

From poverty to poetry

For our annual poetry competition we asked for entries related to the BPS policy theme, 'From poverty to flourishing'.

We present the winning poem followed by three runners up... plus a poem commissioned by the BPS from member and spoken word artist Sanah Ahsan.

Allowed to dream

My mind a seed inside dark earth
I didn't know was allowed to dream,
told none my dreams, so did not grow.
No self-belief. Wrong was my song.

When chanced to tell, my dreams came true
because I heard the truth in me.
I listened slow, not fast, to hear
of all the ways I was to grow.

Hope held my hand, drew me to rise.
Each day I dreamt I could grow more.
I found I'd cope through drought and flood,
if I just thought how much I'd gained.

And now I want to sprout and shout,
tell all flowers that we are free.
I dreamt of growth, and found in light
the world awaits, and dreams with me.

Stuart Larner



'I am a retired chartered psychologist. I worked for over thirty years in the NHS as a clinical psychologist. I have written scientific papers, articles, stories, poems, novels and plays. "Allowed to dream" was written after receiving inspiration from several sources. My ideas came from: the update on the society's "From poverty to flourishing" campaign in the October 2020 issue of Psychologist; the original article by Albert Bandura in *Psychological Review*, 1977; the Martin Luther King Speech "I have a dream", 1963; and Maya Angelou "Still I Rise", 1978. My other writing can be found at <https://stuartlerner.blogspot.com/p/stuff-you-can-access-now.html>.'

Hard work

Life is hard.
Growing up as a child
No-one tells us that.
We work it out for ourselves.

We fight hard.
From our conception,
We fight penniless to grow
Aided by nature, science and nurture.

Understanding is hard.
Do this, do that.
Say this, don't say that.
People and culture forming our
thinking.

Trusting is hard.
Friends come and go.
Our hearts break.
Colleagues betray us.

But, stop! Look at you here,
And all you have achieved.
You survived it all.
Life can be easier now.

Work on getting to know you.
Get to understand your values,
Your likes and dislikes,
Recognise your imperfections.

Work on your goals and your vision
Give your life meaning,
Recognise you are enough.
You are worth more than you think.

Work on being the best you.
You'll lose people you know,
You'll make new friends,
Opportunities will open up for you.

Work your mind and body.
Listen to your head, your heart and gut.
Act according to your values.
Work hard at this and you will flourish.

Jamie Wallace



'My work in psychology is just beginning. A former Master of the Gaelic language, I am currently studying a postgraduate degree in Psychology at the OU. Outside of my studies, I am training to be a professional practitioner of CBT and NLP and my aim is to be one or two steps in front of those I am guiding from a position of learned experience. I have written a lot of personal poetry which I aim to have published by September 2021. Poetry is a gift that has helped me handle life's changes.'

Coronavirus came

The whole earth seemed of one language, and of one speech-
When Coronavirus came.
A global pandemic, a domino rally of Lockdown,
Daily deaths.

Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.
Self-isolate?

Sure.
I've got sick pay, my rights.
Do you?
Confronted by fear, of the virus, of each other,
We obeyed.

Restrictions, adaptation,
To the new normal.

We worked from home,
Or not at all.

Furloughed and fired.
'We're in this together!'

Every household affected similarly,
Yet so differently.

'We can't live on that!' we cried,
Faced with Universal Credits and basic rates of pay.

We know!', said those who'd already tried.
And died.

Don't hug, don't kiss, don't touch,
Stand two meters apart.
Don't date, don't party, don't chit chat,
No time for that.
Keep working, no complaining,
Adapt, adapt, adapt.
How are you doing?
We don't dare ask.
Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams,
Meeting, meeting, meeting.
The Wi-Fi dropped out;
Straight to the next,
The screen has frozen.
Wine, whine, winding everybody up.
Children home-schooling and videobombing,
Overloading the Wi-Fi with Fortnite,
If they have a computer.
'You're on mute!'
We're all on mute.
Muting our exhaustion, our fear, our rage.
Why are you not flourishing?

We needed hope,
So painted rainbows to give thanks.
Clapping on the doorstep,
For posties, for police, for the NHS.
The colourful frown, concealing the shame.

