A Love of Words:  
An Interview with Patrice Vecchione  

by  
ROGER BUNCH  

Santa Cruz, California, poet Patrice Vecchione has a well-earned reputation as a gifted poetry teacher. In addition to over twenty years’ experience teaching poetry, she is also co-editor of numerous poetry anthologies, most recently In Celebration of the Muse: The 15th anniversary Anthology, and Storming Heaven’s Gate: An Anthology of Spiritual Writings by Women. A collection of her poetry, Territory of Wind, will be published this spring, and she is working on a book about teaching poetry.

Why is it important for students to learn to write poetry?

By writing poetry, children prime the pump, free their imaginations. It’s a grease job for the mind. A lot of what it’s about for me is teaching an awareness of feeling, helping students find their language, name who they are and their experience of the world. Writing poems is of value for anyone—grocery clerk, janitor, bank teller. Everybody has stories that warrant being told and listened to. Not everybody will be a great writer because of interest, time or talent, but we can all experience transformation through language. Poetry takes language below the surface. It’s like a dream or prayer.

Writing poetry can also be a key to writing prose. You learn distillation of language, to be concise, the use of imagery, surprise, detail, specificity, poetics—simile, metaphor, personification, alliteration, paying attention to the sounds of words—all of which have application in prose. You pay attention to the particularities, the nuances of language; you can get to your greatest potential in language. I ask students to write whatever comes to mind, to realize they know more than they think they do, to trust their imaginations. This transfers to other forms of writing. Ursula LeGuin says, "Reality is a slippery fish that often can only be caught in a net of spells or with the help of metaphor." Allowing yourself to write what you didn’t know you knew, to write and not make sense, to write without planning what you’re going to say—those techniques have application in other forms of writing. Poetry can help children care about words and where words can take them, help them recognize the magic in the writing process. As the doors open, they can lean to write about anything.

Through poetry, we can also find out a lot about who our students really are. We don’t find out about their humanity and inner life from a math problem. They write things in poems they’d never just tell you. A poem is private and nonlinear; it encourages careful attention, a depth of awareness.

And poetry is important because it can heal emotional wounds. For a child to say something about a loss they hadn’t affixed private language to—say a girl’s loss of her father—is profound. That experience, which didn’t have words before, is mirrored and deepened through language. So her experience isn’t invisible inside her, it’s also on the page, and you can watch the light enter her face, watch her fear lift.

School, like much of modern life, can be the antithesis of poetry. Teachers have to convey an incredible amount of information, so we stifle children’s spirits to get them to conform in class. Some of that’s changing with smaller class sizes, but when you have 30 kids your first job is to manage, in this small space, these
little people who have a physical desire to move that exceeds what our day will allow. In a sense we remove poetry from their existence by saying their natural inclinations are not appropriate in school.

Our lives are so complicated. Even children get up in the morning in a hurry to get to school. “Did I remember my lunch? Do I have bus fare?” Children often come to school with great needs, difficult lives. School may be the only place they get consistency, attention. We have to respond to far more than educating their minds. Poetry pays attention to the nuance of experience, the spiritual in life, which our society often ignores. Beaver Cleaver—land wasn’t everybody’s life by any means, even during the 50s, and life is harder now. Kids are being pushed. I see it a lot. Poetry allows them to clarify and integrate their feelings, their experience, their thoughts.

I think of my own childhood—wanting to say what was true and not having the opportunity. That’s one reason I chose to write. I wanted the page to hold my view of my life, of the world. I didn’t want to be told, “Don’t air the dirty laundry.” I didn’t want to be told, “Everything’s fine, dear,” when it wasn’t. Being told, “You don’t know what you know,” was crazy-making. I want children to be able to know what they know and trust that knowing, to acknowledge and trust their own perceptions, and writing poetry is one way to do that. Attaching language to feelings is a way for them to come to grips, to transform, communicate, and understand their feelings.

Can’t “airing dirty laundry” bring up things you can’t deal with, and create problems with parents?

