begin with, but—the effrontery of someone that I just met, you know, this wasn’t like a therapist of mine or anything, just happened to psychoanalyze me in this diagnostic way like that was like, “Do I really always want to tell people my poems?”

Through this recounting of personal experience, we can see that, in their casual interpretation of poems, readers can apply (or misapply) a therapeutic lens to poetry and project their interpretations onto the personal life of the poet. Additionally, this poet had acknowledged the stereotypes of poets as being a drawback to identifying oneself as a poet. The perception that creativity and mental illness are linked has been pervasive during the past few hundred years in the Western world, and has persisted robustly enough to garner plenty of contemporary psychological studies to investigate whether and how any relationship might exist between the two (e.g., Kaufman, 2005). With the identification of two major drawbacks to sustaining a practice of writing poetry, this participant has shown that not all of the associations that people make between writing poetry and its possible therapeutic connections are positive ones.
Conclusion

While individual poets might find their practice of writing poetry to be either generally beneficial (as in the cases of Miriam, Elaine, and Elizabeth) or therapeutic (as with Sam, Frank, Pearl and John), the negative stereotypes projected by non-poets may bring a stigma to writing that could conceivably discourage poets from publishing poems that they might otherwise have shared, or even discourage novices from pursuing poetry in the first place. The vast majority of studies of the therapeutic purposes of poetry have been conducted with patients who are not published poets, but this study has found that four out of seven poets perceive that they have benefitted from using poetry in a therapeutic sense. Therefore, published poets represent a unique population for study in the area of poetry therapy—not only as a population that exhibits expertise in the domain of practice, but also as a population that finds the benefits of writing poetry to far outweigh the stigmas that are sometimes associated with it. Additionally, none of the poets mentioned sharing their poetry with therapists, which is in stark contrast with the manner in which traditional poetry therapy progresses. Because some poets perceive that they benefit therapeutically from poetry, and because they presumably go about the task of writing and sharing poetry in ways different from the average patient in therapy (for example, the poets described writing about all manners of concerns, large and small, and associated with various positive and negative emotions), more research on how poets benefit from the regular practice of writing poetry could open up new routes to engaging novices in the act of writing poetry to enhance their mental health. Additional reflections on how the findings of this study connect to issues in poetry therapy can be found in Appendix O.
APPENDIX L:

Guiding Principles for Novice Poets

A Synthesis: Real World Applications for the Findings

Sub Questions A and B investigated how the participating poets went about the task of writing poetry as they were being observed. The writing sessions and the questions that were asked of the poets immediately afterward allowed us to glimpse and preserve many aspects of the detailed process of writing as it occurred in real time. Sub Questions C1, C2, and C3 supplemented the findings to Sub Questions A and B by providing a base of information on how the poets viewed their regular practices of writing poetry. As a synthesis of the findings, I offer below some characterizations of expert behavior and beliefs in a format that suggests principles that novice poets could use for guidance in their efforts to write poetry.

Due to the focus on inquiry for this study, one might question the appropriateness of using the findings from this particular study to inform instructional approaches to poetry. However, because inquiry plays such a central role in the act of creating a poem, the findings aren’t as narrowly applicable as one might anticipate. In a deeply reflective essay that critiques a number of approaches to poetry instruction for children throughout history, teacher Phillip Lopate (1975, p. 238) concludes that the best approach for preparing children (and I would include adult novices, as well) to write quality poetry about matters of importance to them is to encourage writing as a means of discovery:

…the only way to write good modern poetry…was to take the voyage into openness and to discover the poem in the act of writing it. It was not necessary to start with a plot or a worked-out premise. I wanted to decrease the fear the children might feel in front of the unbounded subject. I would get them to see that exactly what they were thinking and noticing every minute was the inspiration of literature. I would bring in modern writers and read them, to demonstrate how another person’s quirky mental processes were valid subject matter, and how much discontinuity was allowable in adult literature. I wanted to make them accept how distracted their own minds were. With this understanding, they could begin to turn that continuous subvocal jabbering—so private, and seemingly useless—to advantage.

In short, Lopate determined that encouraging his students to “discover the poem in the act of writing it” was the most appropriate method of instruction that he had used in his teaching practice. I believe that creating instruction that encourages and supports inquiry through the writing process is a promising approach because it closely approximates the ways in which most of the participating poets engaged in their writing sessions for this study. Furthermore, it is an authentic means that can be flexibly applied to writing about topics of genuine concern to the individual, rather than a set of specific writing prompts.
that may or may not be appropriate for the specific mood or preoccupations that the individual might wish to explore at any given moment.

