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**Fine Lines in a Delicate Blur: Some Concerns about the Overlap of Poetry and Therapy**

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Introduction

I think sometimes it is best not to write a poem. That to do so, can be dangerous. When feelings become very strong in a particular way, it is advisable to consider deferring them to another person. One of the desired outcomes of psychoanalytic psychotherapy is to understand that humans are not omnipotent, but when a person is really good at listening, it can be as if they are, emotionally. That this is a felt subjective experience may seem like a pittance, yet a little can go a long way (Eigen, 2020). Feelings that could have driven acts of destruction are held and neutralized. I write this from experience on both sides of the coin. A piece of silvery currency flipping in the air, one that pulses with empathy.

There are no hard and fast answers here. They are mercurial, slow, timeless, ever-changing, made one attempt after another, different things working at different times. Bare language doing what’s needed in one moment by plainly talking about emotional oblivion, then more veiled complex words contemplating an intellectually entrancing theory in the next instance; then the dreaming heart coming into play by poetically crafting in a state of reverie, followed up by another theory less aesthetic and more raw with feeling; clinical immersion of experience, the case of oneself/the case of another; the mixing of theory, self, other, session, poem—“being this way and then doing that”—“a little over here and then there,” a psyche music (Eigen, 2011) that plays with the different capacities of humanness in a weave that fills in its own gaps through the intuition of the author’s textual movements. Poetry and therapy are beyond knowing the frame of either or both. Both taking place in spoken and silent words. Vertices (Bion, 1965) of form as a mediated expression of the baby-self constantly developing in transitional spaces (Winnicott, 2005).

A poem can be like a prayer and elicit the devotion of the mystic upon the page. One feels this, reads this in many poems. All-of-the-self as known in the moment, whatever consciousness can be grasped, feelings, faith, primal need is given to the page. At times, I wonder who is the “who” in this page that the poet so wholeheartedly trusts? I think of Kerouac when it comes to the dangers of full devotion to poetics. How many have wondered how such a psychically and physically free man wound up back in his mother’s home, drinking himself to death. I am not going to attempt to answer such a vast question, but just mark it as an urgently relevant moment in the history of poetry. To put a warning sign in front of the psychic freedom of the poetic plane, and ask, is there a time to go to poetry and another for therapy? A kind of obvious question to some, but still one that may be subtly elusive with fine lines in a delicate blur. Just a question, one to set down and think about in terms of Shakespeare’s idea of all the world is a stage, or in this case, all the world is a page, or better yet, all the psyche is an unclearly defined page in the making. An emotional inquiry of being that is a meditative action separate from its written performance, but still verbally woven in relation to how one exists, relates, communicates to the world. Eigen (2011) emphasizes the idea that we are born all lifelong. An expansion on Winnicott’s (2005, Eigen, 1981) transitional area between mother, self and world. An area that starts with a mother who creates her baby and gradually helps her baby negotiate the paradox that “the baby creates the object,” an “object [that] was there waiting to be created…”

The psyche has a body and a heart and no matter how the poetic spirit cries out with or for infinite flight, my experience is that the psyche has a very real need to limit its flights and come home to rest in the heart of another. A feeling center of the flesh that needs the mutually generating compassion of humans carefully listening together, living in vulnerable breath patterns, loving through the decoding of eyes, understanding through cryptic patience; going through all the tumultuous transformative tumbles that make great therapy sessions. Perhaps, another fairly obvious assertion, though one to be highlighted in terms of the phenomenological ecstatics of writing a poem.

To some degree—poetry-making is one and the same with how psychic reality is fashioned through the raw material of conversations, and in the case of therapy as Phillips says, a very special conversation (1993). As simple as a baby nursing at the breast—the therapy session gives a very basic and primitive care. Yet, also painfully keen as the infant crying out from the storm of its unstructured impulses. The therapist’s ear listens for the waves of psychic need that roll in from such a formless sea as the young body is forming into a mind. Screams that can feel as though they are internally crushing what they connote. What happens when the poet listens to these psyche crushing signals alone? The therapy session opens up such catastrophic intimacy in a cozy setting. If we use Freud’s metaphor of the unconscious as oceanic, then the psychic waterways flow two ways. Seemingly impossible feelings share. The poet is not obliged to dream alone.