When people speak the depths of their truths, they say things they don’t anticipate saying. Writing poetry encourages us to speak uncensored. Saying, “You’re free to write whatever you want” (which I do, and I think that’s essential, because they need permission) runs the risk of children writing things that are inappropriate. And they do. So I’ll tell a child, “It might be better not to read this poem to the class.” I respect the fact that there are families behind these poems. When work is delicate, it needs to be treated delicately.

But often, in writing that poem, there’s an illumination for the child, one that may not have occurred otherwise. Writing poetry can be therapeutic, but it isn’t therapy. In the classroom it’s not meant to be therapy, it’s meant to be writing poetry.

Is all poetry the expression of feelings?
Some poetry deals less with feelings. We need to welcome the whole child—intellect, body and heart, past and present. But I see a connection between deep feelings and inventive language. Being in a feeling, attentive frame of mind helps words and insights come forward, whatever the subject. An alertness, an awareness. It helps the language we choose have more originality, fewer cliches, more layers of meaning. It’s different from using language to give directions or convey facts. And, as I said, it seems to meet a need in children.

You have the reputation of being a brilliant teacher of poetry.

I do? [laughs] I’ve worked hard to be good at this one thing. I don’t teach math or science. It’s unfortunate that, in our culture, we require a lot of teachers to teach all subjects. To some extent teaching is a skill that’s transferable from one discipline to another, but the idea that a third-grade teacher should be an expert at teaching everything is disrespectful to the teacher and all the subjects expected to be taught. For 21 years I’ve been developing my skills in teaching this one subject.

I love poetry. I love what happens when you put words together you didn’t know you would. You sit down, have this sense, put these words side by side, and something happens. You tell a story, create a picture. Donald Hall calls poetry “the unsayable said.” I don’t like literal, sequential things. I like spontaneous combustion. When I walk into a classroom and say, “I love words,” the kids look at me like, “You’re a lunatic. You love these marks on paper that don’t even hold water?” I like where words take me, that they can take me. With words you can make something happen that’s never happened before. Suddenly you have a third thing you didn’t anticipate. To me, poetry is magic, which is what the soul is—unchartable, magical.

What sort of relationship do you try to establish with your students?

I try to support their exploration, their imaginations, to be receptive and convey a belief in the students. I want them to know I’m listening with them for wha-
How do you get students to write?

The individual is at the helm, so most students feel more empowered writing poetry than essays. Poems don’t have to adhere to the same rules as other forms of writing, especially when you begin. There’s no wrong way to do it except not to do it. Poems can be short. They fit in the palm of your hand. That’s one of the allures to kids. I don’t say, “This has to be three pages with research and an opening paragraph.” Activities that involve more emotion than thought or event are the most successful, particularly at the beginning. They tend to lure students into the writing. Most of us love talking and writing about ourselves. We’re experts of our own experience. Writing poetry about what we feel and know—the personal, social, political engages us. From there we can move out into the larger world.

It’s also fun to bring in lessons that play with language so children see language doesn’t have to be a “boogie-man” full of onus and weight, that language can be clay—you can mold it, tear it, bend it, moosh it. If you’re beholden to language you can’t write freely, won’t find its potential, won’t master it. Put words next to each other that aren’t commonly put together. I discuss the uses of exaggeration and lying in service of telling a deeper truth. I say, “In poetry you can lie, but you have to lie honestly. That’s the trick.” As Emily Dickinson says, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” I tell them there are days I sit down to write and nothing happens. There will be days when their poem is hiding. That’s just the way it is. William Stafford says, “If the child could have done better he would have.” For the most part, unless a child is asking for attention for some problem, they want to do well, they want to excel. When a child won’t write a poem, it’s generally not because they’re in a hurry to go to recess or want to do math. It’s because there are things going on in their lives, that whole other life that doesn’t get left at the door.

Writing is challenging. After all, what if I acknowledge to myself what I really think and feel? Then maybe I can’t approach my life the way I have been. At some point if you’re writing poetry you’re going to reveal who you are, your ideas and perceptions.
At Branciforte Elementary School we were writing about our beds, and one boy wouldn’t write the poem. I knelt by him, and as he got talking he told me he didn’t have a bed. He was ashamed. Slowly, as he began to write, he wrote about where he did sleep, on the floor or, sometimes, in his mom’s bed. He read it to the class. The others came toward him, were compassionate with him. Poetry can bring out our compassion. Poetry isn’t just writing about the light passing against the fence. Out of that individuality and specificity you bring the whole of yourself. It requires risk. But it’s also empowering to carve out an avenue of expression and choose the recipients of that expression.