I would like to preface the guiding principles with a few caveats, as well as suggestions for using them in ways that will hopefully aid one’s extended journey in gaining poetry knowledge and writing skills. A detailed and thorough study like the present one would need to be conducted to characterize the behaviors and attitudes of novices as they engage in the writing process in order to determine exactly what the differences are between expert and novice behavior. The guiding principles described below are not meant to imply that novices never engage in some of the same types of actions that experienced poets do. However, it is quite likely that those who have sustained a practice of writing poetry over the course of years have developed a large number of ways in which they are able to engage with the writing process. In the poets’ writing sessions, I noticed that when they approached an obstacle during the writing process (such as not approving of an image or word they had used, or not knowing what direction to take the rest of the poem in), the poets tried approaching the obstacle from different directions, using whatever technique the poet thought feasible for that particular problem, at that particular moment.

The sensitivity of knowing which technique will likely work to get past a given obstacle is one that might need to be developed with experience. After all, the writing process is enacted in the context of writing a specific poem, not in a theoretical world of problem solving. For this reason, the specific techniques described within the guiding principles are framed in terms of the situations in which the poets have used them with success. Given that each of the poets stressed self-study as the primary means by which he or she gained proficiency in writing poetry, it seems likely that a thoughtful application of the techniques and principles described below, as part of a sustained practice of writing (and reading) poetry, will help the novice to navigate past the frustrations associated with being a beginner.

Furthermore, having some strategies to apply to creative pursuits takes the emphasis off of natural talent and places it on effort. This is important in engendering perseverance in novices to continue with an activity as they slowly gain knowledge and skill, instead of assuming that they are simply not good at the new activity, which could cause them to lose interest in it. In other words, shifting one’s focus toward the effort needed to learn a skill (instead of how easily one appears to master the domain) makes one more likely to persist and succeed (Dweck, 2000, 2006).

In fact, there is plenty of reason to anticipate that persistence in attempting to learn poetry writing skills will eventually pay off for the average person who has interest in the activity. Ericsson and Charness (1994, p. 725) report that:

Counter to the common belief that expert performance reflects innate abilities and capacities, recent research in different domains of expertise has shown that expert performance is predominately mediated by acquired
complex skills...the effects of extended deliberate practice are more far-reaching than is commonly believed.

We must keep in mind that persistence in other complex tasks involving the use of language brings success on a regular basis: infants learn to use specific words to indicate wants and needs; toddlers acquire the ability to speak in complete sentences; young children master the use of narrative to tell a parent the story of what they did that day; high school and college students master the skills of writing essays. Throughout our lives, there are many complex tasks involving the use of language that we gain proficiency in, or even master. For all those who have an interest, writing poetry should be no different. Proficiency in writing poetry in the traditional forms of haiku, senryu and tanka is not only considered a learnable skill in Japan, but it is also expected of the average adult. Over a million Japanese citizens write and submit their poems to magazines and newspapers for publication (Bowers, 1996; Higginson, 1985). I believe that focusing on learnable skills, rather than assuming that natural talent is a prerequisite for writing poetry, would encourage more people to engage meaningfully with the art, and would enable many to attain a level of achievement which would allow them to publish their work.

Of course, the type of persistence in practicing the craft of poetry should be mindful and/or supervised by experts. In addition to persistence in writing, the participating poets also reported involvement in activities that allowed them to critique their own work, or to get feedback on it from others. The most commonly mentioned means of learning beyond reading poetry and writing one’s own poems included: reading books and articles about poetry, participating in writing groups, attending writing workshops, submitting poetry to editors for publication (not as a means of detailed feedback, but to see which poems were accepted), and, for two of the poets, taking college level coursework in poetry.

While obtaining feedback from experts is optimal, it appears that much can be accomplished through mindful application of one’s own efforts to acquire writing skills by studying high quality works and emulating them. Ericsson and Charness (1994, p. 739) provide a characterization from Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, describing how he honed his writing skills:

He would read through a passage in a good book to understand it rather than memorize it and then try to reproduce its structure and content. Then he would compare his reproduction with the original to identify differences. By repeated application of this cycle of study, reproduction, and comparison with a well-structured original, Franklin argued that he acquired his skill in organizing thoughts for speaking and writing.

While Benjamin Franklin was an exceptional individual, he was also a very practical man. His commonsense approach to honing his writing skills exemplifies a central learning strategy not only in the formal instruction of art and literature, but in just about every type of skill imaginable: find examples that you admire, take some time to identify key characteristics that make the product (or performance) so noteworthy, and practice
applying them to your own work. With the value of engaging in considered practice in mind, please consider the following key characteristics of how published poets approach the writing process as strategies that can be emulated in one’s own poetry writing practice.

**Guiding Principles for Novice Poets:**

1. **Inquiry on Expression is to be Expected**

   All of the poets in the study either demonstrated inquiry on expression extensively during their writing session, or reported ways in which it occurs during their regular writing practice. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that a poem’s first draft will also be a satisfactory final draft.

