

## The Yes of Soul

Book Review for  
*Poetry in Expressive Arts:  
Supporting Resilience through Poetic Writing*  
by Margo Fuchs Knill & Sally S. Atkins  
Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2021)

**Reviewed by Katrina Plato & Lucien Zell**

### Bios

**Katrina Plato**, ATR, EdD, PhD, has been practicing as an art therapist, expressive arts therapist, and educator for 30 years. She has worked primarily with severely troubled youth.  
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**Lucien Zell** was born in Los Angeles, raised in Seattle, and lives in Prague. An acclaimed singer-songwriter, photographer, and actor, he's published five collections of poetry, one novel-in-stories, and will soon release his novel *The Rabbi of Auschwitz*.  
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This book is intended to awaken, empower, and inspire the creative poetic capacity that exists within each person . . . [W]e explore how poetry offers soul nourishment and connects us to resilience, wonder, amazement, and the magic of creation . . . that stirs curiosity and the courage to tell our stories. (Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 28)

**M**irroring the authors of the book, this review is written in partnership. Creative writing teacher and author Lucien Zell begins the review with a reflection on the book's theme of resilience. Expressive arts professional Katrina Plato continues the review, highlighting some of the prompts in the book with her own poetry, the poetry of Japanese analytical music therapist Dan Komiya, and her expressive arts clients' engagement.

### **There Comes a Yes | Lucien Zell**

E.E. Cummings (1938) reminds us: "Always a more beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question." As a dedicated literary citizen, I offer weekly online writing workshops to poetry students from around the world, and host a bi-monthly online podcast, *Poetry Junkies*. I always do my best to ask beautiful questions:

We'd reached the end of the interview. The Zoom screen displaced Brendan's face, toggling from user to user, searching for the least-silent speaker. After a beat, I unleashed my question: "The poet Wallace Stevens wrote 'After the final no there comes a yes / And on this yes the future world depends.' Brendan, what's your 'yes'?" The poet Brendan Constantine's face reappeared as he released a sigh. All of us, a baker's dozen or so in the virtual room of Poetry Junkies watched Brendan wriggle and think. It was his longest silence of the night. "Id . . . Id . . ." He paused again. "I guess I'd have to say . . . to do no harm."

While we all struggle, in various ways, to find our 'yes,' Margo Fuchs Knill and Sally S. Atkins, with their latest book *Poetry in Expressive Arts*, have composed a powerful yes. A yes that not only 'does no harm'—it does much good.

Ranging from vignettes of case studies to muscular, and practical, writing suggestions (with insight-sparkles flickering in-between), Knill and Atkins weave a bright and significant tapestry of ideas. Ideas about poetry. Ideas about therapy. And, ultimately, ideas about words themselves. Anyone who's been in a heated argument (i.e., everyone who's ever lived) knows that words can lash and misconstrue and provoke rupture. One of the most magical powers of words, and what this book most conscientiously affirms, talking about words *with* words, is their power to caress and teach and conjure reconciliation. Examples of both authors' poetic work is generously sprinkled throughout.

When Knill writes, citing her own work, "I shall lose my mind to claim the poem," (p. 85) it's clear that what she means by losing her mind is closer to finding not only her own heart but the heart of the world. A world-heart that is hurting, but (not yet) broken beyond repair.

The ancient Japanese art of *kintsugi*, wherein broken ceramics are put back together with sap and gold filament, thus rendering the restored pieces even more beautiful than their pristine originals, feels apropos to mention in this context. "The heart breaks to get bigger." This deep/simple notion, one I coined about a decade ago, continues to reverberate in my life. Sometimes you do not hear your own thoughts until someone else says them. Poetry in *Expressive Arts* echoes this sentiment, using other words to express the very same thing. It too urges us, when encountering a friend, or stranger, with a broken heart, to encourage them to (en)courage their own hearts to grow bigger. Not to buckle and breakdown but to bustle and breakthrough.

