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Poetry Potpourri

Joyce Benvenuto

First, I start hard. I start as if this is a National Geographic Special, and I know I've only got ten minutes to get their interest before they start surfing channels. I start where the mood of the room is. If they are all sitting there in gum boots and plaid shirts, and I know that what they want is a wolf dog for a pet, I start with Robert Service and the "Shooting of Dan McGrew" or the "Cremation of Sam McGee." If there are any hams in the class, we've even acted out the stanzas of Dan McGrew. "The Song of Hiawatha" is another winner. Once, when an American Indian complained about authenticity, I switched quickly to Gordon Lightfoot's "The Sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald." Then when a black student groused that he didn't want to read white man's poetry, I said, "Lightfoot isn't a white man. Read the poem."

In other words, I pay close attention. I believe strongly that reading and writing go hand in hand with real experience. I find many English teachers share my view. But I go one beyond many English teachers. Being a poet myself, I feel unleashed when I am given permission to write. The writing flows from me. I don't want any writing lessons. Sometimes I want to write a novel and sometimes I want to write a cookbook. My teachers have always read my work and wondered. In spite of their good intentions, I have always managed to write. Likewise, my own

students. I show respect for my students as writers. I let them write what they want, when they want to, and they share it with the group when they feel ready. Perhaps this sounds tricky. My following suggestions may shed some light.

Their brains begin to burn with ideas.

For example, what if my students are deeply rooted in the city and are totally aware of what it is like to be at a funeral after a drive-by shooting? I feel I should be able to start from this frame of reference. Inner-city kids understand immediately Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Christ Came Down" and have produced their own "Came Down's" almost within hours of reading Ferlinghetti. And if I really have been good lately in school, it would not be beyond reason for me to check the hall for administrators, close the door carefully, and then flip on the boom-box to Tupac Shakur's "Papaz Song." When the music is over I always ask the intellectual questions: Is this poetry? Define poetry. I ask them to see the poetic dimension of the line "Oh starry night, please bring me a pops." I use poetic labels immediately so that they will have vocabulary for future reference. Rap music

is in rhymed couplets. Ballads have stanzas. The Edmund Fitzgerald uses metaphor and simile.

Once the class understands this is going to be some far-out poetry class, it is time to reassure all class members that this class will be broad in scope. We will visit all kinds of poetic forms and every kind of poetry which they may write will be given an audience. The only restricting element is the time dimensions of the curriculum. I can do a great poetry class in six weeks, but I have also squeezed a whole lot of stuff into one three-week poetry unit.

Usually by the end of the introductory material someone has already produced a poem and wants to share it. At my first break I take it to the copy machine and make class copies. At the beginning of the second class period we read our first poem from our first author. We go for it. We have set the mood. We accept the poem. No matter what has been on my planned agenda, we always have time for the student poem. "Poems today, any poems today?" I cry. Their brains begin to burn with ideas. Sometimes they see me in the hall and slip me a poem. Often they are waiting before or after class to hand me a poem. Once the spontaneous poem machine gets in motion, poems happen, unplanned as shooting stars. I don't give poetry writing lessons.

The second thing I do is present my poetry shelf. I tell them that the ticket out of this class is to write three good poems or they must present three poems which they have found on my poetry shelf. I usually have about 30 books on it from every form of poetry. My poetry shelf never grows any larger because students always take certain authors and never bring them back. Students fall in love with writers and must have their books. With time, I have come to view this as a good thing. I can hit a garage sale or a used book store and within seconds start scanning for authors: Jim Morrison, Langston Hughes, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, William Blake, Longfellow, Frost.

The presenting of the poems, too, turns into a spontaneous thing. Students wait for me at the class door any day after day one. We then copy their chosen poem to share with the class. Since I am a great paper saver, I usually find a poem I

like by the same author and print it on the back side. This gives us a two-for-one: the student's choice, plus my choice. The student's selection gives us a springboard for talking about the author, or the genre, or the period, or the form. I often stand amazed at student choices. Invariably someone chooses something from my illustrated Blake, "Bring me my Bow burning gold: Bring me my Chariot of fire," but they choose other classical pieces as well from Whitman, Dickinson, ("...mossy lip,"—"she's deep, man"), Yeats, ("...silver fish upon the floor"), and, of course, Poe. I always ask, "What made you choose this poem?" Their replies are marvelous: "I like the way it sounds when you say the words." What more could a teacher ask?

