

Using Poetry for Reflection and Conversation

When President Barack Obama visited South Africa in the summer of 2013, he visited Robbings Island prison, where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated for twenty-seven years. The president brought his daughters to the cell where Mandela was imprisoned. “Seeing them stand within the walls that once surrounded Nelson Mandela, I knew this was an experience they would never forget,” Obama said.¹

At a dinner with South African president Jacob Zuma, Obama then recited the poem “Invictus” that Mandela had read to the other Robben Island prisoners to sustain their courage and give them the fortitude to withstand the horrific and unjust conditions of their captivity. “It matters not how strait the gate, / How charged with punishments the scroll,” Obama read. “I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul.”

1. M. Shear, “Obama Visits Prison Cell That Helped Shape Modern South Africa,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2013.

Obama's recognition of the power of this poem in Mandela's life speaks to poetry's capacity to touch the human soul and open up opportunities for us to retain our humanity. For Mandela and his fellow prisoners, the words of "Invictus" joined them together amid their punishing isolation and served as a talisman against hopelessness and despair.

Poetry, as Edward Hirsch wrote, "sacramentalizes experience."² It is in some way odd that mere words can have such an enduring impact, because unto itself, poetry exists as scratches on a page, spoken words, or pixels on a screen. The structure of this book illumines a potent alchemic exchange that occurs in the relationship between a poem and a reader. The commentaries highlight how, as the noted literary theorist Lois Rosenblatt contended, "A poem or a play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols."³ The companion essays represent how teachers experience that encounter. Hirsch wrote of this meeting of reader and poem by quoting the great French poet Paul Celan, who said, "A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense, too, are under way: they are making toward something."⁴ This "something" results in a response of tension, insight, emotion, and sensation. It stirs us. As Hirsch concluded, "Imagine you have gone down to the shore and there, amidst the other debris—the seaweed and rotten wood, the crushed cans and dead fish—you find an unlikely looking bottle from the past. You bring it home and discover a message inside."⁵

2. E. Hirsch, *Poet's Choice* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), xv.

3. L. M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (repr., New York: Modern Language Association, 1938), 23.

4. Quoted in E. Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), 13.

5. Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem*, 1.

This section depicts those moments of uncorking the bottle. It describes practical, pragmatic, and procedural ideas for how to find your way to the “shore” with more frequency and structure. It shares the ideas, habits, and approaches to poetry suggested by educators. It is important to note that we focus not on the pedagogy of bringing poetry to students—that is beyond the scope of this book—but on how teachers use poetry in their own lives and in the practice of being a teacher.

Produce Your Own Version of Teaching with Heart

Since we published *Teaching with Fire* in 2003, we have heard from a number of readers who have adapted the structure and form of the book to generate reflection and discussion in classes, with their colleagues, and in their community. For example, one out-of-school program launched *Growing Up*, in which teenagers identified poems and song lyrics that were important to them and wrote commentaries that described the poems and lyrics significant to their lives. A high school English class did a similar assignment focused on poems and lyrics that “they read or listened to” by themselves; students then prepared a short presentation to the class that involved a reading of a poem or lyric and sharing their commentary.

This same process is also something that you can do with your colleagues or staff. We have led numerous sessions in which teachers have selected their favorite poems and commentaries from our books and read those aloud to each other. This can be a meaningful way to build community and shared meaning in a short period of time.

Here is the process in three steps:

1. Begin by sharing several story and poem combinations from *Teaching with Fire*, *Leading from Within*, or *Teaching with Heart*.

2. Structure the assignment using the following steps and prompts, which we developed in guiding our process for creating these books.

- Identify a poem that matters to you because it informs how you think about your identity as a teacher or your work in education.
- Write a brief commentary (up to 250 words) that describes your personal relationship with and connection to the poem. Your commentary should not be an explication, but a personal narrative that describes how this poem touched you and how it helps you make sense of your life and work as an educator. Several prompts that can help frame or direct your writing include:

How did you discover the poem? What is the story behind your connection to this poem?

What about this poem has remained meaningful to you?

How do you “use” the poem to inform your work or your life?

What do you notice or what has stood out to you from this poem, and how does it show up in your life? What do you sense this poem is trying to tell you?

How does this poem help you clarify or explain what is important?