Not all key workers treated the same.
As the line graph rose, clapping turned to anger.
'PPE, PPE, PPE.
Don't let them die doing their jobs'.
But they did.

And spring sprung in glorious sunshine.

Freed from the confines of four walls,
If we weren't shielding.
Sitting in the park,
If it wasn't locked.
Enjoying the countryside,
If we could get there.
Cycling the quiet roads,
If we had a bike.
With no cars, no aeroplane trails,
The trees breathed a momentary relief.
Why are you not flourishing?

Black Lives Matter, yet the R-rate gets more air time.
Don't march for George Floyd, they said,
Stay home, protect your NHS.
We know we haven't examined white privilege,
Or the climate crisis, or Brexit.
But shh, we're at war with Covid,
Lost lives dehumanised,
Wavy lines on a graph.
None of this is our fault.
We're following the science.
Ignoring the science,
Kneading the science.
Blaming the science,
Blinded by science. Science. Science.
We'll beat this together,
If only you'd follow the rules!
Oh sure, he visited Barnard Castle,
But he was protecting his family.
Look at you on the beaches, risking lives.
Form a bubble.
Support bubbles, care bubbles, class bubbles,
I'm forever blowing bubbles.
Bubbles like Venn diagrams,
They're touching,
But don't touch.
Contacts contacted by Track and Trace,
If it's working today.

Lockdown ends.
Stay alert. Control the virus. Save lives.
Turf the homeless out of the hotels,
We need them back.
Holidays, haircuts, nail bars,
One meter apart, and wear a face covering.
Or don't, it's your responsibility.
As is buying your children lunch.
What child poverty?
We've given money, money, money,
For after school activities. tutoring.
'Please sir, we want some more'.

Boris says 'More?!
Get better at budgeting,
Cook them something nourishing'.
His MPs say 'No',
But 'Yes' to a pay rise.
We want more,
Money, money, money!
So Rashford keeps on asking,
'Til Boris makes a call...
'We say yes to lunch.'
What a guy, I wonder why?!
Why are you not flourishing?

Lockdown two.
Stay home, stay safe.
If you can. Or don't.
Remember we're still at war.
The virus, our collective enemy.
The new distraction, the pharma-race.
Who will cross the line first?
He's ordered the vaccines,
He's ordered the Primary Care teams.
Any failure down to those NHS scoundrels,
Too lazy to work 12 hour shifts 7 days a week.
No pay rises. No negotiation.
Why are you floundering, not flourishing?

Tiering up as we ready for the big festivities.
Calling for our secular release,
On December the twenty-fifth.
Yet Passover, Ramadan, Diwali,
All compromised in lockdown.
'All souls matter,
But not as much as mine!'
And money.
We'll let you out for shopping,
For the long-term forecast looks gloomy.
Our nation is in debt.
Let's stop the international aid,
Charity begins at home.
An unemployment storm on the horizon,
A mental health epidemic.
Prescribe the pills, deliver more therapy,
Let's fight this thing with science.
Ignoring the social ills that infect humanity,
Fighting. Flying. Flailing.
Why are you not flourishing?

Many in poverty, deeper in poverty.
Many who flourished now know poverty.
Many with poverty knocking at the door.
Financial poverty, poverty of touch,
Poverty of power, poverty of hope.
Many. Many. Many.

The global poverty of empathy,
Profits no race for a vaccine.
But with humility and wisdom, coursing through our veins,
We can act inclusively, sustainably, ethically,
Compassionately.

Standing side by side,
Touching heart to heart.
Tearing down the structures,
Preventing,
Equality.

You might say I'm a dreamer,
But the task is far from done.
The goal must be for one and all,
Not flourishing for some

Jo Kirk



'I have been employed as a Clinical Psychologist in NHS services for 16 years and work in fostering and adoption services. I value approaches that interrogate structures of power and the accepted 'order of things' and work to challenge narratives that collapse responsibility onto the individual, without reference to sociological factors. I embarked on a part-time English Literature degree two years ago, and Covid swerved me onto a creative writing path, which means I've had to take my voice more seriously. I see this as performance / spoken word poetry, in the vein of the brave and wonderful Kae Tempest.'