As I consistently aim to do in my own poetic work, Knill and Atkins offer concrete tools to ensure the *kintsugi*-like potential that resides in each of us emerges triumphant. In chapter four, for instance, drawing upon the life and work of Holocaust-era poet Hilde Domin—and her stimulating concept of 'nevertheless'—the book keys in on Domin's myriad, and marvelous, life lessons:

The nevertheless hope speaks as a voice of encouragement. Do not fear. Why do we not need to fear? No matter what, spring—a world in bloom—comes back every year. When there is an outer spring, a sense of spring inside can exist too. And what we left behind is impacted by spring and is blossoming. Nature is mercilessly merciful. (p. 104)

Exiled from Germany for nearly three decades, Domin considered herself a poet of return. “When we stand still and let the landscape pass,” Domin wrote, “leaving at one point changes into arriving” (p. 99). She called this radical shift of perspective ‘second paradise’ (Domin, 2006). As an American poet exiled home to the second paradise of Prague, I register her meaning and find strength in it. “Poetry can carry a lot,” insist the authors: “What might become too much to endure in real life can be held in poetry” (Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 99).

Steeped in the art of poetry therapy, the authors introduce us to Domin’s idea, again in her words, that we are all “washed with the water of the deluge” (Domin, 1999, p. 11, translated by Knill) while simultaneously encouraging us to: “gently hold out our hand” to the miracle (Domin, 1996, p. 61, translated by Knill, as cited in Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 126). If we do, they imply, we might all be blessed with a deluge of miracles.

And not just Hollywood’s tinselly, orchestra-backed miracles. No. More Leonard Cohen’s “cold and broken Hallelujahs,” miracles small (and real) enough to give us room to grow. As the authors emphasize, “As long as we do the work, there is always something not yet there or missing, or, when we look at it in a reconciled way, we can say there is always something that is still on the way” (Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 107).

Still on the way to a yes. The yes of beautiful questions, and the answers they imply. Read this book, revel in it, and as Katrina demonstrates next, practice it, and it may help you find—or, better yet, redefine—what constitutes your yes.

### **Soul Nourishment** | Katrina Plato

Soul nourishment is my ‘yes.’ I am nurtured witnessing transformation through the healing arts.

As an intermodal expressive arts professional, I lead group therapy sessions with youth and adults in one of the fastest growing online intensive outpatient programs in the United States. The authors remind us that intermodal expressive arts work is a profession that integrates various arts, eloquently stating, “Poetry speaks not only in words but also in motion (movement), metaphors (imagery), and actions (theatre).” They also speak to the expansion of intermodal expressive arts bringing “sustainable positive change” (Knill & Atkins, 2021, pp. 49-50).

Like my fellow reviewer Lucien, I too felt a kintsugi-like connection in *Poetry in Expressive Arts*. In the introduction, the authors emphasize “expressive arts poetry as a liberating and rescuing force that stirs curiosity and the courage to tell our stories” (Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 28). This reference reminded me of a therapeutic curriculum I facilitate based on kintsugi which combines drawing and poetry. During a group therapy activity, I invite clients to imagine their personal story in metaphor as a clay vessel. First, they draw an image of themselves as a broken vessel in the process of repair, and then write a haiku or free-form poem.

To protect confidentiality, I cannot share their images or poetry, but I can share their story. but I will reflect on their metaphors. Vessels take on different forms as pouring emotions, holding memories,

or moving statues. Cracks might represent trauma, deaths, or growth marks. The glue takes on meaning such as artistic expression, self-respect, and family.

As clients write, they often talk about writing poetry as a daily practice, an idea shared by the authors. One client explained they had a series of poems they referred to as mini diary entries, but in poem form (personal communication, 2023). Clients' haikus described fragility, crumbling, glistening with gold cracks, silence, or forms of resilience such as rising again the next morning. .

In the third chapter 'Writing, Reading, and Sharing Poetry in Expressive Arts,' the authors define expressive arts professionals as "caring professionals" such as "teachers, therapists, coaches, consultants, team leaders, and crisis workers," who, "use the expressive arts with persons of all ages and in many different professional settings in the world including clinical work, education, organizational development, and crisis situations" (Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 65). Some attributes of caring expressive arts professionals that the authors include are the importance of reflecting on their own relationship with words through their use of speech, metaphor, and a conscientiously evolving vocabulary.

We are encouraged to listen, "with all our senses" (Knill & Atkins, p. 68), and find a special space and time of day to write. I recently had the great fortune of attending a Sensory Awareness retreat on Cortes Island in British Columbia, Canada where I played with one of the wealth of prompts listed in the book to use with individuals or groups.

