Professional Voices / Personal Portrait

To Open Hearts
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I went out to the hazel wood because a fire was in my head. (Yeats)

Last summer, up in Maine, I received a letter from a sixth grader whose ESL classroom I had worked in all year. He wrote:

Remember the first book we read with you? I feel like I like the book now. You change my life. And you let me understand the meaning of life of poetry.

In the classroom, we have no choice. No matter what our curriculum, no matter what our methods, no matter what our philosophy, we bring our truest selves into relationship with students. Whatever we are passionate about, whatever we value, what we dream of or yearn for—all of this will be revealed to our students, will be impossible to disguise, and will be our ultimate gift to them. Our students will know who we are by understanding what it is we love. My students understand that for me, there is nothing more important or valuable than a good poem.

And what exactly are poems? Just what is this thing called poetry? Mary Oliver tells us, “Poems are more than words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes to be let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry” (1994, p. 122).

Naomi Shihab Nye, beloved contemporary poet, has this to say: “Poetry is a conversation with the world. Poetry is a conversation with the words on the page in which the words will speak back to you; and poetry is a conversation with yourself” (1990).

It isn’t always easy in this cold, fast-paced world to find someone to listen to us, but she insists, “The paper will always listen.” And finally, she says, “Poetry is a way to pay attention to the world.” Both she and Mary Oliver show us exactly how to pay attention again and again in their breathtakingly detailed poems. I think of them as I rush through my days, determined not to let moments slip away unnoticed.

I hear the music of four or five different languages when I leave my apartment on my way to work. In the street in front of our building, it’s French I hear as I watch little boys in woolen shorts and navy blue knickers and little girls in navy jumpers and white blouses, hunched over from the weight of overloaded knapsacks, hurry into the Lycée Français de New York. Once I am on the bus, it’s the gentle hum of Spanish, German, or Arabic that fills me with a sense of being—at long last, a part of the wildly spinning world.

As I travel to school each morning, I ride through the different neighborhoods of New York City, trying to capture it all—all the diversity, all the busyness, all the hustle-bustle, juxtaposed on all the history of this glorious city. The trees in Central Park are changing color, and I overhear a man in a grey suit say, “It looks as if someone took cans of the very best paints and spilled them all over the trees.” We pass St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and I hear my grandmother’s voice telling my four-year-old self, “The pennies of Irish serving girls built that church.” In the seat behind mine, a grandfather reads to a small boy from an R. L. Stine book, his arm around the child’s shoulders.

We go from uptown through midtown, through Soho and into Chinatown, where I get off on Broadway and walk up Grand Street. Here merchants are unloading their trucks to stock the vegetable stands for the day’s shoppers who will come here to plan family meals, across Baxter and Mott and Mulberry and Elizabeth and Bowery, and all the while I am soaking it in, trying to hear the poems in my head. And as I walk from the
I am paying attention to the world in ways I would be unable to do without the influence of poets.

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I am paying attention to the world in ways I would be unable to do without the influence of poets.

My students have taught me that they do the same thing in their lives. I think of Nan Fry’s small poem, “Apple,” and what it meant to a group of South Carolina eighth graders. We had read the poem together and talked about the images the poet uses to convey a true sense of the fruit. A few struggled with the notion of “the red starry sky,” but after some conversation, thought about how the sky looks at sunset. We moved on to other poems, other stories.

Then one late afternoon, just before Homecoming, the whole school stayed late to participate in the traditional Hall Decorating Contest. Each class had a theme—ours was Wizard of Oz, I think—and the scene was quite chaotic, as girls jumped from desk to desk and boys threw scissors and pots of glue to one another. I was weary and worried about their safety. The head of the school asked me to go out into the woods to see if anyone was smoking. I sighed and reluctantly agreed to play the policeman’s role. As I sauntered toward the trees, Marie came running up behind me.

“Look, look, Mrs. B.,” she cried, pointing up. “Look at the sky tonight. It’s just like that poem we read.” Startled, I turned to see a magnificent red and purple sky, a twilight miracle as the sun was setting in the west. Even more beautiful was the smile on Marie’s face, and I knew this poem was hers for good. Sure enough, a year later, I went back to visit the school, as luck would have it, on Hall Decorating Day. Marie greeted me with a hug and said, “Remember the time we saw the poem in the sky?” Marie will never look at apples or sunsets in the casual ways she did before we read this poem together. And neither will I.

William Stafford says this: “Talk with a little luck in it, that’s what poetry is.” When we bring poems into our lives, when we listen, read, write, and say poems out loud, he insists, “Things will happen to you. Your life will have more in it than other people’s lives have” (1990).