3. Provide an opportunity for a public exposition of the work, such as a printed book, a blog, or a reading.

Post Poetry Everywhere: At Home, in the Office, on Desks, on Walls . . .

Teachers do their work and live their lives amid words, language, stories, and poetry. Classroom walls; school hallways; books; assignment pages; handouts; and gifts for students, colleagues, and families are all places and spaces to fill up with poetry.

John Mayer, an elementary school teacher, has been known to “accidentally” leave a poem in the copier at school. He said that these poems are often found by appreciative audiences of other teachers or staff at school. The anonymity creates a buzz as the finder tries to discover who left the poem there. In showing the poem to others, he or she is indeed engaging with it in a fun way.

Melissa Madenski, a middle school writing teacher, wrote of the simple pleasure in giving something with no expectation of return: “I’ve written poems on napkins and left them for waiters, or tucked a poem in a library book for someone else to find. I invite students to write a poem in the sand next time they’re at the beach. In China, poets write poems on concrete with water. When the water dries off the pavement, the poem is gone.”

Angela Peery, a high school English teacher, keeps a framed copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Success” in her office and a refrigerator magnet of it at home. She said it is one of her favorite poems for when she’s feeling down about teaching.

Several educators referred to the Poem in Your Pocket Day program (www.poets.org/page.php/prmlID/406) as a source for poetry. Principal Cordell Jones wrote that Poem in Your Pocket Day is a project that one of his teachers has been doing for the past few years, and the children love it. They post poems all over campus so that everyone can see and enjoy them.

Quick Ideas for Sharing Poetry

- Post poems on doors or file cabinets as reminders, inspiration, and invitations.
- Give poems as gifts to students at graduation; keep copies to hand out in your office.
- Send poems instead of holiday cards.
- Put poems on business-size cards to give to colleagues or students at special times.

- Decorate the school with large posters of poetry that exemplifies the important values of the school, such as diversity, respect, family, success, and so on.
- Open and close class sessions with readings; and when you read poetry, be lively and energetic—bring poetry alive!
- Create opportunities for students to perform their favorite poems as part of a classroom activity, a community event, a production, or a poetry slam.
- Ask families to share their favorite poems (especially traditional and cultural) with the students and the school.
- Bring poets into the school to do workshops, readings, and so on.
- Encourage local PTAs and PTOs to buy poetry books for all their teachers.
- Sponsor an art contest in which the piece of art is inspired by a favorite poem.
- Sign up your class for any of the many “poem a day” newsletters. Check out “Resources for Teaching and Poetry on the Web” later in this section for suggested sites.

Poetry in Service of Contemplation-in-Action

Teaching is work of high action and intensity. Classroom teachers and administrators spend their days engaged in multiple layers of interactions. In fact, studies of the classroom find that each day, teachers engage in more than a thousand interpersonal exchanges with students. The constant press of engagement leaves teachers feeling worn down and depleted, and they seek ways to replenish their energy and capacity for the intellectual and emotional labor that teaching comprises.

One way teachers attempt to maintain balance and adapt to the relational demands of the work is by adopting what Parker J. Palmer has called the *vacation*

approach to life. Exhausted by activity, we take a little vacation to refresh ourselves, then we plunge back into action until we are exhausted again, then we take another vacation until we renew the energy to wear ourselves down once more—and on the cycle goes.”⁶ Palmer went on to describe how the inverse of such frenetic and defeating actions would be contemplation, and he pointedly explained that he was not proposing a version of contemplation or “vacation” that involved “sitting in a lotus position and chanting a mantra,” but rather advocating opening space for “contemplation-in-action.” By this he meant finding ways to engage in ongoing reflection on who we are and what we do that matters most—while we are engaged in the work. And by so doing, we can find a way to combat the harried nature of our days and bring some measure of rest and a sense of focus to our work.

The teachers described a range of approaches that enable poetry to be part of that integral process:

Kirsten Olson shared how poems help ground her and ready her for teaching:

Poems require me to be quiet, to slow down, and to focus. Reading a poem is an exercise in mindfulness; to breathe into the meaning of the poem and to follow the poet’s images and shifts of meaning can calm me and take me to a place of simply being. I often read a poem just before class, to help center myself when I am in emotional turmoil, or to encourage myself to push deeper into the truth of a situation or to see the truth as a teacher. Poems like David Whyte’s “All the True Vows” encourage me to greater interpersonal courage and honesty as a teacher, or help me remember what’s important. Just before class, to read something like Franz Kafka’s “Learn to Be Quiet” helps me be the teacher I’d like to be.

