

Risking Intensity

IF THERE WERE NO POETRY ON ANY DAY IN THE WORLD, POETRY WOULD BE INVENTED THAT DAY. FOR THERE WOULD BE AN INTOLERABLE HUNGER. AND FROM THAT NEED, FROM THE RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN OURSELVES AND AMONG OURSELVES AS WE WENT ON LIVING, AND FROM EVERY OTHER EXPRESSION OF MAN'S NATURE, POETRY WOULD BE—I CANNOT HERE SAY INVENTED OR DISCOVERED—POETRY WOULD BE DERIVED. AS RESEARCH SCIENCE WOULD BE DERIVED, IF THE ENERGIES WE NOW BEGIN TO KNOW REDUCED US TO A FEW PEOPLE, RUBBING INTO LIFE A LITTLE FIRE.

MURIEL RUKEYSER, *THE LIFE OF POETRY*

In general, teachers are not expected to lay bare their hearts in the classroom. Most students—and I was one of these—have little access to their teachers' emotions. They don't picture us in mourning, in love, in doubt, fighting with our parents and children, excited about vacations. They're even amazed when they catch us buying groceries or going to the movies. If

we stop to brush away tears while reading aloud Virginia Woolf's suicide note, their initial reaction is acute embarrassment. So is ours—and perhaps we resolve never to run such a risk again.

Poets, on the other hand, are expected to give voice to what they feel. Galway Kinnell, whose poems reflect a struggle to be honest about the heart's affections, offers the age-old justification for doing this: "The more deeply, truly personal your poem, the more likely it will be universal, touching a level in the psyche where we're all the same."¹

But what if both teacher and student are afraid to be touched? Then we are also likely to be afraid of poetry.

Add to this fear the fact that poetry was initially presented to many of us as something to "tear apart" in order to find the single correct "hidden meaning" possessed by the teacher, and it's hardly surprising if we distrust it. Even though we now know the answers to "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Or perhaps we feel as we often do about being parents: "I'm not going to make the same mistakes. . . ." A tall order! No wonder we steer clear of poetry.

I'm a teacher; we're supposed to have answers. To what a poem means; to whether it's great or merely good; to why we should read poetry at all; to what's on the next test, where we are going, and where we have been. But I'm also a poet; and poetry, as Lucille Clifton has said, is all about questions. These past ten years of writing poems have often forced me to question what I used to believe were perfectly good answers.

Which seems to me like a fine reason to write poetry. And it certainly makes teaching poems easier—not feeling that you have to have all the answers. I'm repeatedly struck by what wonderfully *unanswerable* questions a good poem asks our minds to entertain.

The mind, though we tend to forget this, is also the nervous system. So poetry speaks to the body. And this is probably another source of our discomfort with it. The body is no more acceptable in our classrooms than the emotions or the unanswerable question. The body was made to sit quietly at a desk and take notes. But once you begin writing poems and rediscover your five senses, your nerves, the way your pulse races and your hands get cold with excitement when images start to emerge on the page and a blurred memory comes suddenly into focus, you may find yourself struggling with a whole new vision of what you want the classroom to be.

My vision expanded further when I began giving workshops in elementary schools. It was only when my senior poetry class insisted, after visiting

our first graders, “We gotta have a rabbit!” that I knew a moment’s hesitation.

So here we are in class with no feelings, no body, no unanswerable questions, no rabbit—and no time. How, in our daily rush to cover the texts, to prepare for tests, to prepare for college, can we possibly make a quiet space inside our students and ourselves where we can be touched, where we can receive or create a poem on breath, pulse, and nerves? Where we can entertain unanswerable questions.

Reading and writing poems can help us discover profound truths we didn’t realize we knew. It can waken our senses and empathy, so we really begin to see a new world. It can help us to know ourselves better. And offer solace for the pain of that self-knowledge. But no quick worksheet or training in writing analytical essays can make this happen; nor can the fear of a test or the desire for college acceptance or a better job motivate our students to open themselves to the muse.