How right he is! I suspect this becomes truer the older we get. Two summers ago, during the New Hampshire Writing Program, I wrote a small poem about a memory of my own eighth-grade time. When I brought the poem to school the next day, I told my friend Susan, “I wrote a poem about the moon!” “Oh,” she said, sighing, “Don’t write about the moon; write about a radish,” quoting poet Karla Kuskin.

Write about a radish
Too many people write about the moon.

The night is black
The stars are small and high
The clock unwinds its ever-ticking tune
Hills gleam dimly
Distant nighthawks cry.
A radish rises in the waiting sky.1

Undaunted by her comment, I read my poem to my writing group.

Writing Another Ending

Late at night,
nights like this,
the moon hangs
low and round,
so bright
it keeps me
listening:
Gentle roll of surf,
solace so often,
but times like this
tug, lure,
irascible seduction.
Late at night,
nights like this,
we are thirteen
again, shy and awkward.
I smear mustard
on the yellow poodle
you’ve won for me.
We stammer wrong words,

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without ever a touch,
 sending messages
 with our eyes,
 all the while
 our hearts
 racing like
 the ferris wheel
 carrying us fast, high
 and far
 from the ordinary days
 of our Catholic school lives,
 fast as time,
 high as hope,
 far as the moon
 hanging in the sky,
 showering the sea
 with light, and loss,
 and mystery.

—1995

When we reconvened on Monday, a woman handed me a poem called “Why It Is Okay to Write About the Moon.”

**Why It Is Okay to Write About the Moon**
(for Maureen)

when the moon
presents itself in a painted on sky
and the trees turn their heads
why not write
why not conjure worlds
that otherwise lie untilled
a forgotten corn field
a page that wanted to remember
we are the night faeries
whose eyes slip off this earth and trip tangle in the heavens
so I say
let us go there
star dust settles in our hair every day
and the moon takes our skin
melting it into liquid beauty
a finger might point
slender wrist
silhouetted gesture
up there
up there
is where I belong
my pupils anchored to a silver history
depth and still as a summer well
I swallow the moon
on summer nights
when other poets
write about
radishes.

—Deborah Banks, 1995

I love having this in my life, this respect
for language, for reverencing the smallest

events, for needing to share experiences and
my impressions of them. Most of all, I love
the way poems help me feel connected to
other people.

Last year, as I began to prepare for the
first meeting of a new YA book group I had
started at my new school, I decided to bring
Linda Pastan’s wonderful poem, “Realms of
Gold,” to read aloud to the group. When I
read it to them, most continued to talk among
themselves, leaving me feeling foolish and dis-
heartened. Later in the day, however, I was in
one teacher’s room, and there on her bulletin
board was “Realms of Gold.” That year, Jane
Lehrach and I introduced so many poems to
her students that now they know no day is
complete without a bit of poetry. They found
favorites, wrote their own, and compiled
exquisite poetry anthologies, inspired by Judy
Davis and her fifth and sixth graders at the
Manhattan New School. “What I learned,”
wrote one boy, “is that the ordinary things in
your life that happen to you don’t always seem
important, but when you write about them,
you can make them important.”

Reading poems will inevitably lead to writ-
ing poems, as Walt Whitman knew all along.

**The Words of the True Poems**

The words of the true poems give you more
than poems,
They give you to form for yourself poems,
religions, politics, war, peace, behavior,
histories, essays, daily life, and everything
else,
They balance ranks, colors, races, creeds, and
the sexes,
They do not seek beauty, they are sought,
Forever touching them or close upon them
follows beauty, longing, fain, love-sick,
They prepare for death, yet they are not the
finish, but rather the outset,
They bring none to his or her terminus or to
be content and full,
Whom they take they take into space to
behold the birth of stars, to learn one of
the meanings,
To launch off with absolute faith, to sweep
through the ceaseless rings and never be
quiet again.

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permission.”
Here it is! We want this for our students, that they “never be quiet again,” that they, too, sound their “barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world.” In the ESL classes in Chinatown, children are beginning to write poetry—“talk with a little luck in it”—with astonishing clarity and freshness:

“My dream is to have a likeness to a bird and to soar the highest sky.”

“The sound of the train is like thunder coming.”

“In China I would try and try, but there were so many stars, always I miss my count.”

“The moon was sitting on the branch of a tree, and the wind came in a whisper.”

“I wondered how high is the sky and how wild is the ground.”

These children are paying attention to the world and using their writing to reflect on their lives. Shelley Harwayne has said that curriculum must be about two things, helping children see the richness of their lives and helping them get ready to change the world. The richness isn’t always easy to find, but when we become writers we do begin to look.

