AUTHORITY MAGAZINE

Meet The Disruptors: Howard Kern of ShiftPoetry On The Three Things You Need To Shake Up Your Industry

I want everyone to be their own best advocate. That means shining in the light of their own words. The moniker "ShiftPoetry" is all about disruption, namely, shifting to a better place. I am a strong advocate of self-improvement. I believe that ShiftPoetry is my best tool to help make the world a better place for all people.

As a part of our series about business leaders who are shaking things up in their industry, I had the pleasure of interviewing Howard Kern.

Howard Kern is a corporate lawyer. He earned his JD with High Honors from Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law and was an editor of and published author for the Cardozo Law Review. He also has a BA in Business Administration from Rutgers College.

Until 2015, Howard's writing focused primarily on the law and his legal practice. During his career, he wrote articles on other topics and even authored an award-winning short story. However, his career focus changed in 2016 when he was diagnosed with cancer for a second time. Unable to recruit the support of his family members with respect to his decision to decline Western medicine, Howard radically changed his diet, discovered yoga and spirituality, and, most importantly, found that writing, especially in a poetic form, provided him with the missing support.

Through his writing, Howard has learned to navigate from dark places to feelings of calmness and serenity. Howard's self-help treatment was the progenitor of ShiftPoetry™, an approach to writing that generates a positive experience that can support its users as they deal with the sometimes-challenging realities of life. He remains a practicing attorney, but his primary focus has gone from corporate law to ShiftPoetry. He is proud that, along with Barbara Ligeti, they are helping people as they continue to write fervently, both for personal and universal healing.

Howard met Barbara, a media entrepreneur, and coach, on a Kundalini Yoga Retreat to Vietnam. They spent many hours together both on the bus and at meals and discovered that they shared many of the same interests, including writing and helping others. They co-created ShiftPoetry based on Howard's way of writing himself "happy, healthy and whole." They became writing partners and have published "SHIFTPOETRY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 — An Anthology of Healing Poems and a Workbook to Help You To Write Yourself Well" and are about to publish Volume 2 in their series of workbooks "POETRY WITHOUT PANTS — Written When Nobody's Looking."

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your "backstory"? What led you to this particular career path?

I was a lawyer. When I was younger, I took a very traditional path. I went to law school, got married, bought the house in the burbs, had two kids, and even became a shareholder in a large international law firm. My life was on autopilot. The thing that changed to me was illness. First others, and then ultimately my own. I watched my mom and two friends succumb to disease. My mom died from breast cancer; my best friend from ALS, and another close friend from cancer. During this time, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I had a prostatectomy. Prior to the operation to remove my prostate, I started writing. I had a traditional view of God and thought that by demonstrating my value and helping others, God would keep me around. I wrote aspirational thoughts on my Facebook page. People started to look forward to my words every day. Life returned to normal for me after a while. However, the other people that were ill died. The funny thing is that the thing that hit me the most was the death of my dog. I wailed like I had lost my lover. In a sense, she was my main support system. Life seemed to be good and I did a lot of traveling with my wife and family. This all occurred between 2010 and 2015. My prostatectomy was in May 2013. In September 2016, I was again diagnosed with prostate cancer. This time I did not follow my doctors' advice but instead chose a more holistic approach. My wife objected and lobbied my family to get me to accept Western medicine. It did not work. I chose exercise, a vegetarian diet, yoga and lots of talk therapy. My choices and my wife's unwillingness to support them and even declare war on them led to the dissolution of our marriage, a process that is continuing today. At this time, my view of the Universe started to evolve. I looked at life with a more curious eye. I could no longer just be an attorney. I wanted more out of life. My therapist believes that this was a result of my diagnosis as well as the losses I suffered. I do not know. I started writing to help me accept life. I no longer wanted to fight, I wanted to live. Writing helped me to reframe my life so that I was better equipped to see the good. In March 2018, I met my partner Barbara Ligeti. I was traveling alone as was she. My wife chose not to go on a particular trip because she and I were having marital issues and she also felt it was more important for her to get the days in as a substitute teacher to preserve our health insurance. Barbara witnessed my "bibliotherapy," namely, writing for health, and she and I packaged it into ShiftPoetry. This process has not only helped me deal with cancer and the dissolution of a long-term marriage, but also provides others with a way to access buried feelings. I love talk therapy, but it is not available all the time and is too expensive for many to access. ShiftPoetry is a therapeutic tool that is available to all. We have written books to share the process and hold regular workshops. We are focused at "improving people's lives one stanza at a time."

