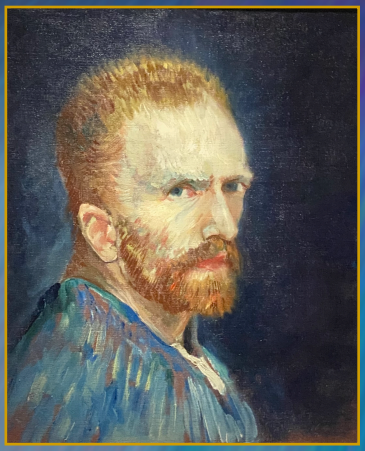
By Finding These Words

Untold Stories to Lift Us to Another Place

15 Original Song Lyrics included

Inspired by
the
Letters & Insights
of
Vincent
Van Gogh



Jerry Mills

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Today.
I finally asked
the perplexing question
that has puzzled me for years
to a prolific, dyslexic Dutch author
driving me from Brussels to Amsterdam.
“Leon, why can’t I write a book, like you?”
The heart of my matter aching to awaken.
Leon responds, “I write words I have to say.
You speak and sing the stories you have to tell.
Words I write and stories you sing are important.
We are much the same. Our stories are important.
Not only are they our stories. We found their words.”
Leon then makes an intriguing suggestion of his own.
“Maybe you write your book by finding the words, Jerry.”
While pondering his suggestion hours later, I give it a try.
Trusting my heart to guide my pen, I set off, searching for
words to untold stories of learning, living, loving and loss.
Written, today, to inspire your search for your own words.
Finding our words changes us, opening our hearts wide.
Finding the words encourages us, enriching our world.
Finding the words empowers us, even, to be willing.
Willing enough, perhaps, to find your telling words.
Those telling words to your own untold stories.
Your funniest ones. Your happy or sad ones.
Your hardest ones. Or unforgettable ones.
Even your painful heartbreaking ones.
Healing comes by finding our words.
Hope, too, writing or reading them.
Lifting us, now, to another place.
Perhaps to a healthier space.
With a smile on your face
Grateful you’re here,
now, by finding
these words.
- JM -

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do you know the stories of those who came before you?
people from your past, some are with you still today?
can you tell your stories?
the ones that you remember?
even the ones you may have locked away?

what do you remember?
tell me your impression.
how did that affect you?
how'd that make you feel?
what was it about that time that you cannot forget?
could it be we haven't heard your story
yet?

telling untold stories waiting to be told.
there's healing in the telling. lessons to behold.
wisdom comes by listening to each word that we say.
comfort comes by being heard each day.

what do you remember?
tell me your impression.
how did that affect you?
how'd that make you feel?
what was it about that time that you cannot forget?
could it be we haven't heard your story
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what was it about the past that you cannot forget?
could it be we haven't heard your story
yet?

could it be?
words and music by Jerry Mills
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Chapter
3

i don’t wanna die

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…we are certain to experience real sorrow,
great disappointments, and will probably
commit great faults and do wrong things,
but it certainly is true, that it is better
to be high-spirited, even though one
makes more mistakes, than to be
narrow-minded and all too prudent.

- Vincent van Gogh
from his letter to Theo van Gogh
Thursday, 3 April, 1878, Amsterdam

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"**B**reathtaking!" That's what we call them. Those rare, life altering moments in time that literally take our breath away. Some change us forever. Some almost kill us, too. Some do both. Sometimes, accidentally.

I'm fifteen. And I'm in trouble, as usual. For being unusual. Because usually punishment works. Or so they think. But not with me. It drives them mad. Crazy, sometimes. It has for years. How do I know? They've told me so. Countless times. Then they usually ask one of two questions. Either they ask, "Did you just do that?" To which I almost always reply, "No!" (sometimes more convincingly than others). Or they ask, "Why did you just do that?" To which I honestly reply, "I don't know!" Because I don't know. And I won't know. For many, many years.