   One way to approach the writing process is to formulate a specific idea of what the poem should express, and to then experiment with developing ways to express that idea in the shape of a poem, as Miriam demonstrated during her writing session and reported as her usual method.

2. **Inquiry on the Content of the Poem is Likely to Occur During the Writing Process**

   **A. Identifying or Choosing Inspiration**

   Among the participating poets, a more common way than developing a specific idea to initiate the writing process was to start with the tiniest bit of inspiration—either an indistinct feeling such as Elaine’s sense of how the light of the setting sun infused a few different scenes from memory, or a specific detail such as an image or word that contains some resonance, such as Frank’s memory of the clouds he had seen the previous day, or Sam’s encounter with the word “kite” that appeared in a poem he read. Once the source of inspiration (however subtle) has been identified or chosen, the writing process may proceed by exploring different ways to develop the inspiration into a specific set of images or context that will constitute the poem.

   **B. Unknowing and the Search that Follows**

   As John explained, a sense of unknowing and a “resonance” that has captured the poet’s attention might help a poet to recognize the types of thoughts and sensory perceptions that have the potential to grow into a poem. The next task, as demonstrated by several poets in the study, is to search for answers that address the sense of unknowing that the poet has regarding the content of the poem. A satisfactory answer is one that gives a sense cohesion (as Sam described), value (as Pearl described), something that “feels like…more than just the words” (as Frank described) or that has a sense of being “true” (as John described), either in a cognitive or emotional sense, or both.
The poet’s initial sense of unknowing is also resolved by the particular expression of the completed poem, since the content and form of the poem ultimately cannot be divided. This connection was illustrated in the cases where a poet’s inquiry on expression led to insight on the content of his or her poem. A stronger identification of the poem’s content with its form was expressed by John: “I think that any of my poems, if the question was ‘what do they say,’ well, the answer can only be ‘the poem.’” Elaine explained how she determines that her poem is complete when she tests it against her idea of “a nothing poem,” which she describes as a poem that “has no particular meaning, maybe, or no particular oomph, or it’s not incisive, it doesn’t capture one’s imagination.” She then articulated her sense that a successful poem should have an emotional impact on the reader; it should be “moving.” Sam showed us that a valid and impactful way to present a poem might be to showcase a sense of ambiguity, particularly if this lack of resolution reflects the poet’s own emotions or state of mind. Additionally, finding a satisfactory form for the content of the poem may feel like the words have been put together so that they “come up with some kind of effect” as Elaine described, or that one has “solved a puzzle,” as Frank described. Pearl spoke of how it was important for a poem to contain a rhythm that reflected the feelings that the poem engendered inside her body.

C. Wander

One way to develop an inspiration or approach the route to finding a satisfactory answer to an initial sense of unknowing is to “wander,” allowing the poem to develop as one follows different streams of consciousness, without a specific goal in mind for the poem. Without a set destination, the wanderer must be on constant lookout for promising leads and remain alert to one’s present surroundings, to determine when one has reached a suitable place. In the spirit of remaining alert to the possibility of arriving at a good destination at any moment, as Elizabeth, Pearl and John have explained, an important part of the process can be to read the poem repeatedly, looking for new interpretations (with a willingness to revise the poem, if a new interpretation seems better than previous ones). As John remarked, “Just because a thing doesn’t do what you intended it to do doesn’t mean that it’s useless. And what’s more, sometimes the use it has is much greater than what you had intended.” Whether a poet has decided to wander in the quest for a good poem or to pursue a specific vision of a poem as Miriam does, it can be helpful to take a look at the resulting effort and determine whether it might succeed in a way that was entirely unexpected.

D. Enlist Thinking Strategies

D1. Ask Strategic Questions

When feeling stuck on how to further develop the poem at any point in the process, sometimes it helps to ask some questions to guide the process in a promising direction. For example, it may be difficult to find words to describe a feeling that is central to the poem. As Elizabeth explained, “words are so
specific…and sometimes the instant experience that you’re having is…not so specific…it could be a whole combination of things that it takes a while to sort out what it is that you experienced, and to come up with the exact word.” She then explained how she proceeds through her sense of unknowing: “You start asking yourself: Why? What is it that made you feel moved? Or: What impressed me?...whatever the experience is, you start to ask yourself why was this a memorable experience, and that’s when it starts to become a poem.”

