Using Poetry to Encourage Passion, Courage, and Wisdom: Reflections from a Preservice Teacher Education Course

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Abstract

"Courage Work," based on the writings of Parker Palmer, often involves the use of poetry as a vehicle for exploring and examining teachers' inner lives. This paper discusses how poetry was used with a group of undergraduate preservice elementary teachers in the Fall 2004 term, to explore how students responded to the poetry, particularly in light of developing a personal sense of passion, courage, and wisdom. Using selected poems shared on a weekly basis, coupled with group discussion and individual journaling, the personal reflections of three students are presented. The reflections provide a unique insight into the "inner lives" of these potential teachers, as will as enhancing the instructor's understanding of each student. Suggestions for further explorations are also provided. (Includes 6 references.)

> We need teachers and administrators who are listeners and learners, poets and storytellers, people who can draw out, lift up, lead, and follow. We need professionals who can move the debate about educational reform far beyond test scores toward a vision of human possibility. Parker Palmer and Tom Vander Ark in *Teaching with Fire: Poetry that sustains the courage to teach.* (2004, p. xxiv)

I like to think that poetry is the music of literacy. Indeed, during a recent visit to a local elementary school, I saw a large banner in the school's library that proclaimed "Poetry is Music Made With Words." As such, it comes in various styles, forms, and themes. Think about the different styles and types of music that surrounds us in our everyday lives. Some of it is light and whimsical, offering simply a pleasant diversion from the routine of everyday life, neither expecting nor asking much from the listener other than perhaps a pleasant smile or a gentle good mood. Some music is merely a reflection of quick-to-pass pop culture, whereas other musical expressions endure for generations. And some music has the ability to touch us deeply and profoundly, "speaking," in essence, to our very souls, bringing us to a space of inner meaning and personal encounter. Poetry can do the same thing, and that's why I choose to use it with my students, not in an attempt to teach them *about* a particular poem or poet, nor to teach them *how* to teach poetry to children—certainly there is an important role for both of those—but rather to allow poetry to speak to them, and hopefully to touch some inner place that can create space for passion, courage or perhaps even wisdom for their lives as future teachers. This is what forms the foundation for how I use poetry in my elementary

preservice classes. In an informal manner, I often come to class with a poem to share, sometimes one directly related to the life of teachers, and other times sharing a piece that is much more metaphorical.

The seeds of this approach were planted with me thirty years ago when I was a student teacher. Working in a 5th grade classroom under the mentorship of Maureen Roehr, I observed how she gently revealed to the students her own passion for poetry, and in the process allowed the students to unfold for themselves the beauty and voice of the poet. Her approach was strongly rooted in the belief that poetry—at any level—is much more to be "caught" than "taught."

A similar approach to poetry has been presented by poet Brod Bagert in his essay "Act it Out: Making Poetry Come Alive." (Bagert, 1992) He makes a passionate argument: "A child's first encounter with poetry happens only once. It is a moment of great promise, and the poems you choose are an important factor in determining how a child will respond to poetry . . . . Here is the heart of it: Imagine humankind in the next century. Envision a people baptized in the sound of the great poems, men and women rich with insight and sensitive to the beat of their own hearts. Dream a generation at ease in the eternal struggle of beauty and the beast, a generation whose poems are clear crystal charms to light the darkness, a generation that will see itself as it is, laugh at it's own foolishness, and maintain the courage to envision a better world." This "moment of great promise" is the foundation that underlies my approach to the use of poetry with my students. Simply add the word "teacher" to the above quote—"a generation *of teachers* . . . "—and one has the essence of what I hope to nurture.

Parker Palmer writes of how he uses poetry with teachers as a vehicle for "seeking truth" and focusing on "things of the soul." Taking his cue from an Emily Dickenson poem, Palmer talks about "truth told slant." As he writes, ". . . our explorations must be invitational, giving everyone the freedom to engage those issues in his or her own way. When our intentionality becomes heavy-handed or our openness becomes aimless, the soul will not show up." Palmer continues: "If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached 'on the slant.' Soul truth is so powerful that we must allow ourselves to approach it, and it to approach us, indirectly. We must invite, not command, the soul to speak. We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen. We achieve *intentionality* in a circle of trust by focusing on an important topic. We achieve *indirection* by exploring that topic metaphorically, via a poem, a story, a piece of music, or a work of art that embodies it." (Palmer, 2004, p. 92) This, I believe, is why poetry can provide an entry point with preservice teachers into the deeper "soul truth" of teaching. This is the seed I seek to plant with my preservice teachers.