**Word walk:** Walk outside and observe the natural world. Collect words—not just nouns, but also adjectives, adverbs, and, especially, verbs (Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 75).

Here's an excerpt from my word walk:

The rising sun's reflection  
dances like fire around round rocks  
in the water lapping forward  
as the tide pulls out.

Seagulls land on a rock cairn  
with high-pitched squawks  
startling a blue heron who lifts its heavy body  
and glides along the surface of the water  
seeking a new perch.

At the Sensory Awareness retreat, several of the participants were from Japan. One of the women from Japan, Hiromi Uchida, is a music therapist. I attempted to share the idea of the sound poems as described in the section on "Playing with Sounds" in *Poetry in Expressive Arts*, creating poems from, "an exploration beyond words" (Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 70). Inspired, Hiromi shared the idea with a colleague, Dan Komiya. I communicated with Dan regarding a poetry process that the sensory awareness retreat inspired: to compose a response to what the authors described as "opening our senses to the environment"

(Knill & Atkins, 2021, p. 71). Hearing this description, he responded with a ‘yes’ in his daily life, creating a poem made of sounds from a walk. Dan (personal communication, 2023) explained:

I created a new sound poem this morning and recorded it on the spot. I took a short walk in my neighborhood where there is a housing complex. I grew up in a small town like this one and I always have a nostalgic feeling whenever I see a housing complex. There was also a kindergarten and I heard the sound of children singing and playing music when I created this poem. You can probably hear a little bit of the sound of children in the background in the sound clip. I tried to let the sound arise from my belly, not from my head. The rhythms of these phrases were more like an ancient Japanese poem (tanka: 5/7/5/7/7 or haiku: 5/7/5) with the transliteration of sounds:

あまつときのなか  
Amatsutokinonaka

わがまんごうらいのむんなかのえん  
Wagamangolainomunnakanoen

まみいっときのまごだっちょう  
Mamiittokinomagodachou

ちゃちゃいのちゃいのちゃいにて  
Chachainochainochainite

むくむんもうのあんげんぜんをあげつ  
Mukumunmounoangenzenwoagetsu

たまおしばのみかえしつ  
Tamaoshibanomikaesitsu

くもなぎはっこうのむぶのもん  
Kumonagihakkounomubunomon

You can hear the sound clip from the link [here](#)

A final poem using the rich poetry prompts given in the book was inspired by Lucien. After reading the section on writing poetry in expressive arts, he set me the challenge of using three of the prompts from the book (Knill & Atkins, 2021, pp. 74-75) for a single poem. The prompts were:

**Found words:** Circle words on a page in a book, magazine, or a newspaper. Black out everything else. Turn the words into a poem.

**Bowl of words:** Fill a large bowl with printed words: adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs. Take a handful and use them as inspiration to create a poem.

**Experiment with metaphor:** Compare an abstract word with a concrete image, e.g. “Fear is like . . .” “Courage is . . .”

I gleaned found words from a used copy of *The Four-Fold Way* by Angeles Arrien (1993), plucked the word ‘breathe’ from my bowl of words, and adapted the metaphor ‘Wisdom is . . .’ to create this poem:

### **The Unclaimed Warrior**

Roots of the pattern,  
being fully seen  
in areas where we are  
talented.

Wisdom is like  
that distant oak  
reflecting the greater being  
that you are.  
The inner healer.

Shaman’s rhythmic drumming  
multiple beats per minute  
accelerates shifts.  
Breathe in  
energized personal leadership.

### **The Soul of Yes | Katrina & Lucien**

*A poem is a brainbow, when the rain of feelings is pierced by the sunlight of intellect.*  
—Lucien Zell

*If we have traversed the ritual well, we will be successful in bringing forth new insights on the questions that live within us.*  
—Katrina Plato

This book astutely asserts the inherent braiding of heart and mind that poetry makes possible. Stories and poems illuminate each page of this book with concrete examples of how to liberally and literally apply the theory of expressive arts. Rarely does a book, especially one ostensibly devoted to therapy, attempt to marry both linguistic music and empirical accuracy; this one does. We encourage readers to explore the embodiment of this book’s ideas in their personal and professional lives. Not only to find a yes, but to ensure that yes is heard by others.

## References

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