Can you tell our readers what it is about the work you're doing that's disruptive?

We stir people's emotions. We ask people to leave their egos at the door and write from the heart. We tell them that whatever they say is "perfect." It is very challenging for people to be honest and/or take responsibility for their lives. It is much easier to be a victim and blame others. Like EST and later the Forum, we ask people to be honest, but in a much gentler manner. Other than cruel acts, like separating children from their families, there are not many other acts as disruptive as asking people to be honest. Our methodology is not about writing about the same things over and over again like a broken record. We tell people that they are the writer, producer, director, lead actor, and extras in their own life. We ask them to write the screenplay that they would want to live, not the one they necessarily are living. It is amazing to be present and hear people take ownership of their stories in their own words.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I think early on, I believed that ShiftPoetry was the cure-all for everyone. Barbara would be responsible for filling the workshops. She also shared my beliefs and would convince people to come. Some of the early workshops were filled with people that had never gone to therapy or even come close to personal honesty. We had one workshop where a woman, whom Barbara had convinced to come, led an uprising and caused people to leave the workshop instead of write personal poems. Looking back, it was funny to witness a woman talk about how she didn't need any workshop when what she needed was intensive therapy. She created an atmosphere in that room that was toxic for all and closed people's hearts. That session taught me that we had to populate the room with people that wanted to be there and not let my ego get into the process. We have not had any additional experiences like that one in over two years. It is funny to look back at how disruptive ShiftPoetry can be for some, but it was scary at the time since we were first starting out.

We all need a little help along the journey. Who have been some of your mentors? Can you share a story about how they made an impact?

My main mentor is my partner, Barbara. I like to think of her as Ray Kroc and me as the McDonalds brothers. Instead of asking "why," she asks "why not." My other mentors have been two close friends that I have had for years, Michael Even, a retired private equity executive, and Jeffrey Hollander, a retired attorney from the insurance world. They are not friends with each other and are very different. Mike is a loving husband and father who sees himself as a libertarian. Jeff is a single gay man who identifies as a conservative republican longing for the pre-Reagan Republican party. Both have encouraged me to follow my passion and have helped me to temper the business and to honestly reflect on the opportunity as well as the choices I make. Mike has never tried ShiftPoetry nor do I believe he needs to. He is in touch with his emotions but is not a touchy guy. Jeff is an active participant and is part of our executive team. His transformation from skeptic to evangelist of ShiftPoetry has reinforced my belief that Barbara and I are on the right path. Like McDonald's we have our own special sauce that has been developed via collaboration and openness to occasional discomfort.

In today's parlance, being disruptive is usually a positive adjective. But is disrupting always good? When do we say the converse, that a system or structure has 'withstood the test of time'? Can you articulate to our readers when disrupting an industry is positive, and when disrupting an industry is 'not so positive'? Can you share some examples of what you mean?

We are living in a time when our Democracy is being challenged. People want to be led and not lead and are willing to follow false prophets. We have witnessed a President that has committed actions on a daily basis that would have led to his termination in any private corporation. Our values have been tested. But that's good. We ostensibly will have our first female Vice President and we as a nation have been forced to look at who we are. Disruption only exists with complacency. When companies only offer what their machines can manufacture instead of what people need, they die. I have witnessed these phenomena many times, from Wang computers to the 8-Track players. Progress is very hard to contain. However, it is the disrupters that are responsible for changes that ultimately will save our environment and lead to a better tomorrow. In my mind, today's corporate disrupters are Howard Schultz, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos. They have changed the way we do things and have forced other companies to either change their methods or join Wang Computers in the archives of history. In politics, we also have disrupters, from Donald Trump to Bernie Sanders to AOC. I may not agree with these people, but they have forced this nation to either embrace our history or accept it and change it. With ShiftPoetry, I want to challenge people to better themselves in their own poetic voices. ShiftPoetry is "writing without rules;" a definition of poetry espoused by the Nation's 22nd Poet Laureate. Phil Knight, another disrupter and the founder of Nike said "if you can walk, you can run." We say, "if you can read, you can write." Again, borrowing from Nike, "Just Do It."