**How do you tap into emotions?**

The poems I read them elicit emotion, so I’m saying by example, “This is what I want you to do.” Children have less self-doubt, generally speaking, about writing than adults do. Children usually welcome the invitation to write from the heart, to try something new. Their experience of the world is more fluid and imagistic than adult experience, and their language carries emotion so it often comes across as second nature. They haven’t been cut off from their heart, language is new, unrestricted by “You should or shouldn’t say it that way.”

**How do you present a poetry lesson?**

Ritual and familiarity help give us something to rely on, so I construct lessons more or less the same. Students need a structure to feel safe during the writing process. I say, “The structure of the workshop is thus,” and follow that. They also need to know that what’s being asked of them is reasonable. The writing activities change each time, but the structure remains the same.

I usually limit lessons to 45 or 90 minutes. After a brief introduction I read one or two poems, ones connected to the lesson. It’s important to me to introduce poets the children might otherwise not become acquainted with, poets from the cultures of the children in the class, or people in their communities—Stephen Meadows who lives in the San Lorenzo Valley, or Adrienne Rich who lives in Santa Cruz. I like to bring Lorca to older children, and discuss the political implications of poetry. Lucille Clifton is a favorite for children. Her poems are vivid and short and go to the heart.

After I read to them I give the writing activity, take questions, remind them of my unusual rules for writing poetry, and we write. Some teachers feel otherwise, but I find talking disruptive, so unless we’re writing collaborative poems, this is a quiet time. We write for ten minutes to half an hour depending on the students’ focus. When we’re done, some read aloud what they’ve written. This is important. Poetry is a spoken art. I don’t think you really own what you’ve written until you read it aloud, attach breath and voice to the words. I ask students not to clap until everyone’s read because it breaks the mood. It’s usually not a good idea to have every child read each time. You don’t want it...
to get boring. When they’ve heard 16 poems about “what’s at the bottom of my heart,” they don’t care anymore. You want it to stay light and fun, not grueling. Read some now and save others for a time devoted just to reading poems.

Over time, I think it’s important to introduce basic poetics, to define simile and metaphor, and explain the role of the line in poetry and have them experiment with it, but on those days the students probably won’t write as well. Some will come up with fine metaphors, but they’re using their minds to tackle that, not to make whole poems. Concentrating on developing a specific poetic skill breaks the mood of making a poem.

I think we have an obligation to teach revision and editing, but since I work with other teachers’ classes, I don’t use peer response groups unless the children have been educated substantially on how to respond. Poems often express such tenderness that it’s easy to injure the writer. I usually don’t make editing or revision suggestions on children’s poems until after the third or fourth session. The part of us that makes poems and pictures and music and dance is one of the most primal and soft parts of our personality, the same part that loves. It’s easy to thwart creativity. We have to treat it with the utmost care. I hear so many stories from adults who were so harshly criticized as students that they completely shut off their creative selves and still won’t go there. We need to treat children with dignity and respect.

**What’s the difference between teaching poetry to second graders and to high school students?**

It’s very different. Young children are less set in their ways. Poetry’s closer to them. Second graders don’t tend to worry, “Oh, what will they think of me?” High schoolers are always thinking about that, which can make it hard to write a poem. Their emotions are changing every few minutes. Another big difference is their preconceptions about what poetry is. High school students who aren’t familiar with poetry are often resistant. But I tell them I started writing poetry in high school, and it steadied my life, made order out of chaos. It’s the perfect form for them at a time of so much upheaval and change. Poetry can help us gain clarity during times of tumult.

With younger children I’m playful with language, silly. I’ll read them “How to Eat a Poem” by Eve Merriam:

> Don’t be polite.  
> Bite in.  
> Pick it up with your fingers  
> and lick the juice that  
> may run down your chin...