My intention in this paper is to share with you how this idea was put into practice with one of my recent preservice classes. In the EOU undergraduate teacher education program, we have a course (the "Core Learning Cycle") that serves as the "backbone" and organizing seminar for many of the other courses taken concurrently in that same term. In a recent term, three students agreed to formally be my "informants" (to use a qualitative research term) in my attempt to explore three general questions of personal interest:

1. How do students respond to poetry that is intended to "kindle the fire" of teaching?

2. What discussion is prompted by the selected weekly poems?

3. What did we learn from our conversations?

My "method" was simple and open-ended. Each week, at the beginning of class, I shared a different selected poem. The poems were primarily chosen from two sources: *Teaching with Fire: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Teach* (Intrator & Scribner, 2003), and *Life's Literacy Lessons: Poems for Teachers* (Layne, 2001), with one additional poem selected from an alternate source. Each poem was first read orally to the group by me, followed by time for group discussion and individual journaling.

Although I have used this format informally in previous terms and courses, I must always keep in mind an idea presented by James Hofmann in his article "When Bad Things Happen to Good Ideas in Literacy Education: Professional Dilemmas, Personal Decisions, and Political Traps." (Hoffman, 1998) As Hofmann points out, innovative ideas in teaching often start out with great promise, but can easily become reduced to rigid orthodoxies. For me, the "professional dilemma" is that of not reducing the presenting and sharing of teacher-inspiring poetry to merely another "methodology" complete with expected outcomes and assessments. This is "soul work," and such work will lead each individual where it is allowed to be led. So, with this thought in mind, I share an overview of some of the poems, the student responses, and some of my own reflections.

Getting started:

"I Care and I am Willing to Serve" by Marian Wright Edelman.

I began the term with this poem, because it speaks to the various reasons one chooses to become a teacher. Phrased in the style of an impassioned prayer, it gives

examples of a number of well-known individuals that have made a difference in the world, persons such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, Bishop Tutu, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Cesar Chavez, then makes the point that one does not have to be "great" or "saintly" in order to accomplish great tasks, but only simple willingness and caring in order to make the life of a child better. I believe this to be an appropriate starting point, as it captures the essence of what so many of my preservice teachers tell me about why they want to be teachers: They care. I do not recall ever having one of my students tell me she wanted to be a teacher because of how smart she is (although goodness knows, they are smart!), or what she knew (even though they know a great deal), or what she had already accomplished in life. But I have had many, many students tell me that they care about kids and want to make a positive difference in their lives. In that respect, this poem starts the term with a powerful validation of the reasons that they want to become teachers, and hopefully encourages them for all the appropriate reasons. Certainly we want and need intelligent, competent teachers working with our children. But intelligence and competence alone are not sufficient. We also need qualities of caring and compassion, and this poem speaks to that aspect. The central thought that emerged from the discussion: Be who you are as a person and as a teacher. As one student commented: "I don't need to be them [referring to the exceptional people noted in the poem]. I need to be myself and use the talents *I* have to share with the children."

More about spirit:

"The Way It Is" by William Stafford and "Children Will Listen" by Stephen Sondheim.

I presented these two poems during the second and third weeks of the term. Similar to the poem from the first week, neither of these two poems is intended to

specifically talk about teaching, but instead each addresses the underlying spirit that nurtures and supports the soul. Of the two poems, the second one—"Children Will Listen"—fostered interesting discussion. The central thought of the poem—more properly, it is not a "poem" but rather the lyrics to a song of the same name—is that children observe all that we do and say, and often pay much more attention to us than we think they do. One student made the following comment: "You can't ever forget that you're the most important person in that room, as well as shaping their self-esteem and their view of themselves as students and workers and learners and little people." This same student added that she had seen examples in her practicum setting where adults made both verbal and non-verbal negative comments about various students, in the presence of those same students, as if the students didn't see or hear them. Yet, she said, it was obvious from watching the students that they did indeed know what was being said about them, and that the comments had an impact. As she said: "There's never a time when someone is not looking at you." For these preservice teachers, understanding of this reality was certainly not new knowledge, but the poem did serve to raise the sensitivity to the issue.

