In the Fall I’ll Return a Poet

Give a sense of hope, belonging, reassurance
listen and understand.
Confer with total honesty,
be a follower — not a leader in the dance.

John, a seventh grade teacher, looked up, smiled at the
receptive faces surrounding him, and continued read-
ing his poem, which was a response to Georgia Heard’s

Discover what guides them,
encourage deep digging for what’s underneath.
Gently urge re-vision
to make their poems complete.

It was the eighth and last day of a summer course I
developed entitled “Teachers as Poets.” I surveyed the
seventeen teachers who were listening to John’s poem.
They had laughed as they listened to Pat read about
growing up with her father, cried while they listened to
Kathryn’s poem about the death of her mother, and
nodded in appreciation as Carol described the special
times with her grandmother.

The group, consisting of regular and special education
teachers, reading specialists, a librarian, a principal,
and a high school math teacher, was as varied as the
poems they had written and were now sharing. I
thought back to the first day of the course when we sat
around in a circle, introduced ourselves, and spoke of
our childhood experiences with poetry. Lynne remem-
bered, “I always enjoyed poetry as a child and used to
cut out poems and hang them up all over my room.”
Carol recollected loving nursery rhymes and stories
with a rhythm. I recalled a fifth grade teacher who
made American history come alive by reading Paul
Revere’s Ride by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and
Whitman’s O Captain! My Captain!

But most of us also remembered unpleasant experi-
ences with poetry, where lessons no longer revolved
around enjoyment of the language, rhythm, or sur-
prises a poem had to offer, but the dissection and
analysis of it. As a seventh grader I was assigned to
read April Rain by Langston Hughes. After the reading
I was asked to record three things the rain did, to
contrast what the rain did in the first stanza to what it
did in the second stanza, and to paraphrase the poem.
We agreed that the exercises designed to teach and
encourage appreciation of poetry were the same exer-
cises that ruined our enjoyment.

During this time of introductions I asked, “Why are
you here and what would you like to get from this
course?”

Carol answered immediately, “I’d like to learn meth-
ods of teaching poetry — techniques to motivate stu-
dents and poetry starters for elementary age children.”

Donna replied, “I am here because as a child I hated
poetry. I could never make it rhyme and sound nice,
too. I would like to learn how to instill the love of poetry
to children — beyond my old friends Prelutsky and
Silverstein. I would also like to learn how to teach them
to write poetry.”

As I listened to the participants it became clear that
many of them were looking for a course that would
offer an outline to teach poetry and ideas to motivate
their students. Their experiences in school, both under-
graduate and graduate, did nothing to help them feel
comfortable with this genre. They disliked reading
poetry because they had learned to analyze, not to
enjoy. They were afraid to write poetry because they
had never written anything beyond the haiku, cinquain,
and limericks the English book offered, and they were
reticent to teach poetry because they did not feel they had the expertise.

Despite their requests I was not going to give them an outline to teach poetry or gimmicks to motivate their students. What I knew, and what I wanted them to discover, was that personal and professional growth go hand in hand; that if a teacher becomes immersed in the reading and writing of poetry her knowledge, self-confidence, and enthusiasm spills over to the children and she no longer needs “poetry starters.” This belief came from my own experience as an elementary school teacher and as a learner.

I had been a teacher who gave assignments to motivate my fifth grade students, but at the same time I was a reluctant writer. I did not start writing until I participated in the Pennsylvania Writing Project during the summer of 1988. As I became a reader and writer of poetry, I realized I no longer needed artificial poetry starters to motivate my students, nor did my students have to analyze every poem they read. Just as I preferred to choose my own topics, it became important that my students select theirs. Just as I enjoyed reading a poem for the surprises it had to offer, it became important for my students to experience the pleasure of reading. My elementary students’ involvement in a reading/writing classroom added more to their growth than the assigned topics and dissection to which I had formally exposed them.