6. P. J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 16.

Sandie Merriam, a newly retired teacher, wrote that the poem she submitted for the book “has been my constant companion since my friend gave it to me. I have handwritten it into my grade book this year in order to keep it visible even in the last months of my career as a teacher.”

Jay Casbon of Oregon State University uses poetry as a way to inspire him in tough times: “We all need as much inspiration and courage as we can muster in these very trying times. I use poetry as a kind of vitamin supplement for my spirit each and every day. It works!”

Capturing Attention

After winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, Mary Oliver wrote a short user’s guide to poetry. She called it *A Poetry Handbook*. In it she describes how poems create “an *instance*—an instance of attention, of noticing something in the world.”⁷

Jovan Miles, a high school math coach, wrote,

Sometimes I write song lyrics, lines from a poem, quotes, or questions on a note card and use a paper clip to attach the note card to my shirt pocket. Students will walk up to me and ask me what my message means, and we’ll have a short conversation about the message, why I chose it, and how it applies to school. It’s an easy way for me to make students think deeply about something without my having to overtly bring it to their attention. I try to write things that will provoke a question, a laugh, a double take, or some other type of response that lets me know either that students “get” what I’m trying to say or that they want to “get” it.

7. M. Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 74.

For example, Miles told us,

I once wrote, “You can pay for school but you can’t buy class” on my note card and wore it around on my shirt pocket all day. The line was rapped by Jay Z on T. I.’s song “Swagga Like Us,” which was a popular song when I taught eighth-grade math during the 2008–2009 school year. The eighth-grade students were often very rude to one another and to some of the new staff members, and I wanted to bring that to their attention without lecturing them or beating them over the head with admonitions about good behavior. I was able to teach them that good manners and socially acceptable behavior, or class, was something that had immense value to them as adolescents and would later be useful to them as adults. I was only able to do this because my “lesson” came in the form of a conversation initiated by the students.

Poetry among Colleagues

Teachers shared how they found poetry to be a powerful asset in intentionally creating space and practices hospitable to meaningful conversations. Poetry read and considered in a group helped start conversations between teachers and those they worked with and for in the school setting—students, colleagues, administrators, and parents.

Several teachers shared how poetry can help to open meetings or create a positive atmosphere for group work. Angela Peery wrote: “When I conduct meetings of an English department at a school, I often open meetings with a provocative poem and allow the teachers to speak to it in whatever fashion they wish. A useful resource for these poems is the Poetry 180 website (www.loc.gov/poetry/180/), where teachers can find a poem a day to use with high school students.”

Jay Casbon shared how he used poetry to help draw out qualities he wanted in a team effort: “The poem I used to set the tone for an evaluation was Wendell Berry’s ‘Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.’ I wanted to encourage and give permission for more courage, innovation, and risk taking in my role as a dean.”

Principal David Hagstrom explained how he has selected and used poems to help his faculty think about specific issues, challenges, and possibilities. Poems have served as initiators of conversations or group processes:

As a “person encourager” (when I’m talking or listening to a person involved in a discernment process), I often use the little poem of Shel Silverstein’s, “The Voice” (from *Falling Up*), in the conversation. As a “school coach” (when I’m attempting to help teachers find their “shared vision” and determine their next steps), I often use William Stafford’s “The Way It Is.” I use this poem with entire school groups because of my belief that a school’s vision is not “created anew,” it is “polished.” I think that you have to look and listen for what’s really important in the work that you do with children in your community, identify that fine work, and then move forward.

Jani Barker, who provides professional development, attested to the power of reading poems in workshops:

I will read poems during relevant moments throughout the workshop sessions. Usually a particular poem will help us support our pedagogy with conversations that include personal stories. A meaningful poem can take our dialogue from workshop theory into the realities of the classroom. This not only helps teachers construct new understandings but also helps them transfer this knowledge into their students’ learning experiences.

I have been grateful and humbled when listening to teachers share their personal responses to various poems. A tangible change occurs when people in a group open their minds and hearts to each other’s stories. We

begin to understand that although our backgrounds may be different, there is a thread of trust forming. This trust allows us to extend our comfort level and reach out to new ways of seeing and understanding each other, the children we teach, and our pedagogy.