Right now, none of my answers are working, stuck in this hard chair for what feels like hours, facing off with Juvenile Detective Richard Rash of the Highland Park, IL Police. He's on his phone, while my frustrated father implores me to, "Tell him what you told me when he gets off his call, Jerry!" This isn't my first encounter with Detective Rash. I've been here twice before, for two other crimes. Guilty both times. The reason I'm sitting here so long, today, is because this time Detective Rash doesn't have anything more to go on. This time he has no witness or physical evidence against me. I answered all his questions. So I'm pretty sure that he's playing a waiting game and that I'm about to beat this rap and walk out his door. I've finally convinced my dad that this time the police really have the wrong person. That this time I really am being falsely accused. That there is no way lanky me could have ever carried that seventy five pound, bright orange Briggs and Stratton construction pump almost a mile down the railroad tracks in broad daylight, all by myself, without anyone spotting me. That this time he really needs to believe me. So he does. He really does. He believes me. Because he's my dad. And I need him to believe I'm telling him the truth.

Detective Rash glances our way as he informs the person on the phone, "I think we'll be ready, so head our way" before hanging up. Repositioning himself and his wheeled leather chair beneath his desk, he rests his forearms resolutely on the desktop, hands and

fingers tensely intertwined, thumb tips together, pointer fingers extended upward like a church steeple. Resting his chin momentarily upon the spire of his fingertips, he offers me "one last chance" to change my story. Defiantly, I refuse. Abruptly, he asks my father, "Mr. Mills, will you permit our polygraph interrogator to ask your son a few questions?" "Of course," my dad replies, confident in my reassurance. Hearing his reply, I shudder inside, instantaneously shifting into full panic mode. On the outside, I'm trying to keep my game face on. But inside, I'm nauseous, faint from lightheadedness. The idea of being attached to a lie detector has me reeling. Detective Rash, who I swear just grinned at me with a "don't say I didn't give you one last chance, kid" expression, gestures past me, waving in the polygraph operator who headed our way, as requested.

As the door opens, the plain clothes interrogator pushes in a metal cart with a silver briefcase size device mounted on top. The shiny metal surface has about a dozen black knobs and switches plus a strand of wires and one of those graph paper rolls with the pulsing pen tips, just like on TV police shows. I'm freaking out, sensing my hours long stonewall crumbling. This won't end well. He'll attach his wire sensors to my trembling fingertips, his rubber hoses snugly around my already hard to breath chest and the black blood pressure cuff on the throbbing brachial artery of my upper arm. I'm gonna be in so much trouble. Because I just did the lousiest, most lowdown thing I have ever done. I just lied, right to my father's face, over and over, in front of this determined detective accusing me of a crime. A crime I actually committed. Detective Rash knows I did it. I know I did it. I just can't confess in front of my dad because I know, from experience, that the stress of hearing another confession out of me, after all my lying and convincing, might kill him. Literally. He's that sick. Life and death sick. Has been since he was born. Regrettably, I'm too lost in my own lost world to understand that the last thing my dad, my very sick dad, the only dad I'm ever gonna have, needs right now is another shock to his heart from his lawless, AD/HD middle son, me.

Certain I will fail the polygraph, I break down, admitting my guilt by confessing to my third crime of the year while trying not to notice my father's tears of parental disappointment welling up in

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his weary Irish eyes. Again. Now I'm crying too, realizing how badly I've broken his trust. Again. How badly I've hurt him. Again. I swear to myself, in that moment, that never again will I let my dad down like this. Never again will I make my dad cry. And never again will I lie to him. Never again! I swear! Little do I know, as I complete and sign my written confession, that our time for never agains is about to run out. Little do I know, as I'm led away for processing, how painful life will become, how profoundly my world will change and how close I will come to never even reaching sixteen.