Bion (1963) emphasizes a place between solo poetry and consciously verbalized feelings as one of therapeutic reverie. In this shared metaphorical ocean of emotional experience, the therapist can transmit a rescue boat of metabolizing feelings. A vessel to take the poet away from his drowning and return him to a quieter version of emotional reality. A boat in a stormy sea being one illustration for how therapist and patient personally build a containing vehicle through their words and feelings. Language built up by the therapist standing through/against the crashing waves that threaten to upend consciousness. Poet in boat coddled to shore.

**The Feeling of Dying as Formative**

There's nothing like the feeling of dying into the mother (Bion, 1967). When the infant has lost it with overfrustration and can do nothing more than flail about. The basic needs on the inside of the body not yet formed into coherent specific desires translate as a wild storm of impulses that grow and grow, creating an unnameable sensation that catastrophe is about to happen. The self is going to be destroyed before it has ever been formed. Worst of all, it is the self-forming process that is going to do the destroying. There's nothing like the warm arms of the mother picking up her baby and gently inquiring, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" To this sound, the soft filament of being within the baby is able to hear through the deafening pitches of his own cries. Something focuses in the chaos of eyes, a stillness brought about for a moment through recognition. The personality begins to form. The cry of internal overwhelm is a communication that elicits caring inquiry. "What's the matter baby?” Cry! Cry! The bolts of electro-overstimulation that course through the infant's nervous system are made to be flowing at similarly intolerable speeds in the mother. She stays calm. Her heart pounds. Her arms tense up. And she takes in a deep breath and exhales the tension. "What's the matter?" She rocks baby a bit in her arms and lightly hums. The motion brings about a dislocation of sorts. Little sobs erupt back to cries. "What is it? What is it?" Mother's voice is soft and strong. Baby sobs a bit more, moves his lips as if beginning to suck. "Oh, are you hungry?" She releases the breast. He cries, latches, and starts suckling. The warm nourishing milk begins to flow. A steady stream. Baby pulls his head back and lets out a scream. Mother holds her voice inside her chest. She gently brings baby's head back to her quiet mammary. He attaches again. And this time, just sinks into the yielding structure, one that gives way yet supports. He suckles and suckles, and falls into a steady chugging rhythm. Mother plops down into a large chair and lets out a huge sigh. A wave of air fills the room. She closes her eyes. Baby closes his. He is not really asleep or awake. Neither is she. They are cradled in the active rest of soothing each other by forming each other's needs. Giving form. What those needs are is not exactly clear. They are not one or another. But one and many, the system of their sub-systems together.

The above sequence is ideal, hypothetical, real and rooted in experience as formulated by the suppositions of psychoanalytic theory. Strip away the intellectual confusion and you are still left with Bion's problem of dying into the mother. Take the symbol of mother away, and what remains is dying into. Subtract baby, and there is someone with a need to die into the other. Take the die word away and meaning softens to merge, surrender, give over to, release oneself into another. The formlessness of form forming by being formless with another. Winnicott (2005) writes about such states as vital to an authentic sense of being. An early developmental need to just be with another but not be crammed into a mold.

At this point I would like to explicitly highlight a dynamic of concern that dwells between poetry and therapy. My fear is about the poem. That it can leave the baby in us too alone. And so leave the poet seeking a missed early authenticity of having such a motherly presence. One that allows for the flood of inner self to pour into a translucent sense of being, and firmly catch an original falling-ness. The poet forever attempting to self-create a similar container-contained relations (Bion, 1967), ambiguated between words and wordlessness, pre-verbal memory and word-making in the present; object relating and relationless text that seeks the object that was never there. What about a psychic plane found between therapist and poet that supports the two in co-nourishing ways?

I worry that the solo field of the blank page can seduce the poet with an exaggerated sense of his own self-capacity to repair. One in which relationality works to inflate grandiosity against the poet’s need for vulnerable care. Writers are good with words. And words come from the mouth. To speak words that are good and to be told that they are good creates pleasure in the tongue, lips, etc; also, the enlivening of the heartbeat similar to falling in love. But the object of love is a blank page. One that fills with oneself. All of one's needs and fears and feelings. Even if one is not to be seen now, they will be heard later. Even if there is no one about, there will be many later. The mythical audience looms. They are the lights of a loving town far off in the darkness of night. For now the poet wanders across barren landscapes, holding up the lantern of his linguistic hopes. They are his feelings. His dreams. Somewhere soon, someone will listen. And when they do, there is nothing better. The reading town he always knew was there and wanted to live in, will welcome him with festive fireworks and cheers. Shouts of love and commendation will greet him at the tavern door!