Four years after becoming a teacher consultant for the Pennsylvania Writing Project, I developed a course founded on the belief that if teachers were involved in a reading/writing workshop on poetry, they would gain the confidence to continue their growth in this genre. The course, “Teachers as Poets,” was based on a major philosophical component of the National Writing Project: “Writing teachers write.” Teachers also would be given the opportunity to work with published poets who would guide them in writing. In this way the “student poets” would experience the frustrations, challenges, and joys of writing, making them better teachers. I had three goals for the class:

1. To encourage teachers to see the poet within themselves.

2. To instill in teachers the confidence to teach poetry.

3. To assist teachers in creating a classroom climate that fosters freedom to explore and discover.

How did seventeen teachers, who had once been intimidated by the thought of writing poetry, leave after two weeks together, believing they were poets and knowing they would never need the crutch of prepackaged materials to teach poetry again? There were four elements that contributed to our success: Georgia Heard’s book *For the Good of the Earth and Sun*, reading poetry, writing poetry, and the environment of the class. These, of course, went on simultaneously during our six-hour day, but for clarity I will explain them separately.

*For the Good of the Earth and Sun*

*For the Good of the Earth and Sun* was our guide, a beautifully written book describing Georgia’s work as a poet and a teacher with students in the New York City public schools. Her book reads like a poem. It not only talks about poetry, but also shows us how a child-centered reading/writing classroom enables children to grow. I chose this book because Georgia allows the reading and writing of poetry to become one with the listening and enjoyment of it. Lucy Calkins writes in the foreword:

*Reading For the Good of the Earth and Sun, one is struck first by the realization that this is not a book on teaching poetry but on teaching reading and writing, and even on teaching itself. As I read it, my first and most overwhelming response was ‘God, this is big.’ It’s big the way Eudora Welty’s One Writer’s Beginnings is big, the way Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s A Gift from the Sea is big.*

Georgia Heard (1989) tells the story of a poetry workshop in which Robert Bly had the participants peel the layers of an onion. As they peeled the onion she writes “We were also to think about our childhoods, our mothers, our fathers, our lives as we slowly peeled away each layer. It was an exercise meant not to create a poem but to give us the experience of examining ourselves and our lives, with the onion as our guide.”

This book had an effect on us both personally and professionally. As individuals we uncovered layers of our lives, and brought back long-forgotten memories. These remembrances created reflective moments giving birth to sometimes angry, sometimes loving, and sometimes sad poems. Also as teachers, because of this examination, we started to free ourselves of the tired techniques and textbooks that took away the joy of learning. As a group of “student poets” we grabbed onto the analogy of the onion and made it our own.

With Georgia Heard’s encouragement we embraced the importance of the readers’ workshop.
Readers' Workshop

Every writer of poetry is first a reader of poetry. Reading poems helps students keep open house. After hearing many poems, students begin to know what different kinds of poetry sound like, and they come to their own understanding of what makes a poem a poem. It’s the equivalent of a young pianist hearing music from Chopin or Scott Joplin; our students’ ears are being trained. They become familiar with the voice of poetry, which is crucial preparation for writing their own. Georgia Heard (p.3)

With this in mind I collected over a hundred poetry books for our classroom library, including Anthology of Younger American Poets, American Anthology of Poetry, Poetspeak by Paul Janeczko, and The Norton Anthology of Poetry. Wanting the teachers to be exposed to as many different styles as possible, I included contemporary poets such as Alice Walker, Marge Piercy, and Octavio Paz, as well as Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and Robert Frost. Sing a Song of Popcorn, Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle . . . , and Talking to the Sun were just a few anthologies of children’s poetry on the shelves, along with Myra Cohn Livingston, Eve Merriam, Arnold Adoff, and Eloise Greenfield.