Other questions that one could ask might have to do with developing the specific imagery of the poem, as Sam demonstrated in his questions about his horseshoe crab’s actions and what condition it was in. Questions could lead toward developing a theme, as Elaine had noticed that the image that she had described in her draft was “very ideal,” and she wondered what she could then do with such an ideal image. She answered her question with two options, one of which became the theme of her poem: to contrast the ideal with the hard edge of reality that comes with the daily newspaper. Pearl described the first image of her poem and then asked “how am I connected with that?” in order to bring a personal relevancy to her observation. At another point, Pearl asked if the message behind her poem was “too sad,” and questioned whether she believed that life operated in such a manner. She determined that she didn’t, and then continued on to create an ending for the poem that she felt was a truer reflection of her beliefs.

D2. Brainstorm and Experiment

During the writing sessions, some of the poets engaged in other types of strategic methods of advancing their work. Sam illustrated how generating multiple solutions to a strategic question, and then pursuing the most promising options can help to develop the poem in useful ways. Frank’s frequent use of experimentation showed how an attitude of when in doubt, just try something out and evaluate whether it helps can aid one in drafting new lines for a poem. The provisional additions can be refined or replaced as needed. Pearl’s writing session illustrated how one can experiment not only with words and images, but with ideas and themes that may be expressed in a poem. When she tried using the phrase “facing the emptiness” in her poem, and then rejected it because it didn’t reflect her beliefs, Pearl demonstrated how experimenting, even with core beliefs, won’t harm a poem if the poet thinks deeply about their implications and measures them against his or her own sense of truth before making the additions permanent. John had described his sense of how he builds a poem in terms of experimentation in assembling Tinkertoys and Legos: start putting some together and then see “whether you like it or not. And if you like it you keep it, and if you don’t like it…you try something else.”

D3. Make an Observation and then Explain its Significance

One could observe a concrete phenomenon either in one’s surroundings or from memory and then examine its personal significance. Miriam directly observed the
table of potted plants in front of her and contemplated the personal significance of how her “garden” appears. New, healthy plants exist side by side with wilted ones, and Miriam purposefully cares for all of them. Elaine accessed concrete observations from her memory, pondered the quality that all three evocative scenes shared, and then developed a theme based on the ironic personal meaning she found when juxtaposing the “idyllic” quality of the scenes with the everyday reality she faces in the newspaper. Elizabeth illustrated how one can make an observation and then use one’s imagination to draw out the significance of the described image or event. She did so by taking on the persona of one who would likely find personal meaning in the image she described. By allowing the narrator of her poem to be someone other than the real-life author, Elizabeth had pragmatically tapped into the advantages of fiction in order to advance the development of her poem when she didn’t otherwise know which direction to take it in next. One could investigate a broad, unanswerable question as Pearl had done by observing the deteriorating state of her tomato vines and then seeing the relevance of how a physical harvest might support an unknown, spiritual harvest.

E. Enlist Passive or Intuitive Methods of Thinking when Active Strategies are Not Effective

Pearl described how she will “enter the silence” by sitting quietly and, in her meditative state, she will “get down into the depths of what things mean.” When the words that the poem needs come to her in this state, all she needs to do is to recognize them; to “fall in love with the thing that is so true, and so perfect and fits so wonderfully.” Frank described how he had taken the self-hypnosis he had learned in order to quit smoking and repurposed it for use in writing poetry. He reported it as one of his methods of relaxing his mind to overcome blocks in his writing process; he characterized his use of the technique as having “re-jiggered the brain” to allow for “clarity” of thinking afterward. Frank explained that even if he falls asleep during the process, having taken a nap often will also allow him to look at his poem with a fresh perspective and make progress toward a successful completion. John also described some of his writing methods as intuitive, where the locus of control was outside of himself. He stressed the importance of allowing time for the “internal process” of preparing to write a poem to occur, as well as the common strategy of allowing time for the poem or draft to sit aside, and returning to it later for a fresh look at it.

3. There are Many Routes to Successfully Completing a Poem

In addition to the variations in approaches to the writing process among the poets, the poets reported differences in their experiences of writing individual poems. None of the poets claimed to go about writing poetry in a fixed sequence of steps. On the contrary, the poets shared their perspectives that one needs to be flexible in approaching the writing process, treating the development of each poem as a unique occurrence. Without a lock-step approach to writing successful poetry, it becomes necessary to acquire knowledge of poetry and an array of writing skills, and to develop the expertise to sense
when it might be useful to apply any given strategy or intuitive perspective in service of the poem that is being created.

