

## Working with 'Hands' and Living Voices



These hands have buckled belts and fastened buttons  
These hands have howked the tatties from the ground  
These hands have handled cutlery and weapons  
These hands have picked the apples from the bough

### **Living Voices**

I wrote the poem 'Hands' while working as a Living Voices facilitator at two care homes in Perth & Kinross.

Running since 2012, Living Voices is a national programme developed by the Scottish Poetry Library and the Scottish Storytelling Centre. In its first phase a group of ten facilitators offered older people, usually in care homes, monthly themed sessions with activities using a mix of story, song and poetry to prompt conversation, reminiscence and creative response. Latterly it has offered training to care home and library staff to lead similar activities.

During 2013 and 2014 I worked as a Living Voices facilitator in two care homes in Perth and Kinross. In both homes most of the residents I worked with were suffering from dementia, and I wasn't able to develop creative work with them. My main focus in sessions was poetry and song, with a smaller storytelling element. I found residents responded well to poems with strong rhythms and to songs, joining in, and becoming more likely to speak afterwards. I also liked to use objects which offered a sensory stimulus, whether smell, taste or touch – herbs and spices, fruit and sweets, fabrics and pebbles.



### **Teas and Trees**

When I was choosing a poem to read in a session, I thought about it in terms of how it suited the general theme for the day, as well as which objects, songs or pieces of music, conversation topics and activities it suggested. I also considered how it worked when read aloud, in terms both of meaning and sound. Two poems I enjoyed using were Ian Hamilton Finlay's 't poem' and Robert Lax's 'never a root'.

Finlay's poem, which I used for a 'Food & Drink' themed session, is a visual poem that works when read aloud, especially if 'tea' is spoken before each item – 'tea parties, tea pots, tea cozys', and so on. You could have on hand some of the objects the poem refers to, offer different teas to smell and taste, and as a soundtrack you might play the Ink Spots' 'Java Jive'. Conversation topics might centre on drinking tea at home, at work, in a café, at a friend's house, and you can of course make a pot of tea which everyone can share.

Lax's poem has a very simple and clear shape and music; it can be complemented by easily found objects such as twigs, leaves and feathers; it leads easily into discussion about gardens, parks and the countryside during (any of) the seasons; and could be used as a starting point for activities such as planting seeds, or simply looking outside to see if any birds are present.



### **Hands**

I wrote 'Hands' towards the end of the first phase, after I'd been visiting the homes for over a year. The theme for that month was 'Handwork', and while preparing the session I started to think about the sorts of handwork which residents had spoken about in previous sessions – playing the piano, painting watercolours, knitting

balaclavas, working in the mills. I added some examples from my own experience, and that of my parents (My father liked to sharpen pencils with a penknife, which gave them a particular look and feel), and I read it at sessions in homes and at training sessions. (I should acknowledge my debt to Michael Rosen's poem 'These are the hands', written for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NHS in 2008.)

Here are some suggestions of ways to use it as a prompt for creative writing activities. (The full poem is below.)

I think of what results as a poem, but sometimes it's best to avoid stating this in advance, as 'poem' can suggest (especially to inexperienced writers) a form of writing which requires rhyme and a definite metre. A poem can be thought of more broadly as 'patterned writing', and the suggestions below use repetition (rather than metre and rhyme) to set up patterns. Generally when they are completed and read aloud, they *sound* like poems because of the repetitions.

### *Lists*

After reading 'Hands', talk about any memories it's prompted.

Ask participants to look at their hands. Is there anything distinctive about them, eg, rings, nails, scars, and so on? How did they use their hands in their working life? In family life? In their leisure time?

Now write a sentence beginning, for example, 'With my hands I...' or 'These hands have...'

One participant can create several sentences, or several participants can create one or two sentences each. You can then combine the sentences to create a poem.

### *In Detail*

Choose one line from the poem that has prompted a memory, and write about this in more detail. For example, from the line 'These hands have picked the apples from the bough' you might write about

- where, and when, you picked apples
- who was with you
- what you did with the apples
- what kind of apples they were – colour, taste, size, type, and so on
- when you last went to this place, and if it has changed over time.

### *Yes... and no*

You can also write about hands figuratively, as in the phrase, 'on the one hand... but on the other...'

Write a sentence about something you have mixed feelings about, for example, a place, a person, your work, and so on, using this phrase. Again, one participant can create several sentences, or several participants can create one or two sentences each. You can then combine the sentences to create a poem.



## Hands

These hands have buckled belts and fastened buttons  
These hands have howked the tatties from the ground  
These hands have handled cutlery and weapons  
These hands have picked the apples from the bough

Hands to hold a pen or blade  
Hands to strike and cup a match  
Hands to give the eyes some shade  
Hands to take another catch

These hands have spooned out medicines and teas  
These hands have painted watercolour scenes  
These hands have tinkled old piano keys  
These hands have worked industrial machines

Hands to turn another page  
Hands to hoist and set the sails  
Hands applaud those on the stage  
Hands with dirty fingernails

These hands in tearooms picked up cakes and fancies  
These hands have sharpened pencils with a knife  
These hands held partners at the weekend dances  
These hands have mapped the progress of a life

Hands to scrub and peel potatoes  
Hands to cup a baby's head  
Hands to knit a balaclava  
Hands to smooth the unmade bed  
Hands to give a proper measure  
Hands to stitch the binding thread  
Hands up when you know the answer  
Hands to shush what's best unsaid



## Links

Living Voices

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/learn/living-voices>

Resources on the themes of 'Family' and 'Days Out and Holidays' are available here.

Ian Hamilton Finlay, '4 poem'

<http://www.ensembles.org/items/4938/assets/8993>

Robert Lax, 'never a root'

<http://www.luxautumnalis.de/robert-lax-never-root/>

Michael Rosen, 'These are the hands'

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/these-are-hands>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb3vKDyQ244>

Ken Cockburn

<https://kencockburn.co.uk>