But where will the poet die? Why is there such a high incidence of suicide and alcoholism among writers? The concern arises that the idea of the therapist is an injury to the poet’s sense of his mother. I wonder if that is why poets feel that their poems just don’t give enough. Does the poem allude to such a giving over of the catastrophic forming processes of psyche, but then leave one wanting for an actual other to receive and process those end-of-self feelings? Poems give so much. When the therapist says you can say anything to me and you should only say certain things here and nowhere else, does the poet hear that as a criticism? While it is totally logical that grown-ups should not disclose all their thoughts and feelings to just anyone, an early wound is agitated when the idea of a paid professional is to be the one who has most intimate contact with the soul. Take away paid. And just leave poet. Why can’t we say everything to anyone? Why can’t the page hold it all?

**Poetic Illustration with some Analysis**

Jogging while it's snowing is so much more pleasant then after all the pedestrians have come and trampled it with their dirty fun. While the little flurries are coming down in all their soft magical white bits, the world mutes to something so permissive, giving, accepting. There is a distance to everything in the blur and yet it is all right there. Little icy crystals melting on the skin play musical notes of life on one’s border of sensing the world. This is the feeling of being held. I think of running in Central Park in such a snow, when the oblong circle of the reservoir is foreshortened by such a distant blur. The park seems ever sprouting with the patterns of its bare tree branches, frozen and highlighted in white outlines. It is clear that there is something more that is being reached for in this geometric efficiency, a highly complex feeling of being alive. That by jogging and being bothered by the enlivening ache of muscle and bone bouncing up and down, one comes closer. To being soothed by the loud silences of beauty. To being so close to nature with the city so present. How close can one get and still be human? Is the poet but a baby who denies his humanity?

If the earth is mother by representation, she holds only up to a point. I can imagine collapsing into her icy surface, sinking deep into the soft white snow and giving over to a natural castle of cold, of emotionally freezing in unknown silence.

When I was younger, a teenager, I had all the time in the world to be with my sensory experiences of nature. To just sit in pure beauty and watch. Never record. Just look and see and feel/become/merge into the feeling that a beautiful landscape could give anything and everything. An infinitizing aesthetic—an infinitizing natural anesthetic. Now, there is much work to be done, so I fight the urge to ecstatically give into nature. I imagine it as a container of old emotional memories. Ones I cannot recollect. Feelings that have frozen and now recall in the peripheral sensory experience of a snowy landscape. I run about the curves of the park’s reservoir, and feel my insides carried by the motion. I wonder if in thousands of years, will people still be reading Basho's sensory glimpses of nature that tell us of a thousand experiences he had in the sound of one cuckoo bird's cry. Of Basho being in Kyoto and hearing this cry, and missing Kyoto at the same time. In contrast, will people be viewing all these hundreds of thousands of Instagram photographs of this winters’ snowfalls. I miss the snowfall of Central Park when it is falling all about me. Am I like Basho in Kyoto? Being so close to the frozen is endearing, warms me up to all that is frozen inside of me.

For Eigen (1995) good poems are like time capsules that contain thousands of little breakdowns that lead to a moment of understanding and synthesis. The fall of the snow is so endlessly captivating. Its many snowflakes perhaps hold all the many moments that have emotionally frozen me. I see these frozen micro-memories gently sailing through the air. A great equality of time overcomes me with this metaphor of a snowing-present being as emotionally real as my psyche-before-words, pre-verbal me still freezing in images that can not quite be said—memory impressions that feel as real as the snow falling about and onto me. The question floating down, with whom shall I melt the freeze?

One wonders do we need to apologize to the poets inside of ourselves. Those inner creative prophets who find everything to realize that it is not enough. Eigen (1998) writes of our warring capacities, imagination pushing against intellect, feeling struggling against sensory experience, on and on, a discontent between perceptual parts of ourselves sensing ourselves in different ways, through different lenses—a symphonic war of psyche that comprises the foundation of life as a dynamic constant. This is very similar but not exactly like the Freud’s (2005) pain of tension being the driving force of life—that the aim of pleasure guides us to reduce un-pleasure the best we know how. Each resolution of un-pleasuring tension followed up by another cause of troubling stimuli; irritants as basic building blocks of psyche, self and life flow. A drive that we can’t ever fully grasp, as we are the very taking apart process of continually being remade.