**Conclusion**

The above characterizations of the writing processes of published poets are intended to offer the novice an orientation to some of the attitudes and thinking that accompany expert behavior in order to make the writing process more transparent and approachable. The ways in which the poets have conducted inquiry via their writing processes have been explicitly portrayed in the text of the Findings sections. Hopefully the detailed look into specific ways in which the process of inquiry has unfolded as the poets conceived of a starting point, drafted, and edited their poems for this study, and as they reported from their regular writing practices, will sensitize novices to possibilities for conducting inquiry as they author poems, as well.
APPENDIX M:

Description of a Curriculum That Supports Inquiry Through Poetry

While there is plenty of work to be done to overcome key obstacles in researching how experts successfully engage in the writing process and designing effective instruction, there are some instructional programs that have a lot of promise. Below I present an example of a high school course that appears to have found ways to teach poetry in ways that meaningfully model inquiry as a vital component of the writing process. Kelly Wissman (2009, p. 39) reports on the first year of a poetry course designed for girls of color that uses the contemporary literary and artistic works of African American women as a catalyst for writing poems of “self-definition.” Inherent in defining oneself is inquiry into one’s own identity. Wissman (2009, p. 40) explains that the published authors modeled a stance that the students then assumed in reading and understanding their work, and then in writing their own poems in response:

The writers embodied an inquiry stance…an investment in using language to open up experience for examination, critique, and transformation. In examining the works from an inquiry stance, the students and I asked ourselves and each other, What inspires this writer? What inspires me? What kind of truth does she tell? What kind of truth do I want to tell? What kind of change is she seeking? What kind of change am I seeking?

Wissman’s curriculum is an example of how instruction can be designed to give inquiry a prominent place in the study of poetry as well as in the writing process for novice poets. Notice that the types of questions Wissman identifies have a strategic quality, much like some of the questions that the participating poets of this study asked themselves while working on their own poems. By making question asking an explicit part of classroom discourse, Wissman has found a way to model and encourage students to practice one of the ways in which this study found that poets conduct inquiry in the course of developing a poem.

Wissman’s course was one with a very well-defined set of goals for the types of inquiry that students would perform, and the works and authors were chosen specifically to support these goals. Wissman (2009, p. 44) went on to explain that:

The reading and discussion of autobiographical poems by women of color infused the course with epistemologies that recognized poetry as a practice ideally suited toward personal and social change; these readings, in turn, shaped the writing produced by the students…Within this framework it is possible to highlight further how the students’ poems of self-definition embody not only critique but also movements toward change, regeneration, and creation of alternatives.

Wissman explains that the curriculum provided support for guided inquiry: the students were given poems that were carefully selected to model the types of healthy attitudes and
perspectives that the students would find relevant to their own lives, experiences and situations. After a guided discussion using the types of questions listed above, the students then wrote poems using similar poetic devices to reflect their own personal concerns. In this way, the curriculum and classroom discourse supported the students in a type of self-inquiry that includes a proactive stance on how they want to present themselves to the world. In short, the curriculum reports that it aided students in conducting deep inquiry of self-reflection, and, due to the types of poems the students were writing, the curriculum took the next step in promoting “personal and social change” to create affirmations of identity. Given that each student was encouraged to write poems that revealed personal truths, it is hoped that the students will find that their poems will be a sustaining force in their lives, acting as a buffer to ward off the harmful effects of racial and gender stereotyping. It would be wonderful if Wissman could follow up on the girls’ experience of their poems a few years in the future, and if any of the students report ways in which their poems have shaped their perceptions of specific challenges that they encounter during adolescence or early adulthood.

Wissman’s curriculum is one that includes not only the academic objectives of understanding and writing poetry, but it also shows that instruction can be designed to support specific personal and social goals. In fact, by varying the model poems and strategic questions that support discussion, it is easy to envision ways in which this type of program could be tailored to any specific group of learners (including those within a given age group, the disabled, cancer patients, those grieving the loss of a loved one), or topic (environmental activism, human rights in developing nations, religious or ethnic tolerance, etc.). Of course, Wissman also demonstrates that educators can engage in participant action research or design their own innovative curricula while awaiting the results of a long research program.
APPENDIX N:

Issues Pertaining to Art Presented as Research

Overview

As will be discussed briefly below, there is much contention on how to define and guide the development of the use of art in service to research, and what standards we should use to judge such work. From my point of view, it seems that a productive stance in promoting the advancement of the various uses of poetry as qualitative research method would be to assume a pragmatic orientation in which the uses to which art can be reasonably put would govern the discourse. I include the caveat that art can and should be defined in its own terms, by those who know it best. This pragmatic orientation would not be meant to define art in such limiting terms. However, art whose expressed primary purpose is in the service of research is another matter. In such a domain, the needs and requirements of the research community should reign.

Is it art?

A concern among researchers and artists alike is whether art used in the name of research is actually art, or if it is something else. The daunting task of creating robust definitions of art and research that allow us to distinguish one from the other has been attempted (e.g., Eisner, 1981a), but there is little agreement as to establishing a paradigm for discussing the two in the same breath (e.g., Armstrong, 1981; Eisner, 1981b). Instead of addressing this problem at the ontological level, I would approach it from a pragmatic perspective. Does it function in the basic ways that we expect art to function in?