I’ll ask, “What did you have for breakfast?” They say, “Cereal,” “Captain Crunch,” and I say, “None of you had poem for breakfast? Go home tonight and ask for poem for dinner.” I can exude a kind of enthusiasm, an irreverent abandon with language that’s part of the heart of what language is.

You can’t do that with high schoolers. You can read them poetry that’s much more sophisticated—they have the vocabulary, the intellectual and emotional development to understand Wallace Stevens, Anna Akhmatova or Adrienne Rich.

A lot of poets have material appropriate for young children, though—Neruda’s odes for example. There are layers of meaning to poetry. Children can access that. The words are right there behind eyelids, at the back of tongues, in inner ears. The doors to their imaginations are easier to access. When I read poems to children there’s usually a place where the key sinks in, the lock clicks, and the door opens. That’s a lovely thing about poetry.

The lesson structure I spoke about is identical, no matter what age. With high schoolers who are not willing to read aloud, I’ll do the old trick of picking up all the papers and reading some anonymously. Or ask them to read one word from their poem, and the next time two words, then three words. Suddenly the whole class is reading their poems.

**You work mostly in other teachers’ classes. How does your teaching affect those teachers?**

Some teachers aren’t comfortable teaching poetry, or don’t like poetry, or don’t want to be responsible for teaching it. There are other teachers whose confidence with and interest in teaching poetry is growing. Some are bringing poetry into other curriculum areas—science or math.
A lot of teachers write poetry along with their students, so they can have the kinesthetic experience of writing and reading what they’ve written aloud, and seeing how on-the-spot they can feel.

They also tell me they get to know their students in different ways by watching how they act and how they respond to poetry while I lead the class. They’ll say, “I didn’t know such-and-such a student was having those problems till you came in and did poetry. I didn’t know that event in his life was having that affect on him.”

How do you get teachers excited about poetry? What do you try to do when you lead a workshop for teachers?

Some smart, creative teachers are intimidated by poetry writing, or unfamiliar with the form. I want them to be more comfortable. How? We read and write poetry, talk about it. I read them poems written by children. When they hear what children can do with language they often get excited. Then we get writing. Mostly I want to offer them an experience of language coming almost unbidden, that incredible joy of language coming quickly.

You can’t teach someone to drive a car unless you’ve spent some time at the wheel yourself, and I don’t think you can teach poetry without having written it. Some things you can teach with a manual and common sense. Poetry isn’t one of them.

I ask them to be aware of their internal critic. By the time we’re adults, most of us have a pretty developed internal critic that lashes out at what we write. This is destructive. Critique your writing later. We need to be gentle with ourselves when we write.

I ask them not to get discouraged when their students don’t write poems that knock their socks off, not to feel they haven’t done a good job teaching poetry. The practice of making poems is often a lifelong practice: it takes time to develop. So pursue it and encourage students to pursue it, but don’t take it too seriously. Be playful with language. Allow it to be soft under your touch. Allow yourself to be surprised by what comes out of you and your students.

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**Student Poems**

**The Puzzle of Life**

The puzzle of life is complicated like an ordinary puzzle but harder.
You always put the pieces with the flat edges together first,
giving support for my future.

**Clifton Riley, age 8**

Loma Prieta Independent Home Study Program
Los Gatos

Mis manos
son el retorno
del futuro,
para mañana
mis manos.

My hands
are the sprout
of the future,
for tomorrow
my hands.

**Francisco, grade 2**

Pajaro Valley Shelter, Watsonville, CA

When joy leaves it leaves you for a great while.
It goes far, so, so far.
I do not know how far.
It may come back to you and it may not.
You do not know when joy is coming but you know when it is there.

**Marisela Chavez, grade 2**

Gault School, Santa Cruz, CA

My heart is a tree and it’s trying to get some wind.

**Simon Christy, grade 1**

Gault School, Santa Cruz, CA
What is the connection for students between reading and writing poetry?

Giving children the opportunity to write poetry is not only a tremendous tool for teaching writing of all kinds, it's also a tool for teaching reading, because what motivates children more to read than the desire to read something they've written themselves? Even if it's just a matter of how quickly they can memorize their three-line poem, that's a prereading activity.

