



Gifts from the Heart: WRITING Activity

Perie J. Longo, PhD, MFT, PTR

Marriage and family therapist and registered poetry therapist, Perie Longo, provides a writing activity centered on the topic of giving that can be done individually, or with family and friends. This activity also demonstrates how the process of creative expression can be used to bring meaning, self-understanding, empathy, connection to others, and other benefits.

'Tis the Season to be Merry but also for Giving and – with more activities than we can keep up with – Stress. When asked to contribute a writing activity, I was reminded of a lesson I taught for elementary age children long ago at a similar time of year, titled “Gifts from the Heart,” and repeated often throughout the years. I had come across the idea from another teacher through California-Poets-in-the-Schools (CPITS) called “Impossible Gifts”. With the idea that we often can’t afford to give what we’d really like, I wrote a poem about how meaningful it would be to write a LIST POEM of things we’d like to be able to give another. For my poem, I was thinking of my husband, who was ill at the time. I told the students, and wrote of things I knew he loved, but added phrases that leapt into imagination.

Wishing Gifts

for my husband

If I could I would give you a piano
that would play Bach all by itself,
One thousand spectacular dreams,
A garden with your favorite tropical plants.
I wish I could give you the ocean
right outside the front door,
with a hundred fish of every color
for you to swim with underwater
and you wouldn't need a snorkel
for you would have gills.
I would give you a mountain stream
you could listen to every day
and mostly a long life that ran
far across the sea and back to me.

Perie Longo

Students were to think of a special person and what would fill their heart, but not with anything that they could buy in a store. They enjoyed discussing what they knew of my husband from the poem. For their own poems, they could reflect on the following questions which you might also like to do:

Reflection:

- What are their favorite activities and how could they be made better?
- What is their hobby? What is something not store bought that might enhance it?
- Through observation, what have you noticed they might really like, though they may not have said it? (I remember a teenager once saying she hoped for her mother that her brother might get a leave to come home from Iraq.)
- What might be a fantasy that they have expressed?
- What might be a dream that they have, i.e. a special vacation?
- What is a favorite scene in nature or place that they would like to spend time?
- What might they need that you have noticed?

Two More Examples: (before the writing prompt below)

The following poem was written by fourth grader, Philip Bildner, which demonstrates a very sensitive child with compassion beyond his years, and further ideas to consider.

The Gift of Giving

Warmth to someone who's cold.
Friends for someone who's alone.
Being friendly to someone who's mean.
Good to someone who only sees anger.
Light for someone who lives in darkness.
A miracle for someone who wishes.
Being a friend to someone who's new.
Freedom for someone who's not.
A memory for someone who's forgotten.
Success for someone who doesn't get any.
A mind for someone who doesn't think.
Forever, for someone who ends.

by Philip Bildner, gr.4

Some years after the above poem was written, I took the idea to a high school class. A student interpreted the idea as what she would do for someone she loved at the holiday season, which develops the idea in another direction.

For You

For you, I would move trees
And make them gather to sing their song for you.
For you, I would pull the moon
So we could ask the tide to move
And befriend the sea anemones together.
For you, I would battle the night sky
To let me see you, just once more,
Even if it were in my dream.
For you, I would bake a chocolate cake
So you could eat the whole thing
And I could watch as you dropped crumbs on your big belly.
For you, I would compose a symphony
And I would leave the first performance for you.
For you, I would jump to the top of a mountain
And bellow to the sun
To make it tickle you with its light.
For you, I would smile,
So you could laugh at my crooked teeth.
For you, I will live.

by Sio Tepper, 10th grade
(in *On the Other Side of Tomorrow*, California
Poets in the Schools Statewide Anthology, 2008).

ACTIVITY: Write a poem or paragraph about what you wish you could give someone as suggested above, OR what you would do for someone you love.

Adaptation for Families and Friends

Thinking of the List Poem and often made Wish Lists, a family could gather and make a list of things they wished for their families of a non material nature. One paper could be passed from member to member. After the first person wrote their wish, they would fold the paper over, so the next person could not see it. The next person would write theirs, until each person had written an idea. There could be several rounds. This could also be a way to reduce stress, or suggestions could be made on how to reduce stress during the holidays. A given person would be asked to read the list aloud. It could be posted on the refrigerator for everyone to think about. One such comment might be: "I wish dad could spend more time with me." Mom might write, "I wish I'd have help with the dishes without having to ask." The possibilities are limitless.

Another idea that I use, which my mother suggested many years ago when I complained that our funds were limited: I write a poem for each child for their stocking making a list of small gestures and accomplishments during the year for which I have been deeply grateful, and perhaps saying how much I love them. Recently, a granddaughter said to me, "I love you more

than the moon.” Her sister chimed in “I love you more the Dulce de Leche ice cream,” which was quite a compliment. We played a game each trying to top one another.

Perie J. Longo, PhD, MFT, PTR is a marriage and family therapist and registered poetry therapist in private practice since 1990. She is an instructor for the [UCLArts and Healing Social Emotional Arts Certificate Program](#) and is active in the [National Association for Poetry Therapy](#) (NAPT), for which she has served as Executive Director, President, and long-time mentor/supervisor for those seeking certification in this field. In 1998, she received the Outstanding Achievement Award from the NAPT and in 2004 she received the NAPT's Distinguished Service Award. Since 1986, she has taught poetry for grades K-12 through [California-Poets-in-the-Schools](#). To learn more, visit: <http://www.perielongo.com/>.

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