Thinking about literacy:

Poems by Steven Layne.

The mid-weeks of the term were devoted to several literacy poems taken from Stephen Layne's book *Life's Literacy Lessons: Poems for Teachers.* I chose these poems largely because they are specifically written for teachers, and they focus on aspects of literacy learning that many elementary teachers confront on a daily basis. These selected poems addressed issues such as reading aloud to students, the tension between phonics,

whole language and balanced instruction, and students that too-easily slip through the cracks. The poems prompted several personal reflections, and how a teacher's sharing of a book can create life-long impressions. One student talked about her husband, a retired elementary teacher, and how he has former students that are now in their 30's and 40's approach him on the street and tell him how they remember the emotional impact of his reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* when they were in his 6th grade class. Another student shared a story about the bond that was formed with a group of adults—one of whom was quite reluctant to participate—on a several-hours-long drive as they took turns reading *Charlotte's Web* out loud to each other to pass the time.

With these literacy poems, the students saw obvious connections with the classroom setting. They talked about children in their classroom that struggle, as well as those that flourish. They talked about teacher comments and attitudes towards literacy. They talked about the tension between "new" teachers and "older" teachers, the tension between "new" paradigms and "old" paradigms, and how unproductive it can be to label either group with blanket statements such as "new teachers don't know how to" or "older teachers don't know."

The final poems:

The Larger View

The final three weeks of the term focused on three poems related to larger issues of the profession. The first, "A Contribution to Statistics" by Wislawa Szymborska, talks about the unique and precious rarity of different types of people in the world—and thus by extension, the unique mix of students and teachers in classrooms. For example, the poem talks about "Out of a hundred people . . . (those) capable of happiness—twenty-

something tops." This was a powerful concept for one student. She commented extensively about a school with which she was familiar where the staff was so fractured that it was virtually impossible for anyone to be happy. This was a staff where most of the individuals constantly looked for the bad, and how they perceived themselves as having been mistreated. For this student, the poem emphasized the idea that if an individual can look at herself as being a capable and confident person, then that same person has the ability to look at the success of another without feeling personal insecurity or threat.

The second poem shared during these final weeks was "I Remember" by Lydia Cortés This is a very personal poem about the childhood school experiences of the author and how expectations, both positive and negative, were placed upon her as a reflection of her Puerto Rican heritage. This poem prompted long and heartfelt discussion. Two of there were currently engaged in practicum settings containing students of color—mostly Hispanic and Native American—so the author's comments rang true. All of the students easily talked about first-hand examples where students of color had been typecast solely on the basis of ethnic perceptions. These typecasting incidents, as the students reported them, were largely the result of well-meant intentions gone bad; i.e. the teachers weren't intentionally trying to stereotype, and were actually attempting to use a student's ethnicity as a positive exemplar of some classroom topic, but due to the teacher's clumsiness or lack of sensitivity, what started as a positive event quickly degenerated into a negative event. All in all, this poem served as a strong entry point into discussion and examples of bias, stereotyping, and insensitivity towards students of all types.

The final poem shared was “Hopi Elders Speak.” I selected this poem to be the final one, as it speaks of the necessity of living in “right relation,” being willing to take risks, and living full in the present. It also inspired much discussion from the students. Students readily connected with the imagery the poem offers. For example, one section of the poem, using the imagery of a river, says that it is time to “let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above water.” In a time when many teachers are feeling apprehensive about legislated standards, issues of accountability, and meeting the needs of increasingly diverse student populations, the students quickly saw the tension felt by teachers trying “to hold on to the shore” as well as the tension felt by teachers taking the courageous risk of “pushing off into the middle of the river.”

Final thoughts:

What did we learn?

My original question concerned how students would respond to “teacher inspiring” poetry. Clearly, they do, but they do so in very personal and individual ways. The comments offered and the examples shared were strongly reflective of the unique practicum settings and individual life experiences of each student. Clearly, each student defines “wisdom” from her own inner perspective. Likewise, each student constructs her own “wisdom” from within. The poem is the same, but the “wisdom learning” is personal, and the insights clearly reflect those that outcome. I believe this is as it should be. I liken the task to that of the parable of the sower, where the task is that of scattering and planting the seeds, then letting them take root and grow as they will. Indeed, the term “parable” is particularly appropriate, as it shares the same derivation as “parabola.”