I don't think you can write poetry well without reading it. Some people say, "I don't read anything because it really messes up my writing," and I think, "How well are you writing?" We don't live in a vacuum. We don't live in a cave. Reading is inspiration. I forget what poetry is all the time. I can give you a logical definition, but in terms of accessing that part of myself, I forget. It's the antithesis of the rest of my life. I certainly experience spirituality when I'm out on my bike or making dinner, or making love, but connecting words to it, making a whole out of the invisible, isn't what my daily life is about. I forget the way poetry insists that we pay attention in an astute way.

So before I start writing I usually read poems just so I can watch how people welcome it in their inner life, how they translate it into words. So also with kids I begin by reading poems as a way to enter into poetry. It's a link, an important connection.

You often arrange for students to read on the radio or on stage. What's the importance of featuring student writing in public places?

How do we recognize adult writers? They publish and read their works publicly. If you tell children they're authors, albeit beginning authors, they deserve a similar forum. In our culture there's a sense that you don't get anywhere until you grow up. I think children's lives and experiences should be incorporated into the adult world. Not, "Isn't Sammy cute," but "Who is that person?"

It's striking how surprised some people are when they hear students' poems—even teachers and principals if they haven't been working a lot with writing. There's this notion that since kids are cute like puppy dogs they have the minds of puppy dogs, but they're very sophisticated. Their minds and hearts deserve recognition and respect.

Children should be eminent members of our society. We should call on them. It serves children and it serves society to learn who children are. As a kid I thought grown-ups didn't understand me. How can we understand the inner life of a child? Poetry is a phenomenal way to do that. There would be a lot less injustice toward children if the people making decisions would listen to the poetry children write. We wouldn't cut child welfare. You can't minimize children when you read their poetry. It makes people behave more responsibly toward them.

Also, telling them their work is going public, and for it to be understood they need to follow certain rules, encourages them to revise and edit. I don't think it's right to tell children that everything they write is a masterpiece. That's just not true. For children, their span of attention is short, so often they're finished with a poem in 15 or 20 minutes. One way to approach editing and revision is through using what everyone calls portfolios now. Collect a series of poems and ask the students to pick which poems to edit and revise, though frequently when I publish anthologies, I pick the poems because often children pick the weakest ones, the ones they feel least vulnerable about. We tend to feel less vulnerable with work that is predictable and doesn't push the boundaries of what we think is acceptable in terms of content and form. Of course, I only publish poems with their permission.

You're writing a book on teaching poetry. How's that going and what will it cover?

Writing, "This is what I think, feel, experience," was very hard at first. For a while all I did was confront my internal critic. By the end of the day I'd be crumpled in my chair shivering, asking, "Will you ever get a publisher anyway?" But I believe in what I'm writing, so I stuck with it. Now I've written some stuff I really like and I think I can write the book. I've settled into the writing.

It's a book for adults who want to bring poetry into children's lives, predominantly classroom teachers, but also librarians, psychologists, parents. There will be a section on how to make poetry part of family life, and on writing one-on-one. In addition to my perspec-
tives and experience, it will include activities, planning lessons, what makes excellence, the necessity for original thought.

**What does make a poem excellent?**

We only have so many experiences as children, as adults—we fall down, cut our knee, overeat, succeed, fail, experience water against our skin, a kiss on our chin, get lost in the woods, get found, we’re loved, abandoned, we behave kindly or do not. How many general subjects are there? What we love, what we know through our five senses, projections into the future, memories of the past, feelings of compassion, anger, longing. There’s a limit to our experience, but there is no limit to the language we can affix to it.

The number of poems that come from children on the metaphor of what’s at the bottom of their hearts, of what’s at the core of their feeling—so many images speak to that experience. Through poetry we can write in evocative ways that create the nuance of emotional experience, giving voice to moments, fragments, particularities, details, how the psyche works, the particularities of experience that, though we’re all so different, we have in common. Excellence in poetry is about expressing that in evocative ways.