At home, life has become even more challenging as my father's health has worsened. He's been housebound for three years, with his own hospital bed and oxygen tanks, ever since he had to retire from his job after becoming medically disabled by a failed heart procedure. Lately he's been away from home more than usual, at his home away from home, the cardiac ward of Columbus Hospital in Chicago's Lincoln Park, where us Mills-kids have visited him countless times throughout our childhoods. Last year, when I was fourteen, he spent one hundred and nine days in his hospital, where his personal physician, Dr. Jerry Nora, and his medical team work to keep his broken heart pumping. When my dad is able to return home and feels up to it, he sits at his typewriter desk in the corner of our crowded family den, typing, trying to complete a book about his life. A book about his very difficult life, complete with his own untold stories. A book about two subjects he is both familiar with and knowledgable about, joy and pain. He's chosen a perfect title, *I'm So Happy, I Hurt*.

Being fifteen and in trouble, I hurt, too. But not because I'm happy. Not at all. So I let people know. Because pain *sucks*. Especially pain from so deep down that you can't possibly know the source. Or find the cause. Because you buried it away so long ago. When it was too much pain, much too soon. So you won't discover it. Or uncover it. Or begin to recover from it. For a very, very long time. Pain that messes with your head for a lifetime, leaving you wondering why. Why am I confused? Why do I feel like such a freak? Why am I so unsure of myself? Why do I feel so alone? Questions which hounded me for years.

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I have no clue what my old man is writing up in our family den above me. I'm stuck down here, in our boy's basement bedroom, lost in my own lost world. In trouble, again. And, now, on probation. Usually, I stay out of people's way by getting as far away from home as I can. Leaving isn't an option today, though, since I'm grounded and under strict orders to "stay in your room until it's clean," the never ending battle between many teens and their parents. Being stuck in my room today, of all days, is driving me crazy because a bunch of new, non trouble making friends are meeting up soon at Moraine Park. Plus it's a sunny day in Spring, even if it is still a bit cold.

As I'm reluctantly cleaning my closet, I find a pair of road biking gloves I thought I'd lost. Trying them on and happy they fit, I feel a rush of adrenalin as I begin mentally calculating the distance to the park, my riding speed and the grade of the mostly uphill ride to estimate how long I could be gone before anyone would find out. My bike gives me wings. Plus, there will be cute girls there, even if I do get super nervous around them. An instant later, with zero planning, lured on by the opportunity to hang out with these new friends, I change my clothes, tie on my shoes and climb out my bedroom window, sneaking, undetected, along the side of our white stucco house, past the rows of lilac bushes, across our back lawn, onto our cobblestone back porch and in through the side door of our attached single car garage.

Grabbing the handlebars of my burgundy 10 speed Schwinn Continental road bike, I roll it quickly out the open overhead door onto our side lawn, avoiding the *crunching* sound of my tires on our gravel driveway. Reaching the public sidewalk, I launch my body onto my bike, both feet landing squarely in my toe clips, cranking first on my right pedal and then my left with all I've got, into my street, Lilac Lane. But only for twenty yards, to the corner. Then a sharp 120 degree left turn onto my escape route, Windsor Rd. Once I pass the Benasi's house, I'm out of sight, scot free. I never look back.

Pedaling for all I'm worth, I eventually arrive at Morraine Park, triumphantly and defiantly out of breath. To my surprise, I'm greeted by cheers since teams are being chosen for a game of co-ed

Clincher, or “Chicago Ball,” a cool softball game using a 16” diameter ball with no baseball gloves required. One more player, me, will even up the teams. If I’ll play. So I ditch my bike and join in. I’ve been playing Clincher since I was little and love it. I’m also pretty good at it.

After a few action packed innings, our game is interrupted when a generous classmate arrives carrying full buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken for us all to share. By now, we’ve worked up an appetite, so someone suggests we look for a shaded place to rest where we can eat and relax. As the dozen and a half of us head down the designated gravel beach trail, we reach a wooden staircase and descend down onto a long, wooden footbridge. The bridge is probably six feet wide from handrail to handrail, maybe sixty feet long, constructed of large wooden timbers, crossing a deep ravine, connecting the park above, by way of this trail, to our City of Highland Park, Illinois Public Moraine Beach at Lake Michigan, farther down the trail beyond.