Thus a parable can be thought of literally as a "curved way of talking." Both parables and poems can, in essence, "sneak up beside someone" with an indirect truth. I believe this is what happens.

Likewise, I ask myself the question about what I learn from this process. I offer several thoughts:

1. Both the individual and group discussions give me new and interesting insight into the personalities and inner lives of my students. For example, one student talked about how Buddhist teachings have influenced her thinking. Another described in great detail how she had overcome the stereotypes and limitations of gender bias. These are insights about my students that I might never have learned if our poetry discussion had not opened that conversation.

2. Likewise, I gained interesting and valuable insight into the nature of classroom issues that my students confront on a regular basis. Certainly in my work as a student teacher advisor, I spend time in on a regular basis visiting schools and classrooms. Yet even so, that time is by nature limited. Student conversations give me additional insight into the lives of contemporary classrooms, and how my own preservice teachers are affected by current contexts.

3. The poetry sharing and discussions serve to foster my own reflection about teaching. For example, when we read "Hopi Elders Speak," I find myself asking the same questions that I hope my students are asking themselves: When and how am I still "holding on to the shore?" Am I living in "right relation," with myself, my students, my colleagues? Or, considering Steven Layne's literacy poems, I ask myself about my own literacy teaching. Am I merely conveying information about children's books and

authors, or am I also listening myself to the voices of “Soup and Rob, Tigger, Charlotte, Horton, and the Queen of Terabithia?”

Questions that linger.

As I write these words, a colleague walks into my office. “Have you seen this book?” she asks, and she shows me a copy of *Teaching with Fire*! By the smile on her face and the tone of her voice, it is obvious that she likes it very much. She’s a high school science educator, by background and experience, and currently works with our teacher education programs as a field experience coordinator. Thinking quite stereotypically, one might assume that a book of “teacher poems” would not speak to a science teacher. But it does. Such is the power of poetry.

Our brief encounter this day pulls me into questions of interest, questions that I continue to ponder:

1. How universal is the appeal of “teacher poetry?” Does it speak stronger to teachers of certain subjects or age-levels? My background is in elementary education. I understand that level. But what about middle school or high school? How do such teachers respond?

2. When using “teacher poems” with preservice teachers, I don’t easily know what lasting influence, if any, remains. Sadly, students graduate, begin careers, move away, and we loose contact. I wonder how many of them remember our discussions, if they are meaningful in the ensuing years after being tempered by the myriad demands of the classroom context.

3. By planting the seeds of "teacher poems" with preservice teachers, what influence is nurtured in the lives of the children entrusted to those teachers? Do those teachers go on to plant seeds of passion, courage, or wisdom in the lives of their students?

A final thought.

I conclude with thoughts expressed so eloquently by Parker Palmer and Tom Vander Ark in the Introduction to *Teaching with Fire* (2004, pp. xxiii-xxiv):

> [An] education that fails to take us beyond mere information and testing into the struggle for personal and social change, is an education that fails our children, our society, and our world. We want schools that join mind and heart in imaginative ad powerful ways, where young people can wrestle with life's deepest questions, departing with an informed viewpoint and the capacity to act as moral agents. We want schools that, in the words of Deborah Meier, foster "feisty children." To grow such children, we need educators who are alive and awake, who own and relish the most important work in the world, who understand what it means to "teach with fire."

Poems cited

The following poems may be found in *Teaching with Fire* by Intrator and Scribner:

"Children Will Listen" by Stephen Sondheim

"I Care and I'm Willing to Serve" by Marian Wright Edelman

"The Way It Is" by William Stafford

"I Remember" by Lydia Cortés

"A Contribution to Statistics" by Wislawa Szymborska

The following poems may be found in *Life's Literacy Lessons" Poems for Teachers* by Steven Layne:

"Read to Them" by Stephen L. Layne

"Reading Orphans" by Stephen L. Layne

"For the Phonics Advocate/For the Whole Language Advocate/For the Balanced Instruction Advocate" by Stephen L. Layne

Authorship of the poem "Hopi Elders Speak" by the Hopi Nation Elders is ambiguous. The poem may be found in varying forms on the internet.

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