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Writing Poetry as an Enjoyable Experience

Joey Latterman

We write poetry on Wednesdays. We write about relationships, the weather, our anger, our grief, gas stations, pets, food . . . we write about ourselves. We write to better understand who we are. Sometimes we look at structure or meter. Certainly we recognize there is rhythm in a poem, as there is in life, but we write for expression not cuteness. Once in awhile we play with limericks, rhyme, haikus, or syllables.

We read poetry. One or two poems serve as models and battery chargers. Poems like “A Sneeze” by So Chung-Ju help us understand life’s questions; “Ode to Tomatoes” by Francisco X. Alarcon encourages truths about food; “Folding Sheets” by Anne-Marie Oomen uncovers our relationships; “Foul Shot” by Edwin Hoey helps us energetically convey sports on a page; “Kitchens” by Eric Nelson connects us to where we live; poems by Jane Kenyon, Robert Frost, Gary Soto and many others work because poetry is, as Stanley Kunitz quotes in Bill Moyer’s book, “an intrinsic element of the beauty and mystery of existence, something we take in with the air we breathe . . .” So on Wednesdays, we listen and observe poems to get a glimpse of this mystery.

Then we rehearse. We discuss the poem on the overhead. First we attempt to understand it, knowing its our own interpretation, and we talk about how it connects to us. Sometimes, at first it doesn’t seem to connect at all, and I wonder what we’re going to do with it. But, as we stick with it, invariably it reminds someone of something, which connects to someone else’s something and so on.

At times we need to brainstorm verbs or adjectives on the overhead to get images and gears going. When we read “What I Heard in a Discount Department Store” by David Budbill with its dialogue of “Don’t touch that. And stop your whining too. Stop it. I mean it. You know I do . . .” we remember actual words from our parents; putting into poems “how many times have I told you?” and “you’re worthless you know.” Because protective, complicated recesses of our brains make it difficult to pull up those memories and words, we spend some time probing and pushing.

And we write. Some are reluctant at first, especially if they’ve just come into the class. “I can’t write poetry—never done it.” And the rest smile when I answer, “You will,” and they do because it’s the class norm. Because writing a poem is the writing of our hearts—it’s the unveiling of our psyches. I explain to my students, “It’s just a story told down the page with less worry about grammar and more emphasis on images and playing with words. So first tell your story, and later we’ll worry about getting it down right.” We talk about alliteration, metaphors, and similes because that’s the starch that helps form the essence of what we want to say. However, not rhyming. I seldom accept rhyming because that’s a different emphasis—not on what you’re saying but on what fits, which takes away from the message. Rhyming isn’t bad, it just doesn’t fit my purpose of expression.

We write for about twenty minutes. This

is predominately a quiet time so we can sit and think. I also write because I believe in the power of poetry, appreciate the opportunity to write, and want to experience how it is to write from the point of this particular poem—extremely helpful for providing feedback. Usually I limit my own writing time to about ten minutes and then I go around and help. Often students ask for help during this ten minutes or say they're done. I respond, "Just struggle with it, look it over again, or write another one." When I go around the room, I look for the students who are stuck. Usually they're able to start or go on with some questions. It's not that they don't have something to say, they often don't think what they're saying is right. I also check for appropriateness, no examples of "war stories" or stories glorifying acts of violence or sex. Many want approval before continuing, or some need help "diving into" their situations to circumvent general, bland comments.

Next, those who desire, share. Always there are some eager to share. I encourage them to ask for feedback, but this is a learning process, to know what to ask for. It's also a learning process to know how to respond with specifics, not the "that's good" or "that's deep." It's during this time that the class molds into a community as an act of acceptance. Through the sharing we discover so much about each other. The tough kid has some compassion; the quiet student is in sync with us after all; a student who suffers with reading can express clear thoughts; the class clown can be serious. And often we hear childhood stories of trauma and grief that take our breath away or bring tears to our eyes. After sharing comes revising and editing.

We also publish. Students type up their poems to share on the walls of the building, signing only first names or remaining anonymous. We put them on placemats for local restaurants. We send poems out on postcards for feedback from the general public. In April, during poetry month, we have a visitor every day read poetry to us, and we present them with chapbooks of our poetry. There's always an offer out to the students to put

their own poems into a book to take home. (Easily done via Kinkos.) We send poems into contests.

We celebrate poetry. Every week they memorize a poem, alternating each week between a poem by another author and one of their own. This is to practice memorizing and to build a repertoire of poems. Last year we brought in Terry Wooten, who recited his and others' poems all morning, validating for us the thrill of knowing poetry in our heads. At the end of April, we put on a performance of our memorized poems, inviting all those who have read poems to us. This year we also celebrated our poetry by exchanging poems with some public school second graders.

For us, poetry is not drudgery. Instead, students say: "It's a chance to unravel who we are." It's a chance to "vent when I'm angry." "It gives me a good feeling inside—sort of like therapy." "With poetry, I can express myself without hurting anybody." However, it can also be a time when you sound like a "chump" because you sound caring and compassionate. This is a real concern and needs to be confronted. But when the students feel safe, poetry provides a chance to become real because, as Langston Hughes says, poetry is "the human soul entire squeezed like a lemon into atomic words." On Wednesdays we write poetry.

On the day "Kitchens" by Eric Nelson was modeled came this poem from Tim:

Kitchen Memories

The room of no doors,
the stove barely touched,
tile shining,
as if never walked on.
The room barely used,
trash filled with fast food.
Never a meal together,
no talking to each other,
only to the air.
Never together
except in a fit of rage.
The cold hard tile touching my face,
it would never give to ease the pain.

Feeling the roughness of the grout
against my skin,
slippery with socks.
With big windows
views always beautiful
even in times of hate.
Something that never could be changed,
always leaving you hope.

On the day we read "Ode to Tomatoes" by Francis X. Alarcon, Justin and Sue wrote:

Pizza rolls

Pizza rolls
little pillows
soft and chewy on the outside
warm and spicy on the inside.

Strawberries

Seeds of enjoyment
and life grown upon
the rosy red face of
an angel.
Sinking my teeth
into the luscious,
delicious strawberries
in the green field,
I feel alive.

NOTE

¹ we encompasses my fifteen students attending school in a locked juvenile facility

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About the Author

Joey Latterman, a first-year teacher at a youth facility, was one of the first participants of Red Cedar Writing Project. She teaches six subjects including writing.