Every day we read poetry for an hour. We jotted down favorite lines, surprises, and ideas that came to us as we read, sharing with each other at the end of the hour. During readers’ workshop a teacher often came up with an idea for a poem. Carol’s reading of When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple triggered a poem about her grandmother. The first stanza reads:

Starched cotton dress
Silver white hair
Clean, crisp hanky, not the paper kind
To wipe whatever needs to be wiped
A great big lap to sit on
Bags of sewing
Big flowered apron, covering top and middle
Raisin bread, dripping with icing as it leaves the warm toaster.

Reading poetry as a writer, we learned to open our senses to every image the poet described. After reading Owl Moon by Jane Yolen, a story about a young girl who goes “owling” with her father, Suzanne stated she could feel her senses stretching to comprehend the following words:

We watched silently
with heat in our mouths,
the heat of all those words
we had not spoken . . .

Mary, reflecting on the reading/writing connection, wrote in her journal:

Just as I now notice the inchworm climbing a grassy pole in front of me as I sit under the tree, I see poetry everywhere. I observe more. I see, hear, and touch things that I used to overlook.

I have reconnected with children’s literature after so many years, both through your personal library and our community one. Poetry for kids has changed so much! Contemporary poets reflect a wide range of this art form. I leave with a great list of anthologies and a broader attitude.

Kathryn summed up the importance of readers’ workshop when she commented on her growth as a writer and a teacher.

I have grown as a writer and a teacher. I know I was teaching poetry all wrong. I’d teach images, important feelings, subjects, but not poetry! I didn’t understand line breaks or white space. I know I didn’t read enough poetry (although I’ve read the entire Norton’s anthology in the past). I only analyzed it, not appreciated it.

Reading For the Good of the Earth and Sun and participating in readers’ workshop prepared us for the challenging task of writing poetry.

Writers’ Workshop

Many of my poems begin with a feeling, some deep urge. Sometimes it’s so strong I actually feel something inside me move. It can happen any time; it happens about ideas, memories, things I see every day. Often I start with an image, a picture in my mind. I use this as a resource to guide me in the making of the rest of the poem. Georgia Heard (p.10)

Writers’ workshop gave us the time to write about what was important to us. In the first part of the workshop we spent an hour experimenting with ideas, form, and conferring with peers. An imperative part of this experience was “group share” — the time when we came together at the end of the hour and learned from each other. From this sharing time we grew to trust one another as individuals and writers.

During five of our class days we spent part of writers’ workshop with a visiting poet. All of our guest poets had written for journals, published at least one book of poetry, and were teachers. Each read a selection of his or her work, talked about finding ideas, and encouraged us to write. As we wrote, the poet walked around the room and listened to our drafts, giving individual
feedback while pointing out strengths to the group. With this type of response I could see self-confidence building as the teachers felt more comfortable sharing with the poets and each other.

Although each poet's presentation was unique, the lessons they taught could be divided into two categories: finding ideas and the language of poetry.

Idea Finding
A poem comes from what we hear, observe, know, and experience. It speaks of our loves, hates, fears, loneliness, and happiness. A poem is found in the streets, on the nightly news, in our backyard, and on the playground. This is the message we received over and over again from the poets. If we knew where to look for ideas we would never be without a poem in progress.

Polly brainstormed things she could remember and came up with the idea for the start of her poem Snips.

I can remember my purple sundress
its fancy cutout
on the stomach —
a peephole to let air pass.

I can't remember
where the scissors came from
small, silver
in my hands.

One guest poet brought in objects from nature asking us to choose one and to describe it, using our senses. We were encouraged to continue writing to let the idea carry us until we "turned the corner," making the object speak to us about something in our life. Suzanne picked up a river stone and let her words flow until they formed the beginnings of Neurosis.

We picked the stones
out of
the perfect
blue and white
bowl.
Worry stones, she called them.
We rolled them around in our palms,
caressing different sizes and shapes,
worried to perfection.

We learned to get ideas by thinking about events we had witnessed. For me, this activity brought back the memory of a friend who was sent to Vietnam in 1969. Part of my poem reads:

You, the 18-year-old child-warrior
with a grandfather who cried
the day you signed up,
remembering his months of hell in French trenches.