Albert Camus knew about richness when he wrote: “A man’s work is nothing more than the slow trek to rediscover, through detours of art, those two or three images, great or small, in whose presence his heart first opened.” His words resonate so for me that I forgive him the sexist language.

I love the notion of two or three great and simple images. So often it comes down to that, doesn’t it? We write, again and again, about what matters most to us, about what moves us, about what we fear. We write our memories and relive our lives. We write our visions and rehearse what we hope our lives might become. We write to understand.

For William Stafford, the images are mountains, water, candles, deer; for Linda Pastan, lightning, Biblical characters, tiles in a mosaic, a delicate eggshell, camellias; for Mary Oliver, a grasshopper’s legs, a bear’s snout, a lily pad, the whole natural world. “What else is there?” she asks (1995, p. 92).

And so it goes for us. Recurring images are crucial to our writing. As Camus says, it is our life’s work to look at them and discover their significance. I love the ocean, the rocky coast of Maine, small pubs in Ireland, all the churches in Italy and New York, old houses—whether in Charleston, South Carolina or Portsmouth, New Hampshire. But more than any of these, I love a tiny island off the coast of Rhode Island where I spent two weeks every single summer of my childhood until I was old enough to work there and stay until Labor Day in September.

As I write of it again and again, the days and nights there, the smells, sounds, and faces of the people come back to me with startling clarity. When I write of Block Island, I am involved in “the slow trek to rediscover” those times when my heart first opened. I write about the Spring House, that old hotel on the hill where we spent rainy days in front of the giant stone fireplace listening to my grandmother’s endless stories, and sunny mornings on the porch writing postcards to the unlucky folks at home. I write about the gulls and the taffy and the songs the theatre people sang under my window as I resisted afternoon sleep.

What I realize, as I write about my summers, is how lucky I was to have had the love of these two good people. My grandfather worked for the Long Island Press and my grandmother for Doubleday and Company fifty weeks of the year. Their two weeks off, their only vacation, they chose to spend in the company of two small granddaughters. I took it all for granted, of course, and growing up neglected them shamelessly. What does it mean to my life today? Why was I so blessed? And what is there to be learned from their lives? My writing about them is, as Mary Oliver says, “as necessary as fires for the cold” (1994).

When I was sixteen, I got a job as a waitress in the same hotel where I’d stayed since the age of four. This time, instead of a large, sunny guest room, I was given a tiny bedroom over the laundry and a bathroom to share with three other waitresses and twelve chambermaids. I thought it was exotic, my first taste of adulthood. From my bed, I could hear the chef at 5 a.m. barking orders to vendors who brought supplies, or cursing Aldo, the Italian baker whose pastries made
all our mouths water. The chef was Johnny; he was short and bald and had teeth missing. He had little patience with me, and would holler constantly, “Hey, Pepsi Generation, what’s your order?” I was awkward and clumsy and scared to death. But I was also free from the confines of home and rules and my mother’s incessant criticism. I learned my job, managed to get along with the twelve chambermaids, and before long, fell in love with John Evans, who was a Protestant, wore horned rim glasses, and came from Iowa. We climbed down Mohegan’s Bluff to swim in the rough surf, rode our bicycles all over the Island, hiked out to the tip—Sandy Point—and snuck into the hotel’s barn at night to engage in what my grandmother used to call “spooning.” My heart opened.

Island Summer

Back then we rode our bicycles in the rain over hills, past the cottage, “Smilin Through,” around a hundred ponds. You led the way down paths untraveled, though this place was mine from childhood, and you were new here. Bramble bushes tipped our tires; honeysuckle filled our heads. Back then, escaping friends, we ate tomato sandwiches on the beach or at the diner, pondered earth’s beginnings, argued the Protestant Revolt, birth control, reincarnation. Wiping juice from our chins, we knew where we stood. Back then we stood high at Mohegan’s Bluff. Arms around each other we were protected: stalwart lighthouse, sentry some hundred years or more. We knew rocks, tides, seagulls’ wings against the wind. Climbing down the face of the cliff or out long reaches of Sandy Point, the muscles in our legs ached.

Back then we walked down to the Empire where the projector would stall, and we’d join the crowd stamping our feet on the wooden floor to start the film again—“A Man for All Seasons.” You held my hand in the dark, traced circles up and down my arm.

Back then we stole hours at night in the old wooden station wagon, used to carry luggage, lobsters, and new guests by day, to sit and talk—harvest times, Kalamazoo, the Swedish exchange student you loved before me—important news. You called me “sweetheart,” held my breasts in your hands.