One way in which poetry as a research tool currently differs from writing poetry for aesthetic reasons is that many researchers acknowledge that, while they have an appreciation for poetry, they are not practiced at writing poetry, and/or they recognize that their research poems do not have the same level of quality that their aesthetic poems have (e.g., Furman, 2006; Piirto, 2002; Willis, 2002). In other words, much art created in the service of research does not function in the ways that we expect art to function because it has diminished impact on its audience compared to the professional standards of the art (and literary) world. Of course, the reception and appraisal of art is subjective. The tastes of individual critics and editors vary, but one could ask of a poem: is it likely to be accepted for publication in a literary journal, if it were submitted?

Using a pragmatic approach to address this issue, we can also see that issues of quality are more or less important depending on what purposes the artistic process and resulting products are put to, and whether the author tries to pass the product off as art, or as something else. For example, Willis (2002) proposes that we refer to poems created by researchers for their research studies as “poetic reflections” (p. 1) and “poetic texts” (p. 3) rather than as poems. Willis’s solution seems appropriate to me in enabling one’s research to benefit from the unique perspectives and types of inquiry that the activity of art making can bring to the process of qualitative inquiry in the social sciences, while not
claiming the products of these important processes to have attained a higher level of merit than they deserve. There are ways in which artistic processes and “art-like” (Maxine Greene, as quoted in Piirto, 2002, p. 433) products can benefit research, regardless of whether we agree that the actual representation constitutes art.

**Should art stand alone as research?**

Some researchers argue that the art created in support of social science research should be able to stand on its own without any context-setting or interpretation from the researcher whatsoever (e.g., Piirto, 2002; Richardson, 1994). For example, Richardson (1994) published a series of poems with the title “Nine Poems: Marriage and the Family” without any contextual information. She did not even identify whether the poems represented the perspectives of different participants, a single participant, or of herself. The only prose that accompanies the poems argues for her decision to leave out the details of the study or personal experiences on which the poems are presumably based. Richardson concludes her article with the claim that, because the poems are presented as ethnographic writing, they should be regarded as such (1994, p. 12): “For now, ‘Nine Poems,’ appearing in the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, ‘is’ ethnographic writing.”

Added to the controversy surrounding the absence of context for these poems (which would be expected within a research domain), are issues pertaining to different standards of representation within the artistic domain. As implied above, the narrator of a lyric poem is not always the author. Furthermore, it is considered permissible (and even expected) in poetry circles that any given detail in a poem, or the poem in its entirety, may be fictional without lessening the literary value of the poem in the slightest. However, there is a debate among poets on the ethics regarding confessional poetry (poetry that appears to be autobiographical), and other types of poetry that seem to chronicle historical events. For example, Sontag (2001) argues that the aesthetic impact of the poem is the manner by which it communicates the most important and profound truths contained in the poem, and therefore, the poet is at liberty to change details in the poem to enhance the emotional qualities that the poem engenders in the reader. She argues that the poet has no ethical obligation to advise the reader of such departures from representing the literal truth, even if the poem is presented in a way that leads the reader to believe that it represents actual events that have taken place.

Kooser (2001), on the other hand, argues that poets should include contextual clues or other means of advising the reader if a poem that appears to be autobiographical depicts events in ways that are not factual, especially if the fictional elements result in engendering strong emotions in readers toward the person of the poet, rather than toward the poet in his or her professional capacity. He cites an example of a woman who published a poem about her disabled son, and the deception and impact on some of her readers, who have approached her with sympathy for her personal situation, only to be told that she does not have a disabled son. Kooser argues that such instances represent an unethical breach of trust with the reader. By examining the ethics of veracity in this light, we can see similarities with issues of trust in the (prose) genre of memoir. Large
scandals have ensued when parts of James Frey’s memoir were discovered by the public to have been fabricated (Wyatt, 2006), as well as when the entire accounts portrayed in the memoirs of JT LeRoy (whose real name is Laura Albert), Margaret B. Jones (whose real name is Margaret Seltzer), and Misha Defonseca (whose real name is Monique De Wael) were discovered to be fiction (Jones, 2008; Mehegan 2008; The Associated Press, 2006, 2008). Clearly, there are varied and complex issues surrounding the fictionalizing of accounts that are presented in contexts that lead readers to believe they are literally true. These issues should not be ignored (and are clearly not being ignored, as evidenced by the media attention, the reactions of the public, and the occasional and costly recall of books by embarrassed publishers). Furthermore, making explicit the expectations that works of various genres should meet becomes even more pressing for cases where the literary work carries added authority and stature as representing the scholarly work of social scientists rather than the presumed informal self reflections of an individual.

