

Mess Making

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I think it's the mess of poems that allows me to work with high school students. Even though that messiness is the one thing that is most difficult to convey—how a poem can be built of anything, but how it also has to have a kind of solid structure, some sort of frame to hold it together, like any building. Teaching this is a strange process. Sure, there are ways to get to it: line, image, sound. That's what we teach. But sometimes when a poem works, you can't name what's working. It's just got that thing. Some people would call it *duende*, others call it *soul*.

But no matter what you call it, it's nothing you can put into a succinct definition on a chalkboard. Once upon a time, in the land of rhyme and scansion, I think we believed we could. But free verse has made defining wilder. There's so much ground to cover. Mood and voice and timing and off-rhyme. Defying expectations. Taking startling turns. Doing the unexpected. Doing what can't be explained. That's how you get to a good poem.

It's funny. I've had people tell me, instruct me actually, not to try to teach kids how to scan a line or to do anything with formal meter because they won't hear it. That hasn't been my experience. My experience is that if you show a young person how a poem is a big, messy pot of stuff you are just trying to get a handle on, they get that. You tell them cook in some image and some repetition and some song and some slant rhyme. If you propose that prosody and meter, like image and rhyme, is just one more ingredient—like carrots (some stews need them, some stews don't) then they'll be open to it. And I've worked with kids who actually requested we do more lessons in scansion. That threw me. I didn't tell them they'd just requested more broccoli. We just opened the pot and stirred.

That's the coolest thing about contemporary poetry to me—you can teach it a lot like you can teach someone how to cook. Sometimes you use the recipes that require all the special bakeware and

brine and layering. And other times you just turn up the heat on a well-oiled pan and freestyle with whatever's in the fridge. Sometimes you get magic that way. These lines from Norman Shepherd at Mumford High remind me of that:

I put in my magic box . . .

A peanut
And out came a new way of life

The thing is, some of this mess making happens before you ever get to the page. There are poems that never see the anthologies. Snippets of lines. Freestyle moments of breakthrough. Or maybe more importantly, there are connections you make with kids who, in turn, get to work with people who take their art seriously and make a living doing so. The permission it gives them to take their own writing seriously is not lost on them. But the process of teaching writing is about as messy as the process of making poems. Every week I go in with a recipe book and every week I feel like we've come out with a dish I didn't exactly mean for us to make.

Sometimes the poem happens in a classroom without any writing happening at all. When you get to ask a kid what they think about a poem, or about themselves, or about things going on in the world. A lot of the magic is off the page. That "Magic Box" poem came from the year I worked at Mumford in 2009, the year after President Obama was elected. There was so much energy and joy in the air that year. I remember being surprised, not only that the high school kids were excited to write about the new president, but that they "got it."

Like Norman got it:

I put in hundreds of years of oppression
And out came a black president

I put in a bee
And out came a flower full of nectar
The sweetest thing on earth

Norman who seemed, in class, so cool, reserved. One of those young people I wished I could have followed. He took everything in stride. He got the mess of poems, that stuff we love, the wildness, the unanchored, the freshly excavated. There's nothing like that.

Still, there are poems that resonate the process, that somehow reflect the work we have done in class. When Jonathan Hosey at Detroit School of Arts showed me "My Last Words Before My Epitaph is Written," (see page 123 for the full poem) I felt like I saw a different side of him. Jonathan is always so sober in class and so very logical. His is a voice of reason.

He is a sweet and warm young man who always seems to have it together. He was a good writer when we started working together, which is why he made the Citywide Poets team. But I think the messy part meant a lot to Jonathan's creativity. I think it's safe to say he found a way to cut loose in his poems, to explore other possibilities. And that is, I think, the best we can do: open more doors. In this poem, Jonathan embarks upon an unwieldy adventure that begins with REM sleep. "The phase in my dreams," he says, "where they're no longer in my hands." I've often thought teaching poetry would be easier if we were all asleep. There'd be so much less resistance to the strange backdrop of poems. The poem as a phase where our imagination is no longer in our hands. Where we turn it over to the poem.

"My Last Words" is a kind of turned-over poem, a stream of consciousness that meanders along a cityscape in order to explore a simple thought: "I've come to realize that I'm succeeding in my life when I live in a society that doesn't expect me to succeed."

And that's the beautiful thing about working with young people. They so often write things to inspire themselves and others. I'm moved by how much structure young people like, by how much they want to communicate. Their poems don't alienate, or leave behind. They are not likely to write the poems that allude to old, ancient texts a lot of people don't remember. They tend to want to bring their readers along. When they play, they tend push it back toward function.

Say I can't, I won't, I dare you. I did, I do, and I will.

If I go in offering these young folks a way to think about getting

weirder and wilder, it's the young people who remind me to bring it home. They remind me that poems can convey something, can communicate, can resolve.

That relationship—between the artist and young student—is so fantastic. I love the tension. I love that I leave every class feeling like I've suggested, encouraged, and, yes, learned.