

“Gratitude to Old Teachers”: Leaning into Learning Legacies

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Abstract

Amongst a group of poet-scholar friends, all of us students of the American poet Robert Bly, we often speak of our “gratitude to old teachers,” the title from one of Bly’s (1999) poems. We cherish a meditative awareness of deeply rooted presences holding us up, buoying us as we stride across “Water that once could take no human weight” that now “holds up our feet / And goes on ahead of us.” What is this mystery? Through the love and support of “old teachers,” we are held, led, and supported, into an unknown future that, without their guidance, we might never have reached. Many of Bly’s students (myself included) refer to how meeting him “changed” or even “saved” their lives. Similarly, I could say this of meeting and studying with Canadian curriculum scholar and poet Carl Leggo. Practicing gratitude to old teachers fosters vital pedagogic engagement and personal connection in a world often fraught with isolation and despair. Reflecting on how these poetic influences have inspired and guided my own personal and professional life, this essay ruminates on grateful legacies within literary and curriculum studies, and beyond.

Keywords: gratitude, curriculum studies, mentorship, poetry, poetic inquiry



“Gratitude to Old Teachers”— Leaning into Learning Legacies
To Robert Bly (1926-2021)—Teacher, mentor, friend in mythopoetic forays

Gratitude to Old Teachers

When we stride or stroll across the frozen lake,
We place our feet where they have never been.
We walk upon the unwalked. But we are uneasy.
Who is down there but our old teachers?

Water that once could take no human weight—
We were students then—holds up our feet,
And goes on ahead of us for a mile.
Beneath us the teachers, and around us the stillness.

~ Robert Bly (1999)

The title of this essay originates in Robert Bly’s (1999) poem of the same name, a phrase that has become a reflective mantra of sorts amongst a group of poet-scholar friends, all of us former students of Bly’s. Often associated with deep image poetry (Poetry Foundation, 2020), Bly (1975) wrote narratively, using imagistic “leaps” that describe “a leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known” (p. 1). Following the example of deep image poets such as Federico Garcia Lorca, Bly’s (1975) goal in “leaping is the ability to associate fast” (p. 4), creating a spark, a sense of spaciousness, room for the imagination to soar (or dive deep) into unmapped psychic territory. Take this image of the frozen lake; we walk atop our old teachers (is that even respectful, we wonder?); there is something uneasy, as Bly said; almost eerie. Will the ice break?

This is the poem’s brilliant leap, for here, fear gives way to trust: our old teachers will hold us up. We will not break through the ice of life’s long crossing and be lost. As seasoned travelers know, there is no guarantee of outcome, and caution must always prevail. But we are guided, led even, and we are supported. We are shown the way by those who have gone before. We are even *held aloft* atop their generous shoulders, like a capricious child, riding when we are tired, too tired to walk on our own. Read the poem again; savor its mysterious images, its gift of companionship, its words of power.

My title also references an idea oft-repeated by Carl Leggo in conversation with students and colleagues: that is, to *lean in* to things, meaning *everything*, whether that be learning, or writing a poem; trouble or grief; likewise, joy, pleasure, or challenging new growth—“*leaning*” as a way of being, of coming close(r) to things we might not otherwise be sure how to approach. Carl’s philosophy of leaning guided his pedagogy, modeling how we, his students, might also *learn to lean*, thereby easing ever more gently into unknowns, ever more creatively into the knowns, assuming a stance of *flow*, of openness, willing to find out; *becoming* in process with our lived

experiences. This offering, then, includes Dr. Leggo's signature suggestion to *lean into* things, out of poignant gratitude to him for helping me bridge the worlds of my poetic and scholarly endeavors (already always in overlap!).

The idea, nay, *ethos*, of a gratitude to old teachers has changed how I hold and carry former teachers within me, in heart and mind, and how I honor teachers currently walking beside me, with a reverence that travels backwards and forwards in time, going back to bring the past forward into the future, toward my students-yet-to-be, where they too will reap the gifts of my teachers with/in me.

Gratitude to old teachers means gratitude for what is given—what we are taught—and gratitude for grace, for when and where we are led to our teachers by forces that can only be described as serendipitous, gratitude that teachers, whether they know it or not, often call to us, compelling us, long before we arrive on their doorsteps. Take my example of meeting Robert Bly in person for the first time. Arriving at the Great Mother and New Father Conference (begun by Bly in 1975), I took a wrong turn, and instead of finding the registration tent, I wound up at an old carriage house on the property. I walked up the stairs on the side of the building, to what looked like an apartment upstairs. I knocked, to ask for directions. A woman who I did not recognize opened the door and started to tell me where to find the main camp buildings. Just then, a shock of white hair poked round the door jamb, looked inquiringly at me, but without asking who I was or what I needed, the man whom I almost instantly recognized (from pictures on book jackets) as Robert Bly, said to me, “You’re Persian, aren’t you?”