The bridge is shaded by the limbs and budding branches of the many large white and red oak, sugar maple and basswood trees lining the hills and banks of the ravine. Beneath the trees is a perfect spot for us all to rest, hang out and enjoy our food. “Moraine” Park is an apt name for this place as the word means, “a mass of rocks and sediment carried and deposited by a glacier, typically at its edges or extremity.” Hence, the deep canyon like ravine below. Hence the steep rugged, rocky nature of this beautiful spot. With the afternoon breeze on this Spring Sunday keeping the chill in the air, as we settle in for more food and more fun. No one has any idea something horrifying is about to happen. Not even me. Which is strange.

Impulsively, I just do it. No drugs involved. No liquor involved. No depression. Quite the opposite. Being with these new fun-loving, non troublemaking friends feels exhilarating. Almost like a drug. All it takes is me and my “do it before you think about it” mind. I don’t plan it. I don’t even ponder it for a split second. I just do it.
Before anyone can stop me, I hoist my lanky body up onto the flat wooden surface of the bridge hand rail. The balance beam like, five inch wide wooden surface of the handrail of the six foot wide

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footbridge we're all hanging out on. This bridge crossing the forty foot deep ravine below. I don't know that yet. Suddenly, I'm up here, balancing, trying not to look down but straight ahead. If anyone tries to grab me it will end in catastrophe. But they don't. I move too fast. I'm already up here, knees bent, reaching out my arms to feel for my balance. Some of the guys nearby shout and plead "Get down, Jerry!" One even substitutes "You idiot!" for my name, for emphasis. Humiliated at being yelled at in front of all these other teens, especially the cute girls, I jump back down onto the bridge, the flush of anger and embarrassment already burning red in my face.

Not one to stand down when someone is yelling at me, I react. "I'll show you," I think to myself, hoisting my body back up on top of the railing. Once again, people are shouting and freaking out. With my left arm suspended above the bridge deck, my right arm, complete with a half eaten chicken leg clutched in my right hand, stretches out over the void and the deep chasm below. After softening my knees and steadying my balance, I walk. Left foot. Then right. Then left. Then, in one spit second, I stumble, my body shudders, my balance shifts and my adrenalin skyrockets as I sense myself falling. Into thin air. Off the bridge rail. There's an instant of "Oh my God!" and voices screaming before my tall body slams violently into the solid ground far below, hands first, then arms then chest then head, my limbs fracturing, my body crumbling, my lung collapsing, my spirit exploding into a field of fully activated, brilliantly illuminating consciousness. Unconsciousness?

Now, I'm looking down. But what am I looking at. Me? Wait. What? Is that me down there on that patch of dirt by that big boulder beside that stream flowing underneath that bridge. The wooden bridge I was just balancing on. The bridge full of shouting, panicking teenagers. Hey that's my new friends. But this is freaky. Why are they screaming for help? Why are they sliding down into that ravine trying to reach that *body*? Is that *me*? *What's* going on? Is that *me* down there? And if that *is* me, *why* am I not *worried*?

In a flash, unspeakable and unbearable pain jolts through my limbs like high voltage as I regain communication with my body. The

violence of my impact breaks both of my arms, shatters my right wrist, fractures my pelvis, collapses my right lung, causing bleeding into my airway, and injures my lower lumbar vertebrae.
Overwhelmed by shock, then by panic, writhing in my traumatic stupor, I moan out feebly - hhellllp! - just as people frantically and frenetically appear at my side shouting “Don’t touch him,” “Don’t move him, or you’ll hurt him!” and “God, what are we gonna do?!” to one another… while others are yelling to the people in the park, above, “Help! HELP! Somebody go for help! We need help! Please hurry!”

Mike O’Shea, one of my new take action friends, removes his dark blue spring jacket and slides it, carefully, beneath my head, keeping my neck and spine aligned. The longer we wait, the worse I feel. Pain. Everywhere. Nausea. Coughing up blood on Mike’s jacket. Hard to breathe. Overwhelming fear of impending doom. I have no idea what has just happened, why I’m in so much pain, why I’m coughing up my own blood or why it’s getting harder to breathe. I just know I’m scared. Because if I can’t breathe, I’m gonna die. And God, I don’t wanna die!

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