A particular danger of the poem is its enclosure. It begins and it ends, and throughout, it metabolizes something indefinably great. But when the poem ends, we are left wanting more. It can be re-read, published, shared with friends, colleagues, family. A part two can be written, but in and of itself, the cosmic digestion has a terminal thread. The relationship with its cohesion is finite for the poet. For the reader, one can read and read into the words, interpret and mine them for their depths, refine them into raw nutrients to be used for something else. For the poet, to go too far with this, is to be self-cannibalistic.

Too much time spent exploring one’s own text, and altruism gets turned in on itself, exhibitionism over-heightened. More than just basking in a masturbatory glow, vital energies get sucked out of the life system, as one is using for themselves what they metabolically need to feed to others. Similar to the infant who hallucinates the breast in its absence (Eigen, 2005), a vacuum of air is sucked on, instead of feeding the reader-as-infant. Seductive smiles fade in the dark. Sobs dissipate in silence. The lyrical craft of dream-feeling perceives as an ineffable connection to an incomplete art form of a person-not-there.

I suspect, at a certain point, it is best to just move on from a given poem. No matter how revelatory, it becomes time to proceed to the next task. Again, something seemingly so mundane. Yet, in times of emotional starvation, perhaps not so simple at all. To get to the next small job becomes the hardest work of all. Make breakfast, clean the kitchen, go to work, just do the next little thing whatever it may be.

But what if one feels overwhelmingly unfilled. Like they really needed something more from their poetic production. Some symbiotic return. Is this a mystical failure, or worse yet, crisis? What if the specific psyche-world created in a given poem cannot be mirrored by explicit reality? Just a quiet knowing that something was made, and that its contribution cannot be clearly grasped let alone spelled out. To crack the ice and release frozen feelings onto the page, as Kafka says, may become an exigent threat. One may then bleed out their life energies into the text. I think of talking in therapy, and how one’s life force gets rejuvenated as though an abandoned frozen poem taken into a warm home of reading. The poet is given a chance to nourish through the therapist filtering the poet’s feelings that can’t quite make it into words. Overblown dreams that need to be consciously had by another person, one who then keeps them quiet, so walls of healing can begin to build in silence—sitting with the unresolved acclaim of the poem—with beating hearts and attentive psyches. Freud’s (1965) famous line, “'Where id was, there ego shall be,” brings dramatic interpretations of anxiety and conflict to mind as the beginning of an intense emotional catharsis. Though the deeper work is one of restoring sleep to wakeful life, the simple labor of the unconscious finding a relaxing pace of completing everyday chores.

When emotional communication is meaningful, the theory of it is irrelevant. It just is. Emotions are flowing and one feels the ease of healing influence. In such moments, there is no question if therapy is something real or helpful. The same with a poem. I think of Phillips (2012) writing that he writes to find out what he is thinking, what he believes. Writing as thinking out loud on the page. By and large, when poetry is good, the poem creates itself or rather the poet is being actively born into a psychically translucent-like container that is the reception of the poem’s making. Freud’s horse pulls the wagon into the sea of infinite-good psychic growth feeling. But what about when the session ends? The poem ends. A session may conclude and then a poem begins. But at other times, one hits a creative drought, a therapeutic standstill. The windless surface of the infinite field blows nowhere. What then? Therapy can seem as though it has been the worst waste of time and never helped at all. Going through bad sessions is part of therapy, just as writing bad poems is part of being a poet. Sessions can wrap up nicely but the pleasure-pain flow of life is ongoing: Rolling hills that suddenly fall with sharp drops, black holes that find their way to sturdy mountains of feeling inside, vibrant blue skies in hovering equilibrium with desolate plains; exposed as the heart can be to winding rivers of feeling that give the impression that one can swim forever, and then the poem stops.

