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“I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope always triumphs over experience. That laughter is the only cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death.”¹

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

It recently dawned on me that as a pediatrician, every day I bear witness to prosody. To many who are not pediatricians, children are nothing more than small adults, little humans who one day will grow into rational, practical beings with meticulous planners and itemized budgets; and while children haven't yet gained these furrows of wisdom, they are biologically and effectively the same. To the pediatrician, however, the daily rendezvous with these little humans is a constant reminder that children and adults couldn't be more unlike.

As a society, we often glorify shedding the playful parts of childhood, the identities we bore before we became the “well-formed” individuals who would pick up a screen before they'd put pen to paper or paintbrush to canvas—adults who forget what it's like to dream about being warrior-kings and queens saving Pompeii from the wrath of Vesuvius, back-water ninjas navigating the straits of Kerala, or futuristic soldiers fending off evil automatons with magnetic forcefields; adults who forget that by putting too much stock in “the right and wrong” ways of doing things, you stifle the imagination, and disbar the enchantments of prosody.

In linguistics, prosody is a theoretical concept that moves beyond the fixed vowels and consonants of phonetics. It is instead concerned with amorphous and transient properties like tone, rhythm, tempo, emphasis, phrasing, and silence, where no one rendering is absolute or correct. Prosody is what enables a phrase to become more than just words on a page, or an empty echo in one's ear—it's the uniqueness of autographing one's soul into what one says, the creativity of imbuing meaning, and the difference between paragraphs and a story.

It's a magic that Linda Pastan captures eloquently in her poem "Prosody 101":

*When they taught me that what mattered most
was not the strict iambic line goose-stepping
over the page but the variations
in that line and the tension produced
on the ear by the surprise of difference...²*

Prosody is a tool adept speakers and writers utilize well. However, it need not only be accessible to the "authors" amongst us. In "Prosody 101," Pastan returns again and again to this idea of the "surprise of difference." The tension in variation, between "expected and actual," between what was and what we decide it could be—prosody is more than a language tool. It's essential to survival.

We can all be prosodists. Children are great examples of this—lending creativity and imagination to everything they do, a deep-welled resilience of sorts. They remember events and happenstances in virtue of the stories they create. They consume myths and legends, dream beyond limits, and laugh like there's no yesterday or tomorrow, because this moment is already transcendent.

It's a skill we lose easily as we age, unless we protect it dearly and intentionally. But if we manage to hold on, the best part is that prosody is always one's own—uniquely different, uniquely special, and uniquely yours. From scribe to wordsmith we turn, single moments suddenly ripe with nuance and purpose.

Prosody has a particularly noteworthy role to play in medicine, where suffering, uncertainty, and unexpectedness are interwoven in the fabric. The narrative of illness is one that circles time and time again around the idea of actively looking for and assigning meaning.

Pastan goes on to write:

*I looked out and saw what a cold front had done
to the garden, sweeping in like common language,
unexpected in the sensuous
extravagance of a Maryland spring.
There was a dark edge around each flower*

*as if it had been outlined in ink
instead of frost, and the tension I felt
between the expected and actual
was like that time I came to you, ready
to say goodbye for good, for you had been
a cold front yourself lately, and as I walked in
you laughed and lifted me up in your arms
as if I too were lacy with spring
instead of middle aged like the camellias,
and I thought: so this is Poetry!²*

What is poetry if not the deliberate creation of meaning through intentional imagery, symbolism, metaphor, meter, and rhyme? And why can't we be everyday poets—each day an exercise in the livelihood of stringing minutes and hours into verse, full of surprise and difference? We should all strive to be like Pastan's protagonist, who sees ink of her penning where others see frost—she the architect of her own narrative.

To age is to relearn how to suffer well. Relearn because suffering is not novel to adulthood. It was always there—we were just better as children at gracefully holding it, at peace with the wild things in life:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.³
—Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things**

Resting freely in the grace of the world is an act that takes courage, a sort of basking in one's vulnerability, yet another contradicting juxtaposition that only the prosodists in us can understand. And while courage in the face of suffering may be challenging, it is precisely in this space, where we throw caution to the wind and choose to live deliberate, full, unique lives, that we are liberated and can fly:

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."⁴

My favorite part of being a pediatrician is the constant reminder of what childhood looks like: innocent, free, stubbornly persistent, and creative—each child’s imagination perfectly resilient and distinctively his or her own.

Part of pediatric training involves spending time in the newborn nursery and neonatal intensive care unit, where one of your responsibilities is attending deliveries in case any newborns require resuscitative efforts, like oxygen or breathing support.

Some days are wild, with baby after baby being born from the stroke of daylight into the wee hours of the night. But amidst the wild things, I can catch little slivers of peace—where for a time, my only forethought is marvel at the vibrant people these little lives can become. So many lives delivered on one day, and yet so many directions they may take—the ultimate *tabula rasa*. I hope they choose to hold onto the joyful parts of themselves well beyond childhood, filling their slates with the most magical, inimitable stories only they can dream up.

Now if that’s not prosody, I’m not sure what is.

“I know what I really want for Christmas. I want my childhood back. Nobody is going to give me that. I might give at least the memory of it to myself if I try. I know it doesn’t make sense, but since when is Christmas about sense, anyway? It is about a child, of long ago and far away, and it is about the child of now. In you and me. Waiting behind the door of our hearts for something wonderful to happen. A child who is impractical, unrealistic, simpleminded and terribly vulnerable to joy.”¹

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

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References

1. Fulghum, Robert. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Random House, 1986.
2. Pastan, Linda. “Prosody 101.” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1983.
3. Berry, Wendell. “The Peace of Wild Things.” Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
4. Frankl, Viktor. n.p., n.d.