For Robert

May 19, 2012

She is speaking softly, boldly, as she did when she was my fifth-grade student. But now she is a post-doc fellow. She is telling me about the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) show she saw yesterday.

The genius of Cindy Sherman is…

She is explaining why I should open to this artist, these photos: self-portraits as a grotesque, a man, a poseur … as anybody else but herself.

Her words impart life experience different from mine.

I remember when she, a fifth-grader, explained the Charles Demuth painting, I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold, to her classmates and me, on our Metropolitan Museum trip.

She stared at the painting, moving forward and back. Then stopped. The three 5s in the painting were, she said, getting bigger because the fire engine was coming toward us.

She felt the motion her words imparted. So we saw it too, felt it: the motion. And the emotion: emergency.

She had empathized with Demuth’s empathy with the William Carlos Williams poem, “The Great Figure.” Words Demuth translated through his own experience. Emotion anybody among us might experience, despite our diversity.

The genius of Cindy Sherman is that she captures…

Her words emerge: fluid, immediate.

… that she captures all possibilities of being human. The human disjunction, ambiguity. The hideousness, beauty we all share.

Now she must catch a plane back to California. As she walks slowly, step by deliberate step toward the door of this crowded restaurant, leaning forward on her two canes, diners stare.

* * *

May 19, 1989

I dreamed of freedom, and now, finally, my three children

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Then I am here in the Henry Viscardi School, an elementary and high school for the “severely physically disabled.” Beautiful, black-braided Bettina, stuffed in her wheelchair, understands immediately. She must help me.

in school, my husband at work, I sit in my office editing my poem—then hear my voice on the phone: “volunteer.”

Then I am here. A modern, windowed fifth-grade classroom in the Henry Viscardi School, a partially state-funded elementary and high school for the “severely physically disabled.” The legless boy, the wheelchairs. The teacher is asking me to help with math. Beautiful, black-braided Bettina stuffed in her wheelchair, understands immediately. She must help me.

August 1989
Today I bike from my brick house, green lawn, to school, a tan modern sprawl, a close other world. I was supposed to teach American Indian history during summer session, but I showed them Wassily Kandinsky painting postcards with his poems and played some Arnold Schoenberg music. The elementary school principal said, get a teaching grant. But I’m just here once a week, just presenting music, paintings, poems, just inventing exercises to elicit words. Not teaching.

September 1989
School started this week and now they want me in the high school too. The high school principal knows my name, kissed me hello in the library.

February 1990
Today two mute boys in a junior class chose the same Pablo Picasso painting, the most fragmented. One wrote the black and white material was a “curtain.” One wrote that it was “black and white minds.”

March 1990
Years I couldn’t read much. Now I can’t stop reading. I think it’s for them. Walt Whitman, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens … Novels, poems, criticism, letters, journals, biographies … excited to learn. For them.

October 1990
Calida, a dark, paralyzed Madonna, a new student who got shot, hands me her poem as she glides past me for the door.

I am 11 years old
and sometimes I feel mad and angry
because it feels like I’m the only handicapped child
in this whole world
I sometimes go to the front of my house
and people stare at me
like no one’s ever seen a kid in a wheelchair
and that bothers me so much
that I go to my room
and I ask God why me
why am I the one to be made fun of
why am I the one to be stared at all the time
and I read the bible
and it tells me that those who are made fun of
will one day be someone very special
and will get to succeed in this world

Before I came here did I stare?

June 1991
In each class we collate this year’s poems for the end of the year anthology I type up with two fingers. But their handwriting is part of the art. A child with no arms, only fingers. A child with casts on his arms. Their writing, in their style, seems beautiful. Vance noticed the two spaces I typed between two words in his poem and didn’t like them.

September 1991
The last line of Bettina’s poem is “… what makes us so different, so the same?”

January 1992
As I’m passing through the library to get to the art
This is the excitement in the classroom: the surprise of what’s inside us, said.
Shana, in a sophomore class, tests at fourth-grade level. My first year here she hid in the bathroom with her switchblade, and was expelled. Now, her spontaneous poems make her the class star.

The clouds sprinkle the sea with illusion. As a path of gloss.

SHANA

Shana, in a sophomore class, tests at fourth-grade level. My first year here she hid in the bathroom with her switchblade, and was expelled. Now, her spontaneous poems make her the class star. But “I’m vanishing,” she says today in a poem she reads to the class, her mouth an O trying to form a word. She hands me her second poem and asks me to read. But Kacie wants to read her poem. And Rainbow, paralyzed in her wheelchair, bruised knees exposed below her red pleated skirt, insists on reading her René Magritte poem first, which ends, “the rose is calling for help / because it doesn’t want to grow anymore / it wants to stop growing.”