He was right, of course, and thus began a long and fruitful mentorship, where I—like many—say that meeting Robert has significantly “changed” or “saved” my life. (The woman who had opened the door was Ruth Bly, Robert’s wife, and a beloved “old teacher” in her own right.) We are a tight-knit group of poets, singers, artists, and rebels, all committed to this journey where, Rumi (as cited in Çitlak & Bingül, 2007, p. 81) reminds us, “Ours is not a caravan of despair” (p. 81); traveling along, poetically aspiring, we follow the music, listening to the song of our old teachers in the earth, rising up to show us the way.

Bly’s correct identification of my ancestral heritage from Iran led me to study with renowned Rumi scholar, Dr. Parviz Sahabi, in Vancouver, BC. This, in turn, allowed me to fulfill Robert’s request of me, “to hear some Rumi in Farsi from you next year” (personal communication, June 8, 2004). The following June, on a remote loon-filled lake in Maine, thanks to Robert’s initial charge, and Dr. Sahabi’s excellent tutoring on melodic and metaphoric nuances of the Persian language, I recited the opening lines from Rumi’s long teaching poem *The Mathnawī* (1925/2013), colloquially known as “The Song of the Reed Flute,” in Farsi, to the accompaniment of a sitar’s melodic murmur, the tabla’s soft heartbeat, and Robert’s approving nods, fingertips dancing invisible notes in the dawn’s glowing air.

What you seek is seeking you.

~ Rumi (1247/1995)

Rumi says, Lovers are in each other
all along. What I’m moving toward is
moving toward me: I don’t know why

we haven't collided yet!
A pedagogy of the moment,
what you seek is seeking you
like gravity, magnetic pull
the moon's metonymic orbit.
Opposite attract.
What you seek is seeking you,
sleek trickle now a surging stream
river winding, meandering
home to the sea, where I see:
what I seek is seeking me,
revealed, salt-soaked and glittering,
there inside me all along.

* * *

Winter Solstice (For Robert Bly)

Christmas night
solar eclipse in Capricorn

no stars in this black Sierra sky

just solitary snowflakes
falling on a heavily blanketed
white shore
melting swiftly
in the lake's gaping black mouth

In the heavens
Jupiter poised to play
Saturn, the taskmaster,
reclining into a well-earned rest

this winter night

unnaturally still
hushed
as the sun's covered face
on the world's other side
casts its shadow northward
time
stands still
axis poised
wheel
turning

darkness shrouded in celestial quiet
murmuring chatter of animals
agape
at midnight's gift of speech,
marvel
peace of a child's heart
our guiding star

Light returns,
sun shrugs off night's veil
dark waves lick the shiny ice cream shore

Will Shakespeare was one of my first “old teachers.” Along with Emily Dickinson and Robert Louis Stevenson, Shakespeare led me into poetry, and a different form of pedagogy, among staggering shadows, colored lights, a blackened stage, some magical words tossed to the floor like so many loaded dice. Working with a Shakespearean youth company in the U.S., Will (and company director, Richard Carter) introduced me to Dr. George Belliveau, professor of drama education and research-based theatre at University of British Columbia-Vancouver, who was studying our little-company-that-could, and suggested that I introduce myself to Dr. Carl Leggo. Carl welcomed me as his master's student in poetic inquiry and a/r/tography, encouraging my scholarship in rhizomatic lines of flight interspersed with poetic reflection. My world has never been the same since; Carl's mentorship led to other teachers, mentors, and friends too many to name in this short space, but for whom my gratitude continues to grow, reverberating backward and forward in time and space, spreading the love of gratitude for an old teacher.

Reverberations of gratitude remain with us, even after death, through the veils, where these reverberations buoy us and carry us forward through our days in mysterious, often pedagogic, ways. In April 2019, walking on a bluff outside Metchosin, BC, I came upon a patch of wildflowers that I didn't recognize. Upon closer inspection, the words "Fawn lily" came to mind, *though I had never seen this flower before*. Then, suddenly, I thought of Carl Leggo, who had just died that March, and I vaguely recalled . . . had he written about fawn lilies? But how could I know what they were, having never seen them before? I started to doubt myself, yet in what felt like a sharing across the veils, I looked up "Fawn Lily" on my phone. Also known as Wild Easter Lily (thus connotative of resurrection, redemption, and new life), riotous clumps of the cream-colored blossoms dotted the mossy headland. Was it a feeling-tone that called out to me? *Was it Carl?* Delicate petals sweeping up like an elaborate headdress behind a prayerfully bowed face reminded me of Carl's long, white hair flowing from his regal deportment. Such mysteries reverberate and return in different shapes, colors, voices and teachers: unexpected surprises, gifts and grace all.

That spring, I made a flower essence from these beautiful white flowers, wanting to somehow preserve this sense, the taste and delicate scent, of a friend of Carl's: to imbibe this elixir, its healing vibrations, to take in to my own systems and soul some distillation of the friend Carl was to me, the teacher and guide, as well as the general healing properties of this lovely wildflower. Now, I know, of course, that technically a flower essence cannot be made of another person's spirit . . . or do I? In the realm of vibrational essences (such as crystal or flower essences), what do I know? I listen to my guides, seen and unseen, and I follow my heart (as also in writing, teaching, and scholarship). Mostly, all turns out well. And as for what I don't know? I learn to relish and trust unknowing (Seidel, 2017) and that which is unknown ever more fervently. For just look at the gifts that come from unknowing, like the name of a wildflower never seen before, or communion with a departed friend on an airy springtime afternoon.



