

Why I Write Poetry

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HOW TO CITE: Fogleman C. Why I Write
Poetry. *Fam Med.* 2023;55(X):1-1.
doi: [10.22454/FamMed.2023.756062](https://doi.org/10.22454/FamMed.2023.756062)

PUBLISHED: 1 August 2023

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As a physician, I write in the margins, in spaces large and small, between tasks that fill my in-basket, while patients are lined up hour-to-hour, when I'm in awe and when I'm drained of power. Two ideas come aligned, and I try to find space for a dash, the word "night," or a metaphor about water and light.

A poem is no vaccination or technological innovation, but then, writing might prevent me from making the same mistakes again. Certainly, I have been inadvertent, probably even unkind; like most, I have harbored bias and undoubtedly been blind. And while poetry will not indemnify us, gripping a pencil until it dents can be a step on the road toward penitence.

Writing poetry is no antidote for what my patients express—unanswerable questions we press like dried flowers into the pages of our too-brief encounters. One might wonder whether I am hiding what has been confided, setting aside my own dismay at what I have witnessed, injury and shame. And while it's true I must find a way to be present with each next-patient I see, there is no forgetting what has been revealed to me.

Writing is more than an apology and more than disremembering. Assembling what I want to say is to admit, ask permission to be welcomed, offer to have a reader look beyond my shell and attend, perhaps, to what makes me well. At times I have held my head high; at times I have stumbled. So, I am reaching out—to those like me who also have been humbled—by working through the recursive process, and trying to craft a final draft, however prepossessing.

I am offering my opened-canyon, my river-in-eddy, as a way to say I am trying to be ready to accompany anyone who is also dealing with something essential, something hard. There is great potential for healing, I believe, when we take the time to self-regard.