I think we all suspect, in our heart of hearts, that the enjoyment of poetry has something to do with our capacities for dreaming, remembering, and play. But how to create an inclination to encounter the self in these ways within the confines of the traditional school day and curriculum? And how to assess these encounters? Can one grade a dream? A game? A memory?

A sixteen-year-old girl told me recently, “When people write poems they are putting themselves on the line—to be criticized or praised. It is really risky. For me to write a decent poem, I must release all inhibitions, and then go with it.” Adrienne Rich, activist and poet, recognizes the risk, but insists:

*You must write, and read, as if your life depended on it. That is not generally taught in school. At most, as if your livelihood depended on it: the next step, the next job . . . no questions asked as to further meanings. And, let’s face it, the lesson of the schools for a vast number of children—hence, of readers—is *This is not for you.**

To read as if your life depended on it would mean to let into your reading your beliefs, the swirl of your dreamlife, the physical sensations of your ordinary carnal life; and, simultaneously, to allow what you’re reading to pierce the routines, safe and impermeable, in which ordinary carnal life is tracked, charted, channeled. . . . Or, you can say: ‘I don’t understand poetry.’²

Risking Intensity invites you to try discovering and writing poems along with your students and, in the process, to find out together what “safe and impermeable routines” need to be pierced in order to write and read as if your life depended on it.

At my writing table, in my classroom, and in other teachers’ classes where I’ve worked as visiting poet, there is one thing I’ve invariably found to be true: Because good poems speak to the heart, they create a sense of community. It doesn’t matter whether they’re classic or contemporary, written by teacher or student. And for the same reason, sharing poems can *widen* this community—can help us find commonality with people outside our own circle.

Discovering commonality—among different ages, cultures, and races seems to me one of the most important tasks for student and teacher. As I write this, I glance out of my studio window at the field and trees of a breathtakingly beautiful park in the Canadian Rockies and remember Bertolt Brecht’s uncomfortable question:

*W*hat kind of times are they, when
A talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?³

And, fresh from reading Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*,⁴ I think about the teacher in East St. Louis, faced with two hundred twelfth-graders who are expected—in theory—to compete for college places or jobs with privileged private school students yet have too few textbooks, no computers, and one-fifth of a guidance counselor. I think about the teacher whose thirty first-graders share a decaying gym with three other classes—all children whose poverty and races have doomed them to live in a dangerously polluted part of the city, too close to a flooding river—children who can’t concentrate because of malnutrition. Is poetry, whether written in forests or on subways, powerful enough to penetrate these horrors? To bridge such chasms? I don’t know. I can only put my trust in Galway Kinnell’s words and hope that my experiences and those of my students go deep enough to reach that “level in the psyche where we’re all the same.”

Notes

1. Galway Kinnell in "The Simple Acts of Life," writ. James Haba and Ann Price, *The Power of the Word with Bill Moyers: A Six-Part Series of Contemporary Poetry* (New York: PBS VIDEO, David Grubin Productions, 1989). This is a wonderful series of conversations and poetry readings, on four videotapes that include footage from one of the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festivals at Waterloo, New Jersey. It brings "live" to the classroom some highly accessible contemporary poets, such as Sharon Olds, Lucille Clifton, Quincy Troupe, Joy Harjo, Gerald Stern, Garrett Hongo, Li-Young Lee, Stanley Kunitz, Robert Bly, and the late Mary TallMountain.
2. Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993) 32–33. A book that should live by your bed, except that it will keep you awake with its passionate commitment to change the world through writing and reading poetry. The title comes from a passage in William Carlos Williams's "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower": "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there."
3. Bertolt Brecht, "Bad Time for Poetry," trans. John Willet and Ralph Manheim, cited by David Mura, "On Poetry and Politics: Brecht, Rich, and C. K. Williams," *AWP Chronicle*, 23.3 (Norfolk, VA: Associated Writing Programs, 1990) 2. AWP is an organization of college creative writing programs, but anyone can subscribe to their publication and the articles are sometimes relevant to high school poetry teachers.
4. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).