I am never blown away by the sub-group of this larger group. They are usually students who are taking an elective—anything just to graduate. These students run to the shelf, find the three shortest sets of lines that they can, and present themselves as having fulfilled the obligations of the class. I believe a deal is a deal. But I still ask the question, "How come the publisher is printing this teeny-tiny thing? What's the deal?" The argument starts between class members. We talk about symbol, economy, image, form. Students who thought this was going to be an easy out shout, "I knew it! I knew she'd do this to our heads. She messes with your brain, man!" So be it. All students, all poems deserve literary attention.

I have thus established a noisy beginning, followed by weeks of poetic interruption. In reality, it is manipulated confusion. It is also an organic soup for creativity.

While I am continuously being interrupted with poems and poetic readings, I am also introducing an agenda which gets us here and there. A third activity which I introduce and have a lot of fun with is free-writes. Everyone in the class gets to write one word on a slip of paper. Each folded slip of paper is put into a closed box which is kept in a closet. On a writing day, one student draws a slip with its one word and announces it to the class. I write the word on the board. For one half hour, everyone writes from that one word—anything they want. Some write poems, some memo-

ries, some start a story. Some start with a drinking fountain break. Others hunker down and just spill their guts. At the end, we break into groups. It is understood that this is an unpolished rough draft. Students are eager to share what they've written. I'm always astounded to find the number of ideas that flourish around one word. This year, these are the words my class has written on, and as a teacher I assigned none of them: window, rain, failure, love, ecstasy, gone, void. There are more words in the secret box, but none of us know what they are yet.

Depending on how students feel about these pieces, students may or may not work them into more careful works of craftsmanship. Nothing may happen immediately, but two years from now that student may find this little gem in the rough and change it then into something more wonderful.

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The fourth thing I do is to look around my room at the culture groups and make small presentations of poets from each group. I have found that black students love Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni and some of the Muslim African writers. When I want to introduce Giovanni to the class, I may for the fun of it say to the tallest macho male, "Here for the moment you are a black Italian female." The class loves it. My male assumes a little female voice and reads a funky female poem. I've also found that blacks read black dialect poems beautifully. White students often see for the first time the enchantment of black expression.

It's important here to state that poetry includes music. Some musicians write lyric that is truly gifted poetry. Arrested Development writes their own material and publishes it with their CDs. "Mama's Always on Stage" says "Can't be a revolution without women." And don't forget Bob

Marley. "Survival" is probably his best CD. "Our fear is our only courage, so we might as well push on through." While you are reading black poetry, it also doesn't hurt to have Miles Davis playing "Sketches of Spain" in the background.

Sometimes poetry is appropriate for real occasions. One of our class members, a black student, 17, died in a train track accident. The whole school was speechless. I had to begin the next day somehow. I started by saying, "I want to read a poem for Richard." The poem talks about the senseless death of young people. Then I read Dudley Randal's "Ballad of Birmingham." It was a ceremonial religious moment in the class. Poetry said the necessary words for us.

There are another group of writers who do miracles with poetry. These are Latino writers. Sandra Cisneros is probably the most famous. The group of writers I use are from Chicago: David Hernandez, Luis Rodriguez, et al. Their work can be found printed by the Tia Chucha Press (P.O. Box 476969, Chicago, 60647). I have a short 14 minute tape of Hernandez reading his work to the accompaniment of Spanish guitar. Students look on this with respect and awe. I usually have one student read something in Spanish just to hear the flow of the language. Latino students love to hear poetry in their own language. Of course, we have fun translating. Sometimes we are good, sometimes not.