Kathryn wrote In the Middle, a poem about growing up as middle child, when we were asked to think of our roots and to respond to the prompt, "I go looking for myself ..."

Older sister, my look-alike idol
as you hurry through Central Park
do you remember
how hard you punched?

And Pat composed her poem when she imagined herself in a favorite place that brought back the memories of a past vacation.

On a Rented Porch
Dozing on a rented wooden porch I chewed other people's poetry and after coffee sky wrote my name on the cover and bucketed shells that looked like baby's ears and parked striped short legged chair in sandy cinnamon bubbles edge and brewed iced tea with orange chunks and ate a tuna sandwich on plastic and left the crusts not the chips but when your shadow entered knew home.

--Pat McDonald-O'Brien

Working on idea-finding was an invaluable lesson for us. We now had the ability to find poems in art prints, snapshots, magazines, or an old chest. The opportunities were limitless and none of us would depend on prepackaged ideas again.

Part of reading and writing poetry was learning how to recognize the uniqueness and strengths of our language.

The Language of Poetry
Each guest poet discussed language, explaining that poetry is an oral art and that sound is paramount to its success. We were instructed to start our poems with a picture and to strengthen the images with comparisons. We were also taught to use line breaks to enhance the flow of the words.

While writing a narrative, a poem that tells a story, we thought of an image and recalled the memories associated with it. The poet advised us to use concrete details. After following this advice, Wendy declared that she
finally felt successful writing imagery. This stanza of *First Offense* describes the dismay of a five year old after finding her parents had sold their car.

I rushed to its side
throwing myself down
sprinkling it with kisses
and spraying it with tears
my parents exchanged soft looks
a silvery mirth emerged
from the corners of their mouths.
Half an hour later
when they pried my fingers
from the metal handles
and slung me
into the backseat
of the step-car
their eyes
were set in stone
their mouths
an indifferent grim line.

We were also encouraged to write a lyric poem, which was described as a suspended moment in time dealing with strong emotion or image. We were reminded not to plan the ending, but to allow the poem to lead us into a surprise. From this prompt Leslie wrote a poem remembering a time when she disobeyed her father.

*First Spanking*

Between the sweet bell peppers and the early
yellow corn
Daddy loomed.
Rubbing his shaven head, he wiped droplets from
his reddened brow.

Sister Betsy weeded the radish rows between
her complaints of broken fingernails
“A family garden,” Dad replied.

A call for naptime for the youngest member
brought my protest.
Betsy chided.
Daddy fumed.

My young Keds began, stumbled up the hill,
but saw Dad
leap
the chickenwire fence.

--Leslie Fetterman

Working with the poets we learned to put surprises into our poems by using strong words that evoke startling images. We experienced the difficulty of finding the right word, but we were rewarded when the jewel was finally found. Georgia Heard writes: “With any art form there are givens: a painter has paint, a musician the voice or instrument. And a poet of course has words.”

Everyone in the class enjoyed the experience of working with published authors. Listening to their stories made poetry come alive and validate our learning experience. John commented in his journal, “Each poet made an invaluable contribution, especially in the area of conferencing. I was particularly impressed with the wealth of experiences they shared with the class; learning about the poets through their poetry was a sheer pleasure.”

And Leslie wrote, “With each poet’s visit I held a mental conference — revising, stretching, incorporating my new learning.”

**Class Environment**

Students are more willing to take risks if they feel they are in a supportive environment. There was only a short time to establish an atmosphere in which all the participants would have the confidence to share their writing. I planned the class carefully, modeling the two areas I believe are important in order to build a community of learners.

First, I was a member of the learning community. I was not an expert, but a teacher who was excited about the prospect of having time to immerse myself in the reading and writing of poetry. My struggles were shared along with my successes. I conferred with individuals and with groups, receiving and giving advice.

