

Living Poems, Writing Lives: Spirit, Self, and the Art of Poetry

by Reggie Marra

Reviewed by Mary Caprio

It may be an occupational hazard common to poetry therapists that everything reminds us of a poem. The poem that came to my mind as I began reading Reggie Marra's *Living Poems, Writing Lives* was the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, where Walt Whitman wrote:

...read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul and your very flesh shall be a great poem.

Which is not to say that Marra's tone is anywhere near as commandingly prescriptive as Whitman's, but that Marra too believes that there is more than just hypothetical value in comparing your life to a poem, and vice versa. In fact, Marra takes the life-as-poem metaphor to a higher level, offering a way to use poetic devices as lenses through which one can seek and find greater self-awareness.

In each chapter of *Living Poems, Writing Lives*, Marra focuses on one poetic device. For example, the poetic line becomes analogous in Marra's hands to the episodes that make up a life. He moves from the Poet realizing that the places where the lines break in his poems are neither random nor meaningless, to the Self exploring the transitions between the episodes in her life, balancing and finding value in both continuity and discontinuity:

. . . the Self must learn to recognize her episodic transitions--- beginnings and endings--and notice when and where she chooses to "draw the line," set some appropriate boundary or mark and move forward.

Note: Although Marra speaks of the Poet as male and the Self as female throughout the text, the assignment of gender is completely arbitrary and Marra welcomes readers who worry about such things to strike out offending pronouns wherever they occur.

In other chapters, Marra explores Imagery, Metaphor, Theme, Point of View, Texture, Diction and all the rest, always bringing the device from its poetic use into the realm of self-discovery. And yes, even Punctuation becomes a tool for greater awareness:

[The Self] may feel that her life is so incredibly important to the rest of the world that she "lives in quotation marks," drawing attention to the significance of her every breath; or (at the opposite extreme) she may live in parentheses and see herself as an occasionally relevant addition to, but never an essential part of, the world at large. Perhaps she believes that her role in life is to prepare the way for what will come after her: life as a colon. She trembles to think that her calling is the identity crisis of the nebulous dash--appearing with various levels of emphasis in popular culture as a questionable stand-in for the comma, parentheses or colon—she does not know who she is--nor does she care (and therein lies her tragedy): a true identity with any one of these is preferable to the dash's ambiguity.

Unlike Whitman, Marra offers suggestions rather than commands, possibilities rather than promises. Traveling with Marra is like following a wise teacher down a long hallway as he keeps opening doors for you, saying "Maybe this is the one for you... or would you rather take a look at what's in here?" Marra, with his background as teacher and coach, as well as poet and workshop leader, offers a rich array of guides for this journey, drawing on the "integral" theories of philosopher Ken Wilber, the works of Mary Catherine Bateson (*Composing a Life, Sacred Stories, Peripheral Visions*), poems by authors from Shakespeare to today's slam performers, as well as developmental psychology, history and philosophy.

Meditation is also woven into this journey for poetic self-discovery. Each chapter ends with instructions, suitable even for the most fidgety of beginners, on using meditation techniques for growth and insight.

And if all that isn't enough to dazzle the prospective reader, dare I mention the appendices? Marra provides not just an overview of psychological development theories, but a "selective timeline" of the universe to give us a broader perspective of our place in it, as well as an impressive annotated bibliography that is guaranteed to send poetry therapists looking for their library cards and depleting their book-buying budgets.

So, like the best of poems, *Living Poems, Writing Lives* is a work that will speak to readers in different ways, depending on their interests and experiences. Is it a guide to a greater appreciation of poetry? Will it help you find new poems to write, and more tools to employ in your writing? Will it teach you about new ways to appreciate the world we live in and the people we relate to? Yes, yes, and again, yes.

Book Review

Living Poems, Writing Lives: Spirit, self, and the art of poetry. By Reggie Marra. Philadelphia: Xlibris Corp., 2004, 373 pp., \$18.00, paperback.

How is the process of revising a poem like re-visioning a life? Where do self, soul, spirit and awareness intersect in the poet's work? Personal transformation may begin on the page, but does it end there? These are some of the questions that Reggie Marra addresses in *Living Poems, Writing Lives*. Far too often the realm of the poem is detached from the realm of self, and we fail to connect the dots and see our writing in context. Marra explores poetic devices and concepts and their role in helping the self to "live a conscious life." Each chapter begins with a basic introduction of a poetic device or concept: structure, line, point of view, metaphor/simile, drama, diction, punctuation, rhythm, revision, theme, texture and completion. Marra then moves from the realm of poetry to the realm of the self, and each chapter ends with written exercises and an approach to meditation.

Marra forges the links between poetry, awareness and self-exploration. Although he does not call his work "poetry therapy," his work is certainly relevant and important to poetry therapists. Marra pays thoughtful attention to the writing itself and shows how the writing informs us about our lives. Some poetry therapists, who rely heavily on clinical skills, may not be utilizing the poet's toolbox as fully as they can. *Living Poems, Writing Lives* asks some new and surprising questions, jumping off of poetic device and writing concepts. For example, "How does the poet *structure* his/her life around money, vocation, relationship?" "As the line is the basic building block for the poet, what are the basic building blocks of the poet's life?" "Does imagery affect our daily living?" "Have we chosen life metaphors, or is the perception of life as a journey, a gift, or a war, simply borrowed from others?"

Marra writes with intelligence, compassion, and humor. If you've read Natalie Goldberg, Julia Cameron, and John Fox, you will still want to read *Living Poems, Writing Lives*. Why? Because it's different from any book on writing that you may have read. Reggie Marra approaches writing as a practice with depth, breadth, and focus. The inclusion of developmental theories and meditation practice make this book unique. Not surprisingly, a history of the world is in the appendix. Marra offers us a treasure trove of rich resource material in psychology, spirituality, history and literature. *Living Poems, Writing Lives* is not just about poetry; it's about personhood, vision, consciousness, and transformation. Marra does not think small. In fact, his consciousness takes in the world, yet his attention to detail in his writing is superb. *Living Poems, Writing Lives* encourages the poetry therapist to do the same.

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