Too bad for the mystics. Too bad for Kerouac. Why is it so hard to accept the loss of everything? Winnicott (1986) posed a reality insult for the infant. When the baby learns that he is not all-powerful over life, he goes into a fury. A long set of angry feelings that the mother helps the baby tolerate. Poems and therapy both blindly feel into this space and find felt shapes that let us know that change through exploring and naming our feelings is real. A kind of infinite creative space of finding our psyches in the world that is us. There are so many possibilities. And there are finitudes. There is the helpless feeling of wanting more. At some point after experiencing what is so authentically gratifying, we must suffer the indignity of being fake. Or said with less theatricality, of just being frustrated. Annoyed. Of having to be our own limit-setting mothers and say to ourselves, “I understand that was such a good poem, it’s hard to let go of it. Now it’s time to move on. What would you like to do next?”

**Case Example**

A patient I shall call B- published her first book of poetry with a relatively prestigious small press in the first months of the pandemic. The publication date was set before the onset of the global catastrophe and a book tour in the Northeast of the US was planned. The tour was cancelled for obvious reasons, and the publisher seemed to lose steam for marketing its release amidst the chaos. The session following the publication date, B- arrived to our virtual meeting very agitated. She did not know why except to say that her mood was bad and she wanted something from me but did not know what. As I gazed at B- through the eyes of Zoom, she seemed as though a depressed baby left strewn across a couch. To make such an explicit interpretation would have been pointless, ineffective and at best narcissistically gratifying in the classical psychoanalytical sense. So I held the idea and flowed with a building sense of blah. One could almost hear a displeasing noise of un-pleasure growing louder and louder—except the volume was nil. Her boyfriend was no good. Her day job was boring. Daily life had lost its direction. Sleep was terrible. And finally, she wondered if poetry was no longer for her. A declaration followed up by the pointed criticism that therapy was nothing but a cheap trick. In her complaints I felt a very pungent and morbid rage, one that took its time making its way to my person. A wish to annihilate all, including herself, seemed to be cognitively implied in the imagery of her condemnations. An anxiety underneath it all, that there was a nothingness that could just swallow us all up forever.

What was more than pronounced was that I was not to feel any positive feeling or credit for her poetry publication. B- is a sharp dresser, well spoken and very charming. One feels a kind of automatic credit around her as though you and her have accomplished something great by just being together. To put such a feeling to the side can be difficult for a therapist, for anyone. Who doesn’t need a little bit more good feeling in this world? But my job is not to celebrate myself (I think of Whitman) and gaze at her in omnipotent mirroring. In that moment, I was not to be the all-good feeling mother. I was to feel just the horrible and unpleasant mood that she had failed. That I had failed her. That the environment for which I am responsible let her down beyond what can be tolerated. To reverberate together in an all-encompassing emptiness that eats away at everything is something that B- and I have learned to experience, survive together, grow through. She has learned its okay to reduce me to vacuous quiet. And for her to trust that I remain fine, as I am told that nothing I say is right nor anything that I come up with to correct it, a salve. An inherent owning of defective thinking, feeling, speaking, doing, being. An anti-me that brings a soothing silence to the room and allows her to find a voice that can finally rest and be free enough from the demands of others and the environment, to just speak.

When Bion talks about dying into the mother, this may be a variation of what he means. A developmental permutation. Though, I think he is speaking more specifically of a blind anxiety that has no form, and that only the mother can give shape to by experiencing her baby’s shapeless terrors that verge on self-disintegration. What is symbolic death to the mother’s personality, is a clearing of the ego’s field for the newborn to meld, be and become—pounding heartbeat to pounding heartbeat, searching eyes to searching eyes—so that the little one immediately experiences his mother surviving the feeling of being overcome on the most emotionally primitive as well as somatic level. The transmission of these developmental nutrients can only be conveyed by its happening. The same happens in therapy. Patients enter the office with nameless anxieties that they cannot put words to and fill the space with life and death vibrations. I feel the CBT approach does great disservice to the dignity of the psyche when it labels such a panicky state as catastrophizing. The claim has some nebulous link to medical authority and the misfiring of the Amygdala. That may or may not be true, and could be a helpful tool in moments just to reframe the intensity of feelings. But as more than a mere facet of the human psyche and its profound struggle with catastrophe, psychic reality is minimized to something that I feel is unreal, a mechanistic fantasy of the psyche-soma at best.

