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**SOMETIMES ALMOST DESPERATELY:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF POETRY IN THE LIVES OF  
YOUNG PEOPLE**

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Some people wouldn't call it poetry - the words, rhythms, and rhymes that surrounded me as a child. But it was poetry, and I needed it - sometimes almost desperately.

My home was filled with poetry, albeit not the traditional poetry of scholars and bards. My mother, with her poor Appalachian background and not-quite-finished high school education, didn't read to me the lilting lyrics of Dr. Seuss, the rhymes of Mother Goose, or the limericks of Ogden Nash. But my mother did surround me with the playfulness of poetry. She taught me to play with words as she pointed to my fingers chanting, "Acky backy, soda cracker, acky backy boo, acky backy, soda cracker, out goes y-o-u!" until all the fingers were out of the game. I learned the subtleties of language as I heard the same jokes and riddles over and over: "Pete and Repeat went down to the river..." and "How do you make Budweiser? Send him to school." I was painfully shy, so I needed that playfulness - sometimes almost desperately. Armed with the confidence of "Acky backy," I could engage my playmates in word games for hours until I forgot my shyness.

My father filled my life with poetry. He didn't read to me Shakespeare's sonnets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love poems, or William Blake's lyrical verse. But my father surrounded me with the music of poetry as he played his guitar and sang. He taught me that words can express emotions with his nasal-twanged tales of lost love, such as Hank William's: "Your cheatin' heart, will tell on you. You'll walk the floor, the whole night through." He taught me that words can evoke lasting mental pictures with ballads of everyday events amplified by imagination; "Kowlijah was a wooden Indian standing by the door. Fell in love with an Indian maiden over in the antique store." School was dreadfully boring for me, so I needed that music - sometimes almost desperately. With tunes in my head, I turned my list of spelling words into songs and made jingles of the multiplication tables until I began to enjoy the challenge I made of school.

My best friend forced poetry into my life. She didn't sit with me on the front porch and quote the silliness of A.A. Milne's mind, the double meanings of Robert Frost's world, or the anguish of Poe's soul. But my best friend surrounded me with the utility of poetry as she challenged me with jump rope jingles: "Mabel, Mabel, set the table, and don't forget the red hot peppers!" and taunted me: "Tattletale, tattletale, swinging on a bull's tail!" I was a self-conscious child, so I needed that utility - sometimes almost desperately. I became clever at word wars and quick sing-song retorts until I nearly forgot myself.

My gentle Sunday school teacher shared her precious poetry with me. She didn't raise my social consciousness with the pleas of Langston Hughes, the passions of Nikki Giovanni, or the reflections of Emily Dickinson. But my Sunday school teacher surrounded me with the peace of poetry as she shared her beloved Psalms; "What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee." She made me aware of inner strength with her favourite Proverbs: "A cheerful heart doeth good like a medicine." Tortured with memories of a stranger's assault, I needed that peace - sometimes almost desperately. When the lights were out or I was home alone, I could direct my memory to the King James verses until I nearly forgot the shiny knife and the menacing threat.

Some people wouldn't call it poetry, but it was poetry. It was words, and rhythm, and rhyme. But more importantly, it was playfulness, music, emotions, mental images, utility, peace, and inner strength. I've needed it all my life -sometimes almost desperately. As a young mother with a tiny fevered boy on my lap, "Acky, backy soda cracker," served me till the wee hours of the morning when, exhausted, he fell asleep. As I struggled with the loss of a friend, the music of poetry expressed my grief. When I wanted to lash out in anger at my colleagues, poetry spilled onto the page. When I stood overlooking the Shenandoah Valley, "Be still and know that I am God," swept over me.

Poetry surrounds my life. Sometimes it's my own poetry; sometimes it's the poetry of others. When I can't find words, poetry answers for me. When a turn of events doesn't make sense, poetry reassures me. When I want to give up, poetry rescues me. When I need to escape, poetry takes me away. Poetry gives meaning to my life, because it surrounded and comforted me as a child.

Children today have the same needs I had as a child. Some are shy, some are bored, some lack confidence in themselves, and some are afraid. But children today face much greater challenges than I did. Children today need poetry more than ever. Certainly poetry can't change the social structure of our inner cities; but poetry can give children some desperately needed playfulness. Poetry can't heal broken families; but poetry can give children some desperately needed peace. Poetry can't provide a solid education for all children; but poetry can give children some desperately needed utility. Poetry can't feed hungry bellies; but poetry can give children some desperately needed inner strength.

Children desperately need poetry. They need the rambunctious poetry of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky, the contemplative poetry of Jeff Moss and Charlotte Zolotow, the playful poetry of Lewis Carroll and Judith Viorst, and the quiet poetry of Elizabeth Coatsworth and Christina Rossetti. Children also need the everyday poetry of moms and dads, teachers, and friends. They need words that dance with rhythm and rhyme when they are feeling playful. They need words to quiet them when they are afraid. They need words to express anger and hurt. They need words to show they care. Children today need poetry as I did - sometimes almost desperately!