

Poetry with Van Gogh's Starry Night

Poetry & Language



Set up

- Set aside 30 minutes
- Prepare the kitchen table for the session
- Print out these instructions
- Gather materials:
 - Image of Vincent Van Gogh's painting "Starry Night"
 - Bonus: A few Leaves of Grass
 - Notebook or Blank paper
 - Pen/pencil

Consciously Breathe

- Look your partner in the eyes and say, "Let's breathe together"
- Take three deep inhales and exhales together

Sing and Move

- Ask the person what is a song they like to sing. Ask if they would like to help you sing the song. Begin to sing the song.
- Begin to make up easy movements to go with the song.
- Invite your partner to mirror your gestures.
- Repeat the song without the lyrics (use la-la-la) and enlarge the gestures.

Call and Response

- Say the words below and have your partner repeat after each line
- Start by saying, "I want to share a poem with you by Walt Whitman from his book, "Leaves of Grass," I will say a line of the poem. Please repeat after me."

*I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*

- (Bonus: If you have a few leaves of grass you may explore them together.)

Create Together

- Say the lines from a section of “Song of Myself,” by Walt Whitman together using “call and response.”

*Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the stars,
Speeding with tail'd meteors, throwing fire-balls like the rest...
Storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning,
Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,
I tread day and night such roads.*

- Say I wanted to share the poems by Walt Whitman with you because there is a connection between Whitman and Van Gogh’s painting, “Starry Nights.” Begin to look at “Starry Nights.” Van Gogh loved poetry and when he found a poem he really enjoyed he would copy it out longhand. When he had enough he would take the poems and sew them into a little book to share with his brother Theo. Isn’t it fun to think of Van Gogh sewing little books of poetry and Theo reading them.

Share this letter Van Gogh wrote to his sister:

To Willemien van Gogh. Arles, on or about Sunday, 26 August 1888.

Have you read Whitman’s American poems yet? Theo should have them, and I really urge you to read them, because they’re really beautiful, He sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of health, of generous, love — of friendship — of work, with the great starry firmament, something, in short, that one could only call God and eternity, put back in place above this world. They make you smile at first, they’re so candid, and then they make you think, for the same reason.

- Tell the person that not long after Van Gogh wrote to his sister about his love of Whitman’s poetry, with the line, “...with the great starry firmament...” he painted “Starry Nights.”
- Begin to ask a series of questions around painting. What do you see? How does the painting make you feel? Guide the person to imagine stepping into the

painting? What smells would you encounter? What sounds would you hear? How would you feel in that place? Whom might you meet there?

- Write down the person's answers to the questions. These become the lines of the poem. If possible write the exact words and phrasing they use, this will help strengthen the poem.
- You may also answer the questions as a way to prompt the person. This may feel like a discussion and their answers should guide the questions.
- Once you have a number of answers and are feeling the poem is complete, you may say, "I think we have our poem."
- Perform the newly created poem using "call and response."
- BONUS: add movement as you say the words of the poem.

Celebrate Each Other

- Positively acknowledge a moment of accomplishment
- Examples "The words you said the stars in the painting really moved me," "I loved being in the painting with you."
- Savor the moment