Part of it is using image. Modern poetry is highly imagistic: it makes concrete pictures that describe experience. The idea is to move from vagueness into specificity, to use language that’s visceral, that employs the senses. Sam Hamill said, “If you can say it in one word, why say it in three?” There has to be an element of mystery. You want to tell your reader almost everything, but not everything. You want to leave room in the poem for the reader to enter. You want magic to happen—surprise, leaping from one image to another when only the heart knows the connection. Poetry is a distillation of language, a spiritual language. Excellence in poetry is, in part, the presence of soul in the language.

**How do you evaluate student poetry? How do you assign it a grade?**

I don’t grade poems. I’ll give grades, but not on individual poems. The grades I give have to do with effort and development or progress. Is the student working up to potential? When I evaluate children’s poems I let them know there’s some subjectivity involved. Poetry isn’t like addition; there isn’t one right answer. I’ll say to the students, “This is my opinion.” If you make clear what you’re looking for in the beginning and see them striving to include that in what they’re writing, that’s the basis for a grade.

**How does your own writing affect your teaching of poetry?**

I know what I’m talking about when I ask students to write a poem. I’m not asking them to go off a high dive I haven’t jumped off before. To teach poetry you have to know what it’s like to write poetry, to grapple with the constraints of the form. As a writer of poetry I bring empathy. It makes me real to the students. I can read my own poems, show them some drafts, ask them for advice. “What’s this line need? What’s missing?” That’s why I encourage teachers to bring poetry into their lives. Keep journals, write with their students when they can, incorporate poetry writing into faculty meetings, read poetry in and outside the classroom, get up a half hour earlier once a week to write, notice what motivates them to want to write, then write about it.

If you see writing as another task, you won’t write. Accept what comes. Trust your impulses. Write for the sake of feeling the pen in your hand and the words falling to the page.

**How does your teaching of poetry affect your writing?**

When I’m teaching a lot, it stymies me. At the end of four hours of teaching I’m wrung out. Other things don’t wear me out like teaching poetry does. But what a fine way to get tired! When I’m teaching less, being with the children is inspiring.

**What has inspired or influenced you as a teacher?**

My mother read me poetry and sang me songs even before I was born. Knowing, as a young child, where literature could take me was inspiring. Reading still inspires me. Right now I’m reading Homo Aestheticus, by Ellen Dissanayake, who writes about the biological need for art, how art is a way to celebrate events in our lives—the writing of Charles Simic, William Stafford, Pablo Neruda, Jane Kenyon, and Eavan Bolland, to name a few.
It inspires me that I don’t have life figured out. The passion of life inspires me, and the fact that that passion can be expressed through words. Once I was accused of encouraging children to write sad poems. But poetry is a celebration of life. Writing fills my life with happiness. The fact that sorrow and longing can be articulated is call for happiness.

Teachers who value kids inspire my teaching, watching them engage intimately with children. More than anything, children are my inspiration for teaching. My goddaughter Kyle and my two nephews Nicholas and Joshua deeply inspire my teaching. When you’re with kids, you see that there’s reason for poetry.

What have you learned from teaching poetry?

That the human imagination is infinite. Writing poetry allows us to say what we don’t expect to say. It’s a direct line to our imaginations. Imagination is unpredictable; it can reveal what we don’t know we want to reveal. A lot of answers to a lot of questions will come from it. W. H. Auden, in a poem about Yeats, said, “Poetry makes nothing happen.” That’s fascinating. Bridges don’t get built through poetry. Wars don’t stop. But in the world of the soul? That’s where transformation occurs. William Carlos Williams said, “Only the imagination is real.” Everything is born from imagination.

Don’t underestimate what children can write. They can write beyond their wildest dreams, say things they didn’t know they could say. Have high expectations. They’ll rise to it. I see kids use language all the time in ways they and their parents and teachers wouldn’t have thought possible.

I’ve learned compassion for teachers and kids. When you’re teaching poetry, you’re doing soul work. Don’t leave compassion out. It’s the most important thing to bring into the classroom.

Roger Bunch edits the Central California Writing Project Newsletter. This interview is reprinted from the December, 1997 issue.