Others have used poetry books as a way to build community across large districts. In Fairfax, Virginia, where there are 230 Fairfax County schools and centers, John Marston helped organize an effort to give poetry books as gifts to teachers and arrange for book talks for lead mentor teachers. The Fairfax County Council of PTAs also hosted a book reading and posted the book on its website as its recommendation for a Teacher Appreciation Week gift. Working through such large systems is a great way to share poetry with many people.

Learn to Use Poems to Facilitate Conversations

Numerous educators described how they have used poetry to jump-start conversations or group processes. They described how they would introduce a poem and then launch a discussion. A key element of initiating and facilitating a conversation that uses poetry is first selecting the right poem and then having a range of open-ended questions or an activity to guide discussion.

Marcy Jackson, who prepares facilitators for the Center for Courage & Renewal programs, shared these ideas for initiating an activity with a poem:

- First, allow yourself to just sit with a poem. Read it through silently, then read it again—slowly, out loud.
- Let the poem's themes emerge for you. Enter the imagery. Notice the random thoughts and feelings that arise for you.
- Discover what this poem is saying to you—you personally. And then ask yourself what larger messages, themes, and questions are addressed in the poem.

- Jot down the questions that surface within you as you read the poem—questions about phrases, words, connections of one image to another, and surprising juxtapositions, or universal questions (you may choose to use some of these as “prompts” for conversation or journaling when you use the poem with a large group).
- Think about the ways that this poem connects with the larger themes or questions you want to work with—Where might it lead the group? How might it open things up for people? How will it move the conversation to a deeper place?

Other longtime facilitators also shared specific prompts that they have used along with a poem to engage others in reflection and discussion:

- What do you think the poem is about?
- Where does this poem intersect with your life or your background?
- What do you notice in this poem? What stood out to you?
- What image, sound, or phrase do you find yourself drawn to?
- What is happening in this poem, and to whom?
- What do you find elusive or opaque?
- What do you sense this poem is trying to tell you?
- Whom would you give this poem to, and why?

One of the “dangers” of using poetry in groups is that facilitators often try to churn through a process too quickly. Poetry can be intimidating, conjuring up bad memories of high school poetry encounters focused on dogmatic line-by-line explication. Several facilitators suggested that reading a poem and then providing time for group rumination are critical to engaging around poetry. One technique used involves asking participants to freewrite. In a freewriting exercise, participants read a poem and then are provided with an opportunity to write. Facilitators either

supply prompts or encourage the writers to compose in a freewheeling and open way, just recording their feelings, responses, and sensations. Through the process of freewriting, participants can work through ideas in the poems and develop insights that they can share in discussion. After a freewrite, it can be effective to meet in small groups of two or three for writers to speak about what came up for them before returning to the larger group.

Sharing Poems at Important Moments of Transition

Many teachers shared how they use poetry to start things off in class and meetings, to segue between activities, or to bring something to a close. They described reading poems at transitions, such as when opening a classroom; including them in introductory letters home to families and students; and sharing them during public talks at graduation and other events. Poetry traffics in metaphor, and the compressed and intensified language triggers a response in those listening.

Michael L. Crauderueff, a high school Spanish teacher, shares poetry with his graduating seniors: “Along with a pot of rosemary, I always offer them a poem as a farewell gift. The Antonio Machado poem I have shared in this book—‘Caminante’—is one I often give them, printed on beautiful paper with a beach and shoreline in the background. During our final Spanish class of the year, I ask my seniors to reflect on the days we have spent together and to savor those moments, as they will now begin to walk their own paths to the future.”

Michael Poutiatine, professor of organizational leadership, uses poetry to shift a group’s mind-set:

I use poetry as a doorway into a new or hidden understanding, as a way to engage students to think differently about their work, their lives, and how they construct meaning. I rarely start classes with poetry. I am much more inclined to use a poem in the middle of a class to invite a shift in

thought patterns or structures. Or I will close a class with a poem that invites the students to leave with a different way of understanding a topic or conversation from what they came in with—food for thought as they walk out the door. Often these poems will resurface in later classes, brought back by the students for reconsideration.