As it turns out, White Fawn Lily flower essence "helps you settle into deep loving introspection and reverence for all life. This inspires the nature of your gift to the world, the gift of Peace and your authentic self" (Tree Frog Farm, 2020, para. 2). If that does not sound like the essence of Carl Leggo's spirit dispersed in liquid droplets of a vibrational remedy, I don't know what else might . . . other than starlight, wind song, or the sound of one's own beating heart.

Another long-time teacher-friend to whom I offer unending gratitude is Nils Peterson, a friend and peer of Robert Bly (who, nonetheless, considers himself a student of Bly's). Peterson is a professor emeritus of English at San Jose State University in California: a tall, gangly,

unassuming, and unabashedly-in-love-with-poetry poet, Nils has gained quite a reputation among our raggle-taggle writing group for delivering excellent poetry prompts. Given the 2020 cancellation of the annual “Great Mother Conference” (as it’s affectionately known), we held an online version, and one day, when someone was talking over Zoom about Higgs Boson (an elementary particle in particle physics), Nils misheard the statement as “pigs’ bosoms.” He was so taken with what he thought he’d heard that he suggested it as our daily prompt. Although we immediately corrected him as to what he’d (incorrectly) heard, the catchy prompt stuck!

On Pigs’ Bosoms

It’s a long way from particle physics

to pigs’ bosoms—or is it?

Slip of the tongue, and Higgs Boson

enters the ear like a wave on the surface

of the particle sea, pigs’ bosoms, and the poet

hears a prompt in that ample welcome

(innermost recess, enclosed place, abode

of tender affections, inclination and desire).

A pig’s bosom,

tender underbelly lined

with succulent mammaries

a harbor of teats

cherished nectar’s source concealed

like Higgs Boson, hiding in plain sight

beneath a mountain in Cern

where farmers on the Franco-Swiss border

wonder why physicists study stars

in a particle collider underground instead of lying prone under a night-lit sky
looking up.

Two sisters in their 80s

greet wonder every night

beneath that starry sky

gazing up to see with naked eyes

what their father showed them when they were small

what a collider reveals in light years

the whirring firmament

the motion of time.

This must be a little like pigs' bosoms
 great turners of the wheel of life,
 twelve piglets suckling a mystical sow
 ample concealer hidden from view
 tails whirling to conjure daylight worlds
 in a dance of particles
 between linguistic understanding
 and the wealth of wisdom
 in a pig's bosom
 all the matter we know.

Carl Leggo (2019) said, "Learn to lean on uncertainty." This must be a bit like walking across frozen water; *we place our feet where they have never been*. We trust. In that stillness all around, we listen for the voices of our old teachers, guides on the road that lies ahead. *Water that once could take no human weight*—our forays in personal and professional lives—*holds up our feet*. Miraculous. Gratitude to old teachers, never-ending, carries us forward on invisible waves of support, and extends forward in time to new teachers-in-training, welcoming them into a community of "old teachers," where they, too, will become someone's mentor, part of someone else's story, someone else's memory of an encouraging word along the way, of loving hands on your shoulders, eyes imploring your own, "Keep writing. Whatever else you do, *keep writing*" (personal communication, Carl Leggo, July 3, 2013).

This final poem refers to Mary Oliver's (1992) poem "The Summer Day" in its narrative queries to another poet and "old teacher." Piggy-backing on another poet's words is a technique known in poetic pedagogy as "mirroring" or "scaffolding." Mirroring can be an effective homage to beloved teachers, or simply a scaffolding technique that moves the poem's narrative along, in the case of this poem, hopefully both.

Practicing gratitude to old teachers fosters vital pedagogic engagement and furthers personal connection between generations of scholars, inspiring hope in a world fraught with isolation and despair. Reflecting on how these poetic influences have inspired and guided my own personal and professional life, I hope I contribute, in turn, to grateful legacies within poetry, education, and worlds of inquiry and transformation yet to come.

To Carl Leggo (1953-2019)

In April, month of resurrection,
 I am alive and you are dead.

I wish you were not dead.

I wish you were here to enjoy
 this fulsome day dawning

in your inimitably lyrical
witty and alphabetical way.

You are not here,
and I am alive.

Just as Mary Oliver
(your favorite poet)
asks, I ponder
that one wild and precious question
since you've been gone.
And you are not here
to console or advise.

I think to myself,
'What would Carl say?'
Several times already this has worked
to calm and guide me
(the way "calm"
rhymes with "Carl")
to *lean into*
ways of thinking
I think your heart,
nestled in the heart of pedagogy,
would promote
and lovingly approve:

Live poetically.
Alive in all our senses.

Yet today, I simply miss you,
yearn to hear your voice
in the ear of my heart

see your eyes sparkle
with joy and *pathos*,
mirroring my delight
in this holy life.

How adventuresome you must be
in your new incarnation,
daisy, star, apple tree,
ocean, bird, bumblebee.
Who else have you become?

Remembering you,
what *will* I do
every day
with this,
my most wild
most precious
life?

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