When we get to Asian poets, I never do haikus. I leave haikus to those who love them. Instead I present this story: I knew a Chinese poet who escaped from Beijing and here is his poem. He thinks it is wonderful that I can take his poems and copy them on a machine for all to see. This can never happen in China. In China it is dangerous to want to become a writer and so young people become physics majors instead. But he always loved poetry and always wrote it secretly. So everyday he would write one poem and keep it for one day. Then every night he would burn his poem in a candle flame so no one would know he was a poet. And the next day he would write another poem. Then suddenly he was in America and he could write all the poems he wanted and pass them out and print them. Here is one of his poems:

MICHIGAN SPRING
(NAME WITHHELD)

High heels knocking the snow covered street
click, click, click
waking up the sleepy grass
as birds on the trees
flirt with the morning cloud
jiggle, jiggle, jiggle
shaking my still closed windows
a kaleidoscope
of sky wide
eyes,
of smiling light,
glowing radiation of permed long hair,
of green wind
the mini skirt and long nylon legs,
of warm air
those pink snow melting lips
mixed with
the chilly winter ice,
the razor laughing night
and the rainy cloud of
empty minded loneliness
spinning like a ferris wheel
chaotically holding the world
with destroying passion arms.
I wish
Spring was not a woman.

Usually, I teach Asian poets on the floor, cross-legged. Don't ask me why. I have brought in the CD by the Cambodian National Dance Company (Real World Productions). The singing is all in Cambodian. I assign different stanzas of the translated lyric to be read aloud by various students. I do as much of the CD as the mood of the room allows. Some students were freaked by the experience of reading to such exotic music. Other students thought it magical. They were put "right there" in Cambodia. Last, I had them draw dragons. They never forgot that.

America, too, has its own great wealth of inspiration. Jim Morrison is the best example. He wrote one great lyric, "The End." I usually talk about Sigmund Freud for a few minutes, but more than that we talk about masks, myths, and taboos. "I took a mask from the ancient gallery." Another good idea is to ask students if they were to draw a mask to represent themselves, what would they draw? Have them draw it.

Play Metallica's "Master of Puppets." Ask them who the puppet master is and what does

"chop your breakfast on a mirror" mean? This song is in opposition to Morrison's drug values and this can be discussed. Metallica are hard working musicians. Jim glamorizes drugs; they don't.

Bob Dylan is another great resource. I put students in groups to make a collage. I have a tape that contains "Along the Watchtower," "Hard Rain," "Girl From the North Country," "Subterranean Blues," and "Mr. Tambourine Man." While they are listening to Bob, I assign each group one song (I give them the lyrics) and ask them to scan magazines for images they are finding in the songs. They create great collages.

Now is the time to bring out Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner." I tend to read the first of the poem but skip a lot toward the end. I stay with the eerie parts like the skeleton of the ghost ship against the setting sun, and the critical blessing of the water snakes. Many young adults feel they have done the ultimate bad thing somehow and need desperately to find forgiveness. The rhyme is about shooting the bird of good-luck (in a moment of accident) and eventually finding peace with yourself. Students do love this poem. When we are through with the reading, I put newsprint all over the tables and play the rock group Iron Maiden and their version of the "Mariner." While they are listening I let them draw out their feelings. Students draw boats, death, snakes, roses, skulls, bows, birds. One student drew nothing at all. She wrote out three pages about why she wears black and nothing but black.

Last, there is Allen Ginsberg. He wrote "Howl." Usually I copy it. I sit the students in a circle. Students are invited to read any line they want and in any order. Each student gets to read only one line from each page. At first, there is dead silence. Then your best students begin scanning those lines and see what is written there. Someone usually thunders out a line. Others scramble to start reading the text. Soon the whole poem is being called out. Then you go to the next page. You talk about the text as it happens, explaining New York as you go. On a second day, I ask students to write out their own "Howl." Writing

Howl poems is usually one of the best student participation activities.

On one day, I read my own poetry to the class. They are impressed. I put my own vulnerability before them. This alone is enough to open some students up. They get to ask me questions. We get to talk about process. They get to hear "voice" in a poem.

Again, each time, I always bring in a local poet to read for them. This is usually a big occasion. The poet is usually willing to share and talk. Students regard this as a great honor. Their horizons grow.

Beyond this I always take students to some poetry event in some bookstore somewhere. There is glamour when they see real authors signing books.

At the end of the term we always publish something. There are two or three days of pasting and designing good copy. Anything can be done with one copy machine and a local franchise copy center. By the end of the term, a lot of poetry has been read. A lot of poetry has been written. Some students (that elective bunch) never write anything at all. But they have learned to be a good audience. We are all somehow enlightened. We have had a poetry experience. We all think bigger. We are all surprised at each other. We respect each other more. We are writers.