Finally reading Shana’s poem aloud, I’m stuck on a word. She leans over me to help. This sounds like a song, I say. I have songs she says, and pulls out two. I read aloud and ask her if she wants Mr. G., the English teacher who plays the guitar, to compose tunes. But she’s finished with that, grabs a Claude Monet postcard from my pile, shuffles to a computer, sits. Her hands play the keys like a pianist transported by the piece.

September 1993

In these months before the Joan Miró show, even in some classes that are not going, we look through the catalogue. It’s chronological so, again, I create mysteries such as What changes, what stays the same? Finally I tell them what Miró said: “A red circle, the moon, a star keep coming back.”

Before I came here I interviewed artists, to hear in their words confirmation of what I saw in their art processes. Miró, Matisse, like the artists I interviewed, were finding a language for human experience. Louise Bourgeois told me: “It is a progression … later on not only do I accept the self but I enjoy it.” Self-confiding, then, self-confidence. And, during our four years together here, students do seem less self-conscious, in class and in their poems. As I am, too.

In telling I begin to see the human consistency. Miró said these forms kept coming back “in spite of me.” Memory is the muse. Mnemosyne, for the ancient Greeks. Memory images, according to modern psychiatry, which certain early experience seeds. Like the images Miró said he was “recovering “… One does not discover in life,” he said.

November 1993

Miró returned home to his family farm and had his first breakthrough in an original, detailed, almost surreal portrait of The Farm (1921-2). Shy Grace slowly writes, then crosses out her “Farm” poem, a breakthrough for her: “There are footprints / that go a short way then suddenly stop. / The tree is hundreds of peacocks floating above / the earth connected by one horse’s hoof. The house / is made of thousands of pounds of sand.”

December 1993

Before I came here, my MFA thesis: How a Giorgio De Chirico painting image is in a John Ashbery poem; a Charles Sheeler image in a William Carlos Williams poem, etc. Minds are connected despite language, times. Now I’m showing classes one mind in two languages: Miró’s prose poem for his painting “Carnival of Harlequins.” Juniors, lit by this visual and verbal free association, write feverishly: “… red leaking on all other colors …” “… black hooked to the brown path through the city …” “… black and the color inside light …”. Except for Jacinda, who stares at something I can’t see. I don’t walk over to help as I sometimes do. Eight minutes to go, face down she writes: “The good side
of life and the dark side / life’s repetitious tragedies, crimes / and results / complex thoughts as one listens to a piece of music / one’s inner struggle of doing what’s right and / desiring to be the innocent one.”

February 1994
I’m beginning to understand: Why art?
Miró: “To rediscover the sources of human feeling.”
His breakthrough, The Farm, a weirdly original farm-
house painted when he returned home.

What is art?
Matisse: “It is the recollection of my sensations …”
His breakthrough, “The Joy of Life,” when he re-
turned home metaphorically. In his early Eden paint-
ing, naked people loll on yellow grass below orange,
pink, and blue-green trees while six naked dancers, deeper in,
circle wildly. Soon the six will re-
appear as five, the whole subject in Dance. Five dancers circling
on green ground below blue sky fill the canvas. The “recollection
of my sensations.” Five, circling wildly, arms reaching to attach.
But two can’t hold on.

March 1994
I wake at four a.m. with what Jay said: Miró is “loose
and free like Michael Jordan.” We had compared H.M.
Sorgh’s The Lute Player (1660) with Miró’s 1928 inter-
pretation, Dutch Interior. Jay said Miró was “the winner.”
As he made an analogy between art and sports, I thought,
in both we re-create ourselves by returning “home.” The
backcourt. Home base. First seed. Like Miró to his farm. Matisse to his Eden of free-wheeling sensation.

April 1994
Handwritten note from enormous book of grieving poems given to me by all classes:

Dear Barbara,
I am so sorry your mother died.

Fifth-grader Blair: “I feel like a plant / without sunshine / trying to grow. I feel like a sign / They stare at me ...”

June 1994
Mute Calev in his wheelchair—turquoise eyes, straight blond hair clipped to frame his perfect face—refuses to use the Dyna Box that will speak for him. He’s eight or nine, so handsome, maybe smart, but when I try to get him to join in he won’t move his hands on his tray to words between the left NO or the right YES. The class encourages him but Calev refuses. Is he listen-
ing to the Sakura Sakura tape I play? Others hear colors dancing, playing, praying, as his head slides off the leather head holder on his wheelchair back. So I grab my homemade color chart, loud color strips I got free from a paint store and pasted on manila paper: bright, soft, hard, silent colors I place on his tray—what color do you feel?—but his two hands stay on home base between NO and YES, then slowly slowly scan edges of peach, pink, white, black, all blues, and land on red.