Lianne Raymond teaches grades 11 and 12 and often has the same students for both years. “By the time they graduate, I know them pretty well. So for their last report card I find a quote or a poem that captures the spirit of the student and print it out on card stock, and then I write a personalized message on the back and include that with the report card. Students seem to really love them, many of them telling me years later that they still have it pinned up in their room.”

Marianne Novak Houston, a retired middle school teacher, also has heard from a student how her experience of a poem stayed with her over time:

I used poems the students related to, and liked to invite them to write poems in the same “form” or “format” from their own perspective, from their own hearts. This proved to be fun and rather wonderful over the forty years I taught! Recently, I got a letter from a young woman who is today an attorney in Chicago. I hadn’t heard from her since she finished sixth grade. She wrote to say hello and to tell me that the most important experience of her school life was in sixth grade when I invited the girls to write their own poem, after Rudyard Kipling’s poem “IF.” She sent me a copy of that writing and explained how she had tried to live up to what she’d written.

John J. Sweeney, elementary school teacher, spoke of how illustrating can provide another perhaps less intimidating way into poetry for someone of any age:

I like to give my students copies of poems printed on a page with space to illustrate. It really makes them look at the poem closely, think about

what the poet is saying, and respond to the poem. This is useful for younger students because poetry can elicit feelings that are difficult for young students to verbalize. I suspect that this could be useful for readers of all ages, as it can be intimidating to attempt to respond to a poet's words with our own words. Illustrating also provides students with a personalized copy of a poem to cherish and can create a long-lasting connection to the piece.

Reading Poetry Out Loud

Rick Jackson, cofounder and senior fellow at the Center for Courage & Renewal, described the experience of listening to a poem read out loud:

It is quite amazing to be sitting, silent and spellbound, in a large audience while listening to a poem being read. It is a way of being intellectually and spiritually intimate in public, of being, as Parker Palmer calls it, "alone together." And it is a wonderful way to connect across generations. A few years back, poet laureate Billy Collins came to Bainbridge Island, Washington, and read in a private home to a couple dozen people. When he returned two years later, he filled the Island Center Hall with two hundred eager listeners. And when he came the next year, he packed the high school gym with over a thousand—a standing-room crowd of all ages: elementary, middle, and high school youth, and adults of all races and walks of life. At some point during the reading, virtually everyone laughed and cried without hiding either. He helped us come closer together in community through the intimacy of words shared in public.

Robert Pinsky asserted not only that listening to poetry is a communal act but that live performance is the medium through which poetry should be experienced: "Reading a poem silently instead of saying a poem is like the difference between

staring at sheet music or actually humming or playing the music on an instrument.”⁸ Michael Poutiatine described how he recites and performs poems in meetings:

I only do this when the context calls for a “sage on the stage” approach. For me it becomes about reading the context and using some recitation for the purpose of inspiration. I have found it remarkably powerful if used at the right time in the right way, but I am also aware that it can backfire. The function of the use here is generally twofold. First it is about creating engagement, attention, interest; I find that a quality recitation can elicit a deeper engagement with material than can a simple reading (à la Poetry Out Loud). Second it is an invitation into me—to know me on a different level. So the poems I tend to choose are the ones that have deep resonance with me, the passionate resonance—the ones that give me chills or tears every time I read them.

Penny Gill, a college professor at Mount Holyoke, wrote: “At points of the semester when I just know the students will be weary and worn out, I take a poem in and just read it to them, telling them they need a little present.” Liam Corley, currently an instructor at the US Naval Academy, wrote that he’d “found that the oral performance of poems enlivens discussions,” suggesting the following link as a great source for such performances: www.favoritepoem.org/videos.html.

The Web and YouTube offer many opportunities to see and hear poems read out loud by many different voices and in a variety of styles—by the poets and spoken-word poets, as well as students and teachers. Hannah Cushing, a high school language arts teacher, recommended Button Poetry (<http://buttonpoetry.com/>) as a source for performance poetry. According to that website, “We seek to showcase the power and diversity of voices in our community. By encouraging and broadcasting the best and brightest performance poets of today, we hope to

8. Quoted in “Giving Voice to the American Audience for Poetry,” accessed January 1, 2014, <http://www.favoritepoem.org/principles.html>.

broaden poetry's audience, to expand its reach and develop a greater level of cultural appreciation for the art form."