Patients may need to see-feel-hear even smell the therapist undergo an intensity of panic with them, and while doing so, observe that the therapist can still think about what the patient is saying/unconsciously broadcasting. For B- to look me in the eyes and see my chest mildly heave/my cadence slightly stumble, seems to help her be with the actuality of her obliterating feelings. That her emotional state is a real threat that can be tolerated, stimulates new thoughts and allows them to safely emerge. Neutral inquiry and then focused silence keeps a reassuring hand extended to her internal overwhelm.

At a certain point, B-‘s litany of criticisms crossed into a sour mocking; a glaring sensation that blurred the line of the countertransference. One felt a venomous bite expressing an ego-poisoning of self. Framed emotionally, a stark experience of contempt caught my attention so that I felt that I could not be “me” and not point it out. I spoke to her directly, “You are being disrespectful.” Something I had never done before. Up until then, a vital feeling pervaded that indicated her need to regularly eradicate me as well as any and all institutions of authority, without any hint of retaliation. But now, the mood tones of maturation showed differently. As the author of a published book, she too was an authority over a world—over the text that she had produced. A text that still seemed to be looking for a place in the universe. A newborn baby of words, so to speak. And to disparagingly mimic the voice of my personality felt as though she was doing the same to her own, for reasons that were no longer defensively therapeutic. Her book was screaming for much needed attention and care.

A keen urge to ask B- about how her parents regarded her literary accomplishment surged; a question that I had been keeping at bay since the session’s beginning. She informed me that they took little to no interest in her success of publishing and only anguished over how few copies had sold. Such anxious disparagement from the parent is a failure to acknowledge the child’s very being. Art as an exploration of who a person is, and how they choose to express themselves in the world, need not have any financial grade to it. As she relayed her parents’ unsupportive behavior, her face radically softened and small teardrops started gliding down her cheeks, one after the next. A quiet overcame the room, and one could almost taste a new area of feeling for her non-being, a paradoxical permission to be.

When one significantly trusts a therapist, she can complain, “I am dying! I am dying!” in the language of the infant, as filtered through the lens of how difficult it is to grow up and become a functional adult. To give vent to the lifelong feeling, that life is too much, that we are too much for ourselves. Some patients get very worried when they have the thought of life just being over with. Yet, it is a very human idea to imagine just eternally resting in a released state of soft niceness. Such a sentiment harks back to the saying, “We’ll sleep when we’re dead.” The logical consequence of Freud’s pleasure principle is its evolution into his theory of the death instinct (1961). That the ultimate pleasure, so to speak, is deeply encoded in the body as an instinct to return to the soil, to have its homecoming with an original state of rest. Yet, it is life and death tensions that make up our psyches and let us know *we are who we are* and that *we are here now*. The same pressures that brought us into this world, and keep the psyche going through unknown transformation after transformation, moment to moment, life stage to life stage (Bion, 1965). We are an “I” that is constantly fueled by the anxiety of a self disappearing and reappearing in new versions.

**Conclusion**

When the poem fails, there is a catastrophe. One that can psychically kill. But why? Yes, I am questioning the very mysticism of poetry, its capacity to safely create experience and at the same time, I am validating poetry with a big rubber stamp that states, TRANSITIONAL BEING. An intersection that crosses over into therapy. A presiding wisdom may ask one not to look too concretely/closely at “what is what” in any definitive or categorizing sense; not to parse the soul out of language and experience. Yet, one cannot always be in therapy. And poems may need close supervision. Their emotional alloys may generate new psychological spaces of self that call out for a therapeutic other to complete their container-contained relations. Still, poems can further metabolize feelings that we first become aware of in therapy; the lyrical vehicle then carrying fresh emotion along and into outside vessels that are about a larger process. When all the world fails, poetic dreams need not go down the drain. One may live in the earth, in the frozen snow. In the freeze of themselves melting. Therapy creates space to vibrantly express these feelings. Gives the most basic support, so the most difficult states can be talked about and transformed into something helpfully unknown, a new word form that helps digest what seemed so menacingly indigestible, just moments before. A poem begins and there is hope like one never believed. A spark. A big bang that sets off an energy coursing through the system. A cosmic sub-system. A structuring of psyche that seems to change all the world with one’s feelings. Questions start to be asked. What words will come? Who will I be?

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