We swore promises, held tight to each other, believed the world—ragged cliffs, endless hills of possibility, roaring surf—all ours to swallow whole. We heard Bob Dylan sing, “Go Away from My Window,” and forgot the fall was coming.

I had the feeling then that I was invincible, that there was nothing I could not do, I had only to choose. The fog horn would blow and beams from the lighthouse splash across the sky at regular intervals, but we were safe and strong and lucky those nights. Maybe every kid has such a sense of possibility at 17 and 18, but it was the island, I think, that bestowed it on me in large measure. Sometimes I’d steal a few quick minutes from the dining room to sit outside on the wooden swing and know that I was on the brink of an incredible life. Later under stars so bright and close we could have grabbed them, I would spin plans for my future. It
Poetry seems the surest way to take the moments in our lives—those images great and small—and find both beauty and significance there.

was, as Tom Romano has called it, a time of fire and fearlessness.

Reflecting on this helps me recapture some sense of optimism in my life—a necessary feat these days. Naive though she was, that island girl was gutsy and resourceful; she had ideals, she had faith, and she was filled with joy. She knew what mattered: good friends, real work, and the power of the natural world. Writing about her makes me look at my life today and somehow find the stamina and courage to face the inevitable struggles.


Well, I shared my Block Island poems out in Minnesota years later, and something happened to confirm, yet again, Stafford’s belief that poetry makes our lives fuller. After my presentation at the conference, a man approached me looking very serious. Uh-oh, I thought, he disapproves of something here. “I have something to tell you,” he began. “I was on Block Island in 1965, and I fell in love that summer with a girl from Iowa. She and I did all the things you did, and three years later we got married and had three children. We were married for 30 years, until she died of breast cancer. This summer I am taking my kids to Block Island for the first time.” I was stunned beyond response. We had been on the island falling in love with two Iowans the very same summer. “Do you think I could get copies of your poems?” he asked.

While our writing gives us insight and changes the way we see ourselves in the world, it also connects us in profound ways to other people. Poetry seems the surest way to take the moments in our lives—those images great and small—and find both beauty and significance there. Often we have to look very carefully. Georgia Heard, in her book *Writing Towards Home*, urges us to “fall in love with three things a day” (1995, p. 60), to seek out the real beauty that surrounds us every day.

There is beauty in the seaweed on the winter beach in Maine, and in the driftwood, too; there is beauty in the old man’s face as he hoes down the sidewalk in front of the Foo Wah Grocery in Chinatown; there is even beauty in the old blue and rose colored tiles in the ancient subway stations underneath my city. But how often do I see it? It is only in the writing that we can freeze the moment, capture the image, and begin to understand.

**Morning Miracles**

*Along Grand Street*

*trucks come early, park, double park, blocking traffic and passersby. Strong men hoist crates of pomegranates, leeks, ginger, cabbage, holler to one another in Cantonese, Mandarin, or Fukanese, rare, familiar melody, echo of older times, harbinger of new. Sidewalks are wet here, fishy, like last night’s garbage. At the Sanky Bakery dark-haired women order bau, fruit-filled pastries, American coffee. As old men shuttle toward Delano Park, ready for another card game, children hustle to Sun Yat Sen Intermediate School, faces closed, eyes guarded. Shafts of pink and purple light defy morning dampness, dance around skyscrapers, yellow and red billboards, announce another day. In the tall brick building at the northeast corner of Hester and Eldridge a young woman hangs from her window to pin laundry to a line—grey cotton dress, blue overalls, children’s pajamas, jeans, white tee-shirts—rare faith amid the soot and sorrow of this world. —1996

Because we bring this passion into the classroom, we share writing as a way to dig for insight. When we teach writing, determined that it will be a conduit to each student’s truest discoveries, our kids are lucky. We give them solace and courage and wisdom; we give them survival.
The poets we love—Naomi Shihab Nye, Nikki Giovanni, Gary Soto, William Stafford, Mary Oliver, Robert Frost, Marge Piercy, Janet Wong, Linda Pastan, William Butler Yeats, Emily Dickinson, Nancy Wood, Walt Whitman—share unique insight, moments of consciousness of pain or praise. These are generous things to offer a reader. Can we be as brave? Like them, we hold our images gingerly on the page. We offer them to each other and to our students, knowing they will need to make their own “slow treks to rediscover.” But we do not write merely to become better teachers or to show others the way. We dig for meaning. We seek to know ourselves and our world, to learn why it matters that we are here at all. We write to become more than we are. In this crowded, chaotic, complicated world, we write to make it possible for our hearts to continue to open.

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