I believe that if art is being pragmatically used for research purposes, its use and reception are no longer governed solely by the standards of the artistic discipline. It must then take on at least basic responsibilities to the new domain, as well. This is not to say that valuable art cannot be inspired by, or piece together actual data garnered from, other professional areas of interest. I mean simply that such art should then be primarily considered art rather than social science research, if it is presented without enough detail to enable an audience to identify the culture, group, products, or processes being studied, how the research methods shaped the findings, the researcher’s involvement in the study, etc. Such information could be provided in other publications so as not to interfere with the presentation of the artwork itself, but it should be available for critical appraisal in some form.

The professional standards of qualitative research require much elaboration on exactly what phenomenon is being studied. Because a high level of detail allows the reader to interpret the data and findings (and their limitations) more accurately, a high degree of specificity in presenting the research allows the researcher to establish validity. While validity is a multifaceted aspect of research that must be accounted for in multiple ways (Maxwell, 1996; Kvale, 1995), one common way to address validity for qualitative studies is through face validity in the sense that the reader is presented with enough information about the context of data collection, the data itself, the way in which the data was analyzed, etc. that he or she can critically examine the ways in which the researcher went about forming the knowledge gained by the study, and can judge the findings to be either trustworthy and reasonable, or not.

Conclusion

Art is a valid and valuable way of knowing the world. I strongly believe that art can achieve goals, particularly in engendering complex and intimate reactions to the phenomenon portrayed, that social science cannot. My position is that if art is presented solely as art, it should be received and valued (or criticized) as art; any implications for social science are then informal, and should be received as such by the audience.
However, if art is presented as the culmination of social science research, it then must either include or be augmented by sufficient information for the audience to make an informed decision as to whether and how they should trust the artistic presentation as representing knowledge generated within the domain of the social sciences, in addition to their reactions to the work as art in its own right. Just as we have acknowledged issues pertaining to quality of the art in determining whether it should be called art or some type of artistically inspired product, such as Willis’s (2002) poetic reflections, we might also consider whether the presentation of art (of professional quality) or artistic reflections meet the standards of quality for social science research in order to determine whether they should be considered to represent valid knowledge within the domain of qualitative research.
APPENDIX O:

Connections to Poetry Therapy

Many have reported that the writing process is a key component for coping with difficult situations and healing from them.

Both therapists and patients have given anecdotal evidence of how the writing process has been an important part of poetry therapy (e.g., Bolton, 1999; Fox, 1997). Other non-poets have also found writing poetry to be beneficial in similar ways. For example, inmates have also reported that they have used poetry as a positive way to make meaning of and/or cope with their past experiences and present confinement in prison (e.g., Williams, 2000). Below I identify some potential contexts and populations that can garner therapeutic effects through writing poetry.

As one would expect, the largest number of claims for the mental health benefits of writing poetry appear to come from the community of researchers and practitioners of poetry therapy. How much of the reported benefits of poetry therapy are due to the act of writing poetry and how much are due to sharing one’s poetry with the therapist to communicate deeply felt emotions and strengthen the doctor-patient relationship? While many therapists, poetry mentors, researchers and medical personnel have written case studies to show the efficacy of poetry therapy (e.g., Mazza, 2001; Tilly & Caye, 2004; Williams, 2000), I haven’t been able to find any studies in the area of poetry therapy that have been able to isolate effects due to the role of the writing process from other aspects of the treatment. However, some sources have claimed that writing poetry can be therapeutic as a stand-alone activity, such as for the Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island (Lai, Lim & Yung, 1980), and, more recently, those detained in Guantanamo for suspected ties to terrorism (Coghlan, 2005). To be able to better distinguish how the act of writing poetry aids in meaning making is an important step toward designing better preventative means for maintaining mental health as well as to make further improvements on how poetry can be used in therapy contexts.

While this study does not deal directly with patients in therapy, it should provide some basic understandings of how poets have successfully used the writing process to foster their own meaning making. In particular, many poets have related emotional benefits to writing poetry (Bates, 2005; Leggo, 2005; Obiechina, 2002; Orr, 2002; Rosen, Weishaus, & Okamura, 2004), which makes the present study relevant in informing such an emotion-laden endeavor as poetry therapy. In particular, it appears that the goals of using poetry in existential psychotherapy align quite a bit with the ways in which many poets have claimed that they have used the writing process to make meaning (e.g., Leggo, 2005; Orr, 2002). Lantz (1997) explains that existential psychotherapy looks for “opportunities for growth to be found in crisis and life stage change (p. 371),” and that poetry therapists in this tradition use poetry to help the clients “to notice meaning potentials in the future, to actualize and make use of such meaning potentials in the present moment of time and to honor and re-collect meaning potentials previously actualized and deposited in the past. (p. 372)” Recall that Miriam, Frank, Elizabeth,
Pearl and John each used the imagery of their poems as an entry point to contemplate meanings that can be found in the later stages of life, and that John in particular identified his poem as addressing a change in life stage that he was in the midst of making. Even though Elizabeth’s poem became fictionalized, she identified the theme of her poem as pertaining to her own situation. Sam used his poem to contemplate the meaning of (and his choices for engaging with) his present situation of dealing with a trying week, and Elaine used her poem to both honor and critique the meaning potential of a recent memory.