November 1995
Fifth-grader Blair: “I feel like a plant / without sunshine / trying to grow. I feel like a sign / They stare at me ...”

I don’t stare. Here I feel—in a different way than in my protected life—human connection.

December 1995
I don’t know how I chose this school, but today, when the visiting public school teacher asked me to “teach” there too, for pay, I refused. I’m just a volunteer, but the remuneration is unquantifiable.

October 1996
At the Metropolitan Museum, we are before the huge Édouard Manet portrait of a fifer beside the Eva Gonzalès copy. How are they alike? Different? I ask.
They see different buttons, jackets, pants, shoes, face rouge, backgrounds. Natie says the Manet is bigger. Jacques says they’re not the same style. But the same hat, he says. Then Farah, who told me she got shivers when she first saw these paintings, says, one copied the other. Who copied who? asks Mathilde. They look at dates, vote on which they like best, they vote on which is more modern. Tim says you could enter the Gonzalès but not the Manet space.

I look out at them, listen, worried we block the way to the next room because a crowd has gathered, 40 or 50 people. I hear myself, calm lecturer on a video I fast forward. Do I see Farah’s thinness; Omar’s new haircut, jacket, and how he’s not on his walker but in a wheelchair? Is Tilly bored? Giles is deep in a corner and not talking. They are voting on who is the teacher, Diego unafraid to be the only one not voting for Manet. They vote on who is more original: Manet. Tilly says: If Manet is the teacher why is Gonzalès less original? A student is always the teacher.

March 1999
Before the Chuck Close show at MoMA, we look at his portraits. He was not born disabled but is a paraplegic, I say. Aggie asks: Not being born disabled, is he better off, or worse?

April 1999
Dominika, who mainstreamed, returns to teach with me, nervous, her first time teaching. She is present, straightforward, and they like that. In fifth grade, my first year here, her long blond hair curtained her face as she wrote her first poem slowly, then crushed it:

**Georgia O’Keeffe Flower**
The flower looks like a girl on the ground, lying near the pond.
Hidden by leaves and flowers, she slowly looked in

Tilly says: If Manet is the teacher why is Gonzalès less original? A student is always the teacher.

The generosity here. Students pushing wheel-chaired students through the halls. Students giving up an urgent need to yell out a poetry line or an epiphany to help a non-speaker find words.

I wouldn’t be here if not for Mrs. I., the fifth-grade teacher, my first day here, who sensed my aptitude was not in math. Or the principal who asked me to stay when I recommended a better poet to replace me. The generosity. Of administrators, teachers, nurses,
aides, volunteers. Many with PhDs. Some here for twenty-five years, or more.

January 2007
Dominika and I celebrate. She passed her University of California, Berkeley PhD orals. Her long, blond hair short now, still parted in the middle. After dinner and the Edna St. Vincent Millay program at the 92nd Street Y, I drop her off on my way home. Her parents greet me in their lighted living room. She hands me a recently published anthology in which her poem appears. Her poem is naked, original, deep. Like her beginning poems. She sits beside her mother on the pink-flowered sofa to sign the anthology for me. The same determination in her fingers slowly forming the letters: “...and had you not rescued my poem so many years ago I doubt this one would have followed.”

May 19, 2011
Next week, our yearly poetry assembly in the gym. All students are invited to read their poems from this year’s anthology. Some will read for others who won’t or can’t. This week I ask about their writing process:

Where do your poems come from?

Janelle, 11th grade: “A season inside, I pulled it from my soul.

Zora, 6th grade: “A dream is a huge furry beast running after you. A poem is you running after a huge furry beast.”

Are poems “given,” like your dreams?

Zora, 6th grade: “A dream is a huge furry beast running after you. A poem is you running after a huge furry beast.”

What does it feel like to write your poems?

Avery, 12th grade: “Writing poetry is different from other subjects. I’m free to fly, dangerous, high, intoxicated. I really mean that.”

Isabella, 7th grade: “After writing a good poem it feels new to you, it feels part of yourself, your baby. I had my poem stuck in my head and then my head opened. My imagination flew onto the paper out of my head. Then it kept happening. It kept flowing out of my head onto the paper. It was incredible. I couldn’t do it last year.”

When was writing easier?

Mason, 6th grade: “I liked writing better older. I was freer when I was younger but I liked my poems better when I was older. Younger, I didn’t know about the world, what lay ahead of me in the open sky.”