Can you share 3 of the best words of advice you've gotten along your journey? Please give a story or example for each.

These are great questions. Now I know how politicians feel when they are asked a question and then change the subject. The first story that comes to mind has to do with a friend of mine. She is 81 years old and has experienced a lot of personal loss from the death in an apparent murder-suicide of her daughter at 19 years old to breast cancer. She has told me to continue to be brave and not look backwards. She is a living example of that. She literally has a permanent smile painted on her lips. Another involves one of my best friends, Mike. Mike has always supported me and told me that I am brave for making the decisions that I have made. He tells me that he is not sure that he would be able to make the same decisions under the same circumstances. He also has told me that it is important to follow my heart and not just grab the low-hanging fruit. That is why I am focused on ShiftPoetry and not law. I prefer to be a disrupter and a recovering lawyer. The last words of wisdom that I can think of came from my partner, Barbara Ligeti, a serial disrupter. She has told me to just breathe and ask myself "what do I hope to accomplish via my choices?" I write about esoteric topics and a calmer life-style. These are beliefs that I have and strive for. But I am not there yet. I said to a young friend who said he knows everything, that even at 95 he will still be looking for the answers. My personal belief which came from another friend, Jessica, is that once we have all the answers, we no longer have any purpose. I will continue to stir the hornets' nest so that all people can seek their purpose in life.

We are sure you aren't done. How are you going to shake things up next?

We are going to be licensing ShiftPoetry to others so that we can go wide. We also are going to pump out more books in our ShiftPoetry Collection. We just sent Volume 2 to the printer and are already working on our next book. We also have another book, which I wrote, titled *Walking with Kerry*, which should be available in the next year. Barbara and I believe that anything is possible, it just starts one step at a time. Barbara's daughter, a successful MFT, once said that our Workbook should be in every therapist's office in the US. That was a good start. Now we are looking at other countries as well to share ShiftPoetry and our vision of a better world.

Do you have a book, podcast, or talk that's had a deep impact on your thinking? Can you share a story with us? Can you explain why it was so resonant with you?

A book that changed my life was Anita Moorjani's *There is Always Time to Die.* Ms. Moorjani writes about her personal experience of facing death and then choosing to live. I highlighted everything in the book that resonated with me, and found that by the time I was finished, the pages were all yellow. Her thesis was that this life is about love and is our playground. I embraced her mantra and try to live accordingly. Life is too long to be complacent. It is much more fun to just be. One of the best things that I have done as a co-founder of ShiftPoetry is that I have given a platform for others to share their voices. In both our first book, *ShiftPoetry in the Time of COVID-19*, and our second book, *Poetry without Pants*, *Written When Nobody's Looking,* we have included poems by almost thirty unknown authors per book, giving them a chance to shine in their own lights. Life is a game for all and whether you win or lose is not up to anyone but yourself. ShiftPoetry is going to shake up people's lives so that they can see themselves in the best light, even if that means poor fluorescent lighting.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

The Armour Hot Dogs Commercial. "What kind of kids eat Armour hot dogs, fat kids, skinny kids, kids who climb on rocks, tough kids, sissy kids, even kids with chicken pox love hot dogs … the dogs kids love to bite." For me, that song is all about acceptance. It is not telling people that they have to be a certain way; it is saying that it's all good. We all are good. At ShiftPoetry, we say "We all are perfectly imperfect." Life is a smorgasbord that has something to offer everyone. I want everyone to be able to feast on life however that looks for them.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

I think that ShiftPoetry is the answer. I want everyone to be their own best advocate. That means shining in the light of their own words. The moniker "ShiftPoetry" is all about disruption, namely, shifting to a better place. I am a strong advocate of self-improvement. I believe that ShiftPoetry is my best tool to help make the world a better place for all people.

How can our readers follow you online?

Our website is Shiftpoetry.com. My Instagram account is Shiftpoetry2020. As ShiftPoetry grows and we expand our base, I hope to add more access points so that I can continue to disrupt the world in a positive way.