In a similar vein, literary critic Daniel Hipp studied the personal correspondence and poems of Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney, and Siegfried Sassoon, three poets who were soldiers in World War I. He argues that one of the purposes writing poetry served for these poets was (2005, p. 2):

…to speak to themselves. World War I introduced the medical and psychological phenomenon of shell shock (which was given several names before this collective descriptor was decided upon), a response to trauma that manifested itself upon the soldier’s body and psyche in various ways. One frequent symptom of the condition was mutism, an inability to speak. Poetry of war becomes the means by which the war experience can be confronted and spoken of; poetry of war, I argue, becomes an avenue for healing to occur.

Hipp’s analysis of the way in which these poets apparently used poetry as a means of healing from trauma is necessarily more literary than psychological, given that he is a literary critic. His book is an example of ways in which we might use a close reading of published poets’ writings along with knowledge of the poet’s circumstances and personal correspondence in order to gain a sense of how the poet’s concerns have manifested in his or her poetry, and, at times, how the poet perceives his or her poetry as some form of aid in the process of healing.

One way in which findings from this study suggest that writing poetry may aid the writer in times of stress or crisis is that working one’s ideas and emotions into the shape of a poem can give the poet a sense of control over the situation or emotions expressed in that poem. For example, Sam and John both used the word “control” as one of the ways in which writing poetry has felt therapeutic to them at various times. Regardless of whether the sense of control is illusory or if it indicates a change of attitude or perspective in the poet that will actually bring more stability and control into the poet’s life, this phenomenon has been observed by other poets, as well.

For example, the Japanese tanka and free verse poet Takuboku Ishikawa wrote in his journal: “Wrote some poems. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling to realize that the only thing I was able to manipulate the way I wanted to was a poem.” (Ishikawa 1910/1993, unpaginated). Similarly, poet Richard Wilbur reported that writing poetry gave him a sense of organizational control over his world during the chaotic and traumatic time that
he spent on the front lines in World War II. Craig Lambert interviewed Wilbur, and explains how crucial poetry was to some who served in the war (2008, p. 36):

During the extended World War II battle of Monte Cassino, Richard Wilbur spent a lot of time in a foxhole. The Germans had pinned down his army division in a valley, firing their 88s from the hills above. “As Waugh said, a lot of war is just waiting around,” says Wilbur, who used that waiting time to read Edgar Allan Poe, among others, and to write poems. Years later, he observed that if there were no atheists in foxholes, there were plenty of poets. “Poems were a way of putting your world in order, a bit,” he explains.

Both Ishikawa and Wilbur found that they were drawn to the way in which writing poetry offered a sense of control over one’s life or surroundings.

The findings from this study as well as future research could be compared to the self-reported experiences of how patients in poetry therapy have used the writing process to gain insight and acceptance of difficult situations. While poetry therapy programs have been in existence for over three decades, I haven’t been able to find any that offer detailed or extensive instruction on poetry as part of the process; patients are regularly asked to draft poems with the assumption that they have acquired sufficient knowledge and skill in their previous educational experiences. There are a few self-help workbooks that have sample poems and writing prompts for different life events and problems (Fox, 1997; Gustavson, 2006), but these books do not give literary instruction to accompany interpretation of how the sample poems are enhanced by poetic technique, nor advise the reader on basic skills of the craft of writing poetry to guide their responses to the writing prompts.5

Because the current study has characterized the thinking patterns of accomplished poets, the findings suggest some attitudes, practices and skills that patients could learn from poets to improve their poetry writing and thinking processes (see Appendix L: Guiding Principles for Novice Poets). Gaining such skills might aid patients in achieving more insights during poetry therapy, or may increase the likelihood that they will continue their practice of writing poetry to maintain good health once their formal therapy sessions have ended. In fact, there is even an online journal, *Poetry Sz*, which publishes high quality poems that have been written by individuals who identify themselves as mentally ill (poetrysz.net). Beyond that, literary journals that serve specialized populations, address well defined topics of interest, or specific writing genres can be found in every corner of the world, so there are many resources and communities available to sustain one’s interest in writing and reading poetry.

5 A notable exception can be found in Chapter 5 of Fox (1995).
REFERENCES


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