



# LISA CONGER

Spokane's Poetry Ambassador

BY KAREN MOBLEY

Lisa Conger has facilitated writing classes through Spokane Community Colleges ACT 2 program since 2000. Her work has helped many Spokane seniors find their voice. She facilitates the group “Write from the Heart” for professional caregivers at Sacred Heart Hospital.

Conger says, “I encourage the act of writing and reflecting. I depend on my own writing practice to process and understand what I am both thinking and feeling. Poetry can be both a window and a door. It is a way to pay attention to the outer world, and a way to process your inner world. I think of myself as a poetry ambassador. I encourage folks to pick up an anthology of contemporary poetry and read the poems, finding those that resonate with you. If you like a particular poet, go to the library and find a collection of that poet’s work. Follow your own heart’s inclination. Meander. See if a poem says hello to you. Take a poem and write your own response. Is there a line that strikes you? Is there an image that evokes a memory? Use the poem as a jumping off place to explore your own world of feelings. And remember, poems do not have to rhyme!”

Bill Heaps reflected on Conger’s facilitation, “The first 61 years of my life produced but a single poem. In 2004, I joined the “Write from the Heart” poetry group created by Bill Greene and Lisa Conger. Twice a month for the last 13 years I have watched Lisa’s non-judgmental encouragement give budding and veteran poets the courage to take the risk of writing and sharing poetry with others. Her example and support enabled me to write hundreds of poems, many about personal medical issues, with a dozen or so published in literary journals and 25 included in my memoir, *The Rancid Walnut: An Ultrarunning Psychologist’s Journey with Prostate Cancer.*”

## AT THE ROCKWOOD BAKERY

The blooming pink roses lean over their fence begging to be smelled this mid-summer day, as I walk past on my way to the coffeehouse, where on Tuesday afternoons I have a latte, and write a poem. The regulars are here: the elderly couple, (she, on oxygen) who read novels and do crosswords at their special spot in front of the pastry case; another couple, who play cribbage and drink coffee favor a small corner table or a round one near the front door. Various others come - students at their laptops, and young mothers trying to corral their toddling troupes. Cards shuffle as soft folk music underlies conversations and the tap dance of fingers on electronic devices. The espresso machine hissing and the call of orders over the counter add to the ambiance of friendliness and informality. On the patio, pairs of people sit on wrought iron chairs while dogs beg with their hungry eyes and little birds scavenge for crumbs.

Each of us want to belong to a community or a purpose,

and each of us yearn to be noticed for our individual uniqueness in our crazy and complex world. And here at this coffeehouse crossroads

we come together in a great mix savoring our drinks, our dreams, our companions, and our lives.

by Lisa Conger -August 2, 2016

## A POEM

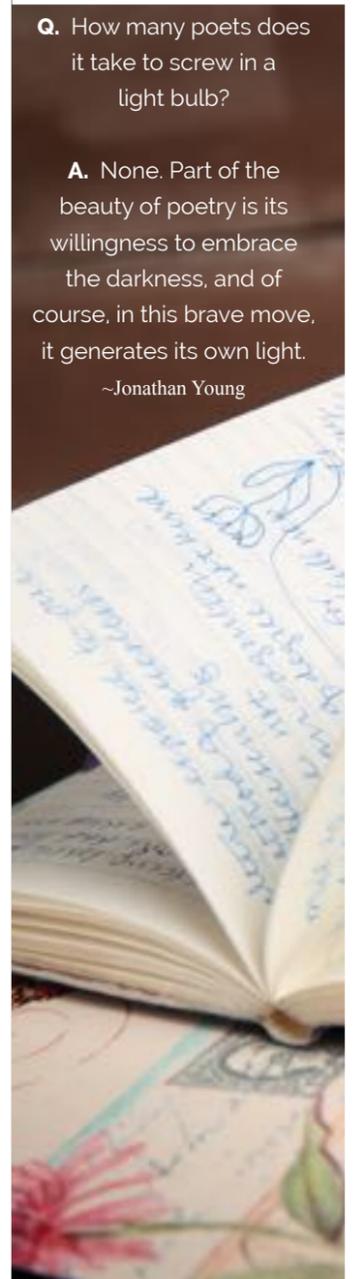
A poem is a paper enchantment performing a certain magic that can pierce the heart - and soul - to heal, and make whole.

by Lisa Conger - October 1, 2016  
Camp N-Sid-Sen, Idaho

**Q.** How many poets does it take to screw in a light bulb?

**A.** None. Part of the beauty of poetry is its willingness to embrace the darkness, and of course, in this brave move, it generates its own light.

~Jonathan Young



“My mother was a poet, although both my parents worked as journalists, as did both of my grandfathers. When I was a teenager, I remember finding a copy of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind* on my mother’s bookshelf, and being struck by the power of his words. I wrote my first poem outside of class when I was about 14. We were at a family picnic up Rimini Gulch near the Continental Divide in Montana, and I was moved by the beauty of the mountains and the clean blue air. I needed to capture praise for what I was witnessing. I think most of my poems are ones expressing gratitude or witness,” Conger remembers.

Conger entered graduate studies in psychology at Antioch University - Seattle intending to be an art therapist.

“I felt, however, that I did not have enough art training. Then I discovered the field of poetry therapy after reading an article by John Fox, CPT (Certified Poetry Therapist) author of *Poetic Medicine*, and *Finding What You Didn’t Lose*. I signed up for an intensive workshop in Washington, D.C. and found my tribe. Here was a community of word lovers and healers and I felt at home in the truest sense. Simply put, poetry therapy involves a belief in the use of poetry for growth and healing,” said Conger.

Conger encourages a safe, generative space to create. She said, “I believe that creativity is innate in each of us, but societal expectations and schooling often stymies this natural urge. Unfortunately, too many people are threatened by

poetry. They are afraid that they won’t get it, so they avoid it. Some of this is from having to “autopsy” a poem in school where the teacher would “dissect” it, often pronouncing that there could only be one meaning, and if you disagreed or had a different feeling about it, you were wrong. You, the reader, bring your life experiences and understandings to the poem. It is interactive. My approach to poetry is more invitational and inclusive. My favorite quote about poetry is this by John G. Stackhouse:

“*Poetry condenses, compacts, crystallizes experience and insight. The best poetry is translucent, prismatic, kaleidoscopic: It lets light in and then splits it up, plays with it, in order to reveal something of the world previously unnoticed, or insufficiently celebrated, or inadequately mourned.*”

“It is hard to say who my favorite poets are. I have many: Mary Oliver, Naomi Shihab Nye, Gregory Orr, William Stafford, Billy Collins, John Fox. And the poets in my classes! In all these years of poetry writing and sharing, I have sent off only a few poems to be published. At the end of this past summer, I decided to put together a manuscript of poems and send them off. Generating poems and organizing them for publication use different parts of the brain. Whether I am published this time or not, I am grateful for the experience of organizing, considering and revising. Of course there is a sense of accomplishment when you see your name in print, but for me, it is the process of writing and playing with words that it is the most meaningful and enjoyable.”

**IF YOU ARE INTERESTED  
IN SEEING CONGER’S PRESENTATION ON  
“THE CREATIVE LIFE,” VISIT  
[WWW.SUNDAYSTREAMS.COM/GO/UUCS](http://WWW.SUNDAYSTREAMS.COM/GO/UUCS)  
FOR JULY 23, 2017.  
GO TO THE TIMELINE AT 37:03.  
IN THIS PRESENTATION I SHARE SOME  
ABOUT MY CREATIVE PROCESS, AS WELL  
AS SOME OF MY POETRY.**