White Picket Fence

I grew up in a world of "maybe next times" and
"if you're good"
It wasn't until I grew older that I really understood
The situation I was born into and the cards I'd been dealt

Maybe one day the grass will be greener on my side
But how am I supposed to be patient for then
When I lack the materials needed to water it

On the other side of the road, where white picket fences
are fitted
Around ivory towers, opportunities in abundance
Where children grow alongside their trust funds, each
getting bigger simultaneously
Wearing their ignorance like a designer jacket

Their education is their entitlement
But to me it is a privilege
An opportunity to better the situation I have been given

Further education is a guarantee for them,
With private accommodation and private travel on finance
Everything oozing style and sophistication
Their futures already near enough an empire
With businesses and properties that they will one day
acquire
Just for being born on the right side of that white picket
fence

But my mother taught me manners
And time made me wise
my family gave me unconditional love
and my experiences gave me eyes

Eyes to see beyond
Beyond the clothes, the cars, the inheritance, the trust
funds
and that white picket fence
That bright white fed me lies of achievement and content
All the while the wealthy had their own issues to attend



'I am a third year undergraduate psychology student, pursuing a career in Neuropsychology. I do not write poetry professionally and I have never had a piece of writing published, but I took inspiration from the title for this year's competition by writing about the unrealistic expectations associated with the term "flourishing" when compared against poverty. We are motivated by materialism due to the way the current economy functions and I wanted to show this competitive mindset by using language that would show envy and resentment towards those who appear to have more than us.'

It turns out that money does not buy everything
Health and happiness most of all
I still had my education, and a house over my head
I never missed a doctors appointment and I always ended
the day in my bed

No it wasn't on the other side of that fence
where I thought dreams came true
No I didn't have expensive things
but I still had every opportunity that the rich kids had too

And so I pose this statement
So subjective is wealth
And objective is poverty,
Is it measured by health?
Or possession of property?

Georgina Rooney

'We all lay flat sometimes, asking for the earth to hold us'

therapy rooms have become therapy zooms
unsynchronised lips sounding how are you
replace hot mugs passed between cupped hands
we let each other in
a view into our homes
through pixelated windows
& speak over each other
in the lapse of connection
the language of disorder has
lost its meaning when the order
is madness inducing
the helpers need helping
as death cues are coughed up
onto streets littered with
mud-stained masks.
but we keep wading through
hot breath rebounding under fabric
smiling eyes saying more than muzzled mouths
psychologists hand-stitch a chest pocket of calm
on the over-spilling hospital ward
fill it with peppermint oil
a place for nurses to count their own breaths
walk into a homeless hostel of 54 beds
speak through shielded screens to
the bare-faced and wet eyed
therapy becomes ringing every person
at the council to advocate for housing
because drawing a hot cross bun
in session 3 of CBT isn't going to
bring back your mum so she can rest
a warm kiss on your forehead
just one last time
a thousand chants of black lives matter
tear through white corridors &
slippery floors of psychology offices & lecture halls
anti-bacced hands dripping with grief
are reaching for each other
the helped are helping
the unhelped are helping
the bare-necked are guiding the lanyard wearing
and everyone's upper lip is sweaty
we all lay flat sometimes
asking for the earth to hold us
but when the ground is trembling and opening
how can any of us walk steady
we all lay flat sometimes
asking for the earth to hold us

Sanah Ahsan



The last 15 months have brought personal and professional challenges to our members, many of whom have made a significant contribution to the UK's response to the pandemic.

In November, the British Psychological Society published a report into the impact on psychologists' wellbeing, which drew on the personal reflections of more than 200 of our members, many of whom described experiencing an 'emotional rollercoaster'.

In recognition of this, the British Psychological Society commissioned member and spoken word artist Sanah Ahsan to produce a poem, which will be read to delegates at the BPS Conference. The poem reflects on the challenges psychologists have faced and overcome, and ends on a note of optimism.

Sanah is a clinical psychologist and a queer Muslim womxn. Her award-winning poetry is centred on compassion, decolonising our understandings of mental health and 'embracing each other's madness'. Her psychological practice is rooted in liberation and community psychology, drawing on therapeutics, poetics, and activism as interconnected practices to support racialised and marginalised people. Sanah's most recently published research is on the deconstruction of whiteness within UK clinical psychology.

Her poetry has been published in several anthologies, and has been featured on Channel 4 and BBC 2.

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