**Poetry from Daily Life: Poetry's rules and forms can help channel sorrow, joy**

By Lesléa Newman

*This week’s guest on “Poetry from Daily Life” is Lesléa Newman, who lives in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Lesléa began writing sixty years ago. When asked about her favorite target audience, she replied, “I write for all ages in hopes of connecting with the humanity and kindness in all of us.” Two books she especially enjoyed working on were "The Babka Sisters" (Esther lives with her cat Lester; Hester lives with her dog Chester; babka is a Jewish treat part cake and part bread), and "Always Matt: A Tribute to Matthew Shepard" (about the life and legacy of Matthew Shepard, a University of Wyoming student who was killed in 1998 for being gay). A fun fact about Lesléa: she has a green belt in Shurin Ryu Karate! ~ David L. Harrison*

**Poetry as lifesaver**

I started writing poetry when I was eight years old and I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that doing so saved my life then and at many other times.

Why did I start writing poetry? Frankly, I have no idea. When I was eight, my family moved from an apartment in Brooklyn to a house on Long Island. In an instant, I went from being a city kid who lived on a crowded lively block to a suburban kid who lived on a quiet empty street. Worse than that, my beloved grandmother who lived in the apartment building next door in Brooklyn now lived a 45-minute drive away.

No one said to me, “Why don’t you try writing poetry? It might make you feel better.” But that is exactly what I did. And it did make me feel better. And it still does.

I find that writing in form is especially comforting when I am going through a hard time. Writing in form gives me a container in which to pour unwieldly emotions. One form I particularly like to write in is the haiku, a form that is familiar to many people who do not ordinarily read or write poetry.

Haiku is a Japanese form of poetry that consists of three lines. In a traditional haiku written in Japanese, the first line contains five syllables, the second line contains seven syllables and the third line contains five syllables. When writing in English, one does not need to strictly adhere to this syllable count; what’s important is that the first and third lines are about the same length and the second line is a bit longer. The entire poem should be as long as one breath, contain an element of nature, a surprise or *aha!* moment, and be rooted in compassion. It could be said that haiku explores the relationship between nature and human nature.

When my mother died, I turned to poetry, as I always do in times of sorrow (note: I also turn to poetry in times of joy). I started writing the poems that would turn into my book, "I Carry My Mother," almost immediately as a way to comfort myself and to keep my mother, who also loved poetry, close to me. Because my emotions were so intense, I chose to write each poem in the book in form. This gave me many patterns to work with, and a good place to start. Here are two haiku poems from that collection:

**After the funeral**

Everyone goes home.

Alone at last: my dad, me

And my mother’s ghost.

◆◆◆

**Beacon**

Cold dark wintry night,

Who will light the way for me?

The mom in the moon.

◆◆◆

Writing poetry could not bring my mother back. But it did make me feel better. Why not give it a try? As my mother used to say, “It couldn’t hurt.”

*Lesléa Newman’s many awards for her more than 80 books include a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, two National Jewish Book Awards and two American Library Association Stonewall Honors. Learn more about her at* [*www.lesleanewman.com*](http://www.lesleanewman.com).