Secondly, there were clear-cut expectations for small group and large group conferences. During “small group share,” the author read his or her draft aloud to the other two members of his group. After the reading, praise was given for strengths, questions were asked by the author or the listeners, drafts were discussed, and occasionally suggestions were offered. These conferences took place while the author was still revising and open to suggestions. I have found the most effective conference partner is a good listener who encourages the poet to talk about his or her draft and any problems there might be with it, because it is in discussion that solutions usually emerge.

The large group sharing of writing was done with finished pieces. It was a time for celebration and discussion of ideas, but not for suggestions. As authors read their poems we enjoyed the language and the surprises. At the end of the second reading we commented verbally and with written responses on the strengths of the poem. The written responses became treasures to read over and over again.
In the course evaluation all seventeen participants mentioned the classroom atmosphere as something that contributed to the success of the course.

...But it was the classroom environment that fostered my growth. There was an air of professionalism that is so rare in most school districts. Private work and think time is so important to a task such as writing poetry.

--Freda M. Schopfer

I came to trust each and every member of the group and realized the importance of creating a similar environment in my own classroom.

--Kim Earley

A powerful part of that process is listening to other poets: classmate poets, visiting poets, published poets. I have heard laughter and expectation and deep sadness, which touched my humor, my history, my sorrows. And as a struggling beginner it was more than a little comforting to hear that it doesn’t always come easy.

The atmosphere of the class was astounding. It was sincere and trustworthy and valid. We were a group of poets helping each other write poetry.

--Pat McDonald-O’Brien

Setting the tone for the learning environment is essential when working with adults or children. As learners we need to feel secure before we embark on new or dangerous territory. The prospect of writing poetry frightened many of the participants; it was my job to make sure that everyone felt safe to experiment. I planned for the success of all my students by observing their strengths and structuring the class according to their needs.

Teachers Evaluate Their Growth

At the end of the course each teacher wrote a self-evaluation. All stated that their knowledge, understanding, and love of poetry had grown. The experience of the seventeen teachers coming together to read and write poetry is best summed up by Carol’s self-evaluation:

In honesty, I enrolled in this course for its three graduate credits with no intention of getting “carried away” with poetry.

In reality, I have found myself totally enthralled in the writing of poetry, spreading it to others around me even if they didn’t want to hear my latest “work.” I’ve even found spare time to read — not just children’s books or the TV Guide.

I think the work I’ve done in this poetry course is probably the hardest work I’ve ever done, but also the most rewarding. I’ve been able to see poetry in a different light — not the high school “dissection” I was trained in.

--Carol Butz

We came together and immersed ourselves in the reading and writing of poetry, no longer needing pre-packaged ideas. We have gained the confidence and knowledge to allow our students to immerse themselves also.

From this course we put together an anthology of our poems. The dedication page reads:

So? Dick and Jane are no longer welcome in my classroom;
I’d rather go ooking. In the fall I’ll return a poet and a teacher.
I’ll bring Polly’s scissors, and Freda’s daughter, and Carol’s fireman...Mary’s street games, and Wendy’s spider and our beloved onion.

--Pat McDonald-O’Brien

References


Quoted Participants

Carol Butz, third grade teacher, Donna Correll, first grade teacher, Leslie Fetterman, elementary principal, Suzanne Harrington, reading specialist, all from Quakertown School District; Pat McDonald-O’Brien, reading specialist, Council Rock School District; Wendy Mendicino, leaning support teacher, Council Rock School District; Lynne Murray, third grade teacher, Quakertown School District; Paulette Nelson, middle school, Mary O’Gorman, middle school, John Pulli, middle school, Freda Schopfer, middle school, all from Upper Moreland School District; Kathryn Oberhoftzer, fourth grade teacher, Quakertown School District.

Pat Carney-Dalton is a humanities teacher for the Bucks County Intermediate Unit and a teacher consultant for the Pennsylvania Writing Project, West Chester University.