



the right to inquire

Approaching the Civil Rights Movement through Poetry

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Jason Lee Middle School is perched in an area above the docks and railroad terminus of central Tacoma, Washington, which has housed a succession of immigrant populations throughout the last century. Recent arrivals from the Ukraine, Ethiopia, Somalia, Central and South America have entered a community that struggles against being identified as disadvantaged. In January of 2003, I was invited by seventh grade Language Arts teachers Justina Johnson and Chad Davidson to deliver a series of poetry workshops in conjunction with their current unit on the Civil Rights Movement. My goal was to get the students to care about civil rights by bringing the subject into the present tense. Most of my students' parents were born after 1965, so the children were already twice removed from the roots of the movement. I wanted to show them that *movements* mean just that: actions towards change put in motion by questions.

The first question middle school students have is, "What does this have to do with me?" By asking the age-old question: "Where are you from?" I invited them to see themselves in the context of the ongoing pursuit of the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Since colonial times (and in some cases still to this day), a person's answer to "Where are you from" has determined the kinds of rights and liberties he or she received. Some students described their families' arrivals on Mayflower-like vessels, others on slave ships, still others on airplanes from Eastern Europe, or over the land bridge from Asia. Despite the diversity of origins, we agreed that each of us is the child of people who survived the trip to America. While the American dream for rights and freedoms hasn't been realized equally for each of us, each one of us is a survivor, strong enough to contribute to the continuing movement towards this dream.

“Where are you from?” I repeated. This time, I asked them to respond by integrating family legends, holiday rituals, genealogical information, descriptions of ancestral struggles, personal joys, and their own imaginings and sensory details into a poem of origin:

I Am From

I am from
 The whim of my mama
 From the cheese in Wisconsin
 From the sports that I play
 I am from the car that
 Drove me to Washington.
 I am from the house I spent
 My first years in.
 I am from what used to
 Be the mayor of Santiago, Chile.
 I am from the heart and soul
 Of my family
 I am from Independence Day.
 I am from the letters in my name.

—Geno

Me...

I am from two different worlds.
 Two different sides of the earth.
 Both honored, yet both different.
 One from Croatia, one from Europe.
 One served an outlaw, one served their family
 One came in the western time filled with
 Cowboys, Indians and desert.
 One came in the war, the time of
 Pain, suffering, and truth.
 One was built on a rock
 One had to build their rock
 I am from two different worlds.

I am from my father’s sweat,
 My mother’s love and help,
 My grandfather’s love of animals,
 My grandpa’s way of holding
 Things together.
 I am from the Navy, which I
 Was born into.
 I am from the parties of Mardi Gras

Which I lived with for what
 Seemed like forever.
 I am from the rain that pours on the earth.
 Who am I? I am me.

—Amanda

In writing their “I Am From” poems, the kids found the power of their voices. Sharing the poems created a community in which each was invited and expected to speak from the richness of her or his unique point of view. I discussed how America was founded on the dream of freedom for all, but by men who understood “all men are created equal” as self-evidently referring to “all landowning white men.” When I asked students (and adults) in Ms. Johnson’s classes to stand up if they were equal by this definition, we all stayed seated. The kids were upset. They didn’t think this was right. They had moved out of their personal concerns into engagement with the inequality written into the Declaration of Independence that led to the questions that sparked the Civil Rights Movement. For this reason, they loved reading “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes, with its compassionate, patriotic challenge to America to live up to its dream. A prolific poet, playwright, and educator, Hughes became famous during the pre-civil rights days when many African American writers felt compelled to distance themselves from their history and culture in order to achieve the American dream. Hughes went against that, writing with the rhythm of blues and jazz and infusing his work with authentic African American idioms and speech patterns.

Hughes died in 1967, a year before Martin Luther King’s assassination. In “Let American Be America Again,” the students were particularly drawn to lines that resonate with King’s visionary rhetoric.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
 The steel of freedom does not stain....
 Let America be America again.

They also picked up on its similarity to the “sticks and stones” retort to name-calling. They were moved, as Hughes meant readers to be. Joining him in the questions that run throughout the poem, they engaged in a uniquely American optimism: the belief that ordinary citizens can and must act to right what is wrong.

In contrast to Hughes’s poem, with its defiant commentary on the disparity between America-as-ideal and the America where most of us live, we read Emma Lazarus’s quixotic “The New Colossus,” the poem almost literally written in stone at the base of the Statue of Liberty. But a movement was in progress as we read: America was about to declare war against Iraq. Fort Lewis is just south of Tacoma, and many of the kids had family members stationed there. We talked about what the war could mean for them and for the Iraqi people. To encourage them to see the Iraqis as people, we read “Freedom” by the celebrated Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef.¹ With their heads and hearts full of these poems and our discussions, I asked them, “What does freedom mean to you?”

Are We Free?

Are we free my brothers and sisters?
 Back then we were not.
 The white was superb.
 The colored was dirty.
 The white got the front house.
 The black got the back house.
 The light skinned was in the house
 Serving the white
 And the dark was outside in the field.
 The colored was threatened.
 But not now.
 We are free my brothers and sisters.

—Donovan

Freedom isn't a word that we use
 Often. Back then in the 50s states
 Like Alabama made it look like they
 Ripped the Declaration of Independence. Today
 People take advantage of our freedom,
 Like committing football riots in the street
 Or even doing that at Mardi Gras, going
 Over the speed limits for their satisfying
 Needs. America is the only state with real freedom
 And I wish people could understand.

—Tay

Using the text-melding technique from Sheryl Noethe and Jack Collom's wonderful *Poetry Everywhere* (T&W Books, 1994), I took it a step further by asking the kids to choose nine vital words from the Hughes poem, then a total of nine words from "The New Colossus" and "Freedom." Basically, I asked them to structure their poems as follows:

Line 1: Use the first word from the Hughes list and the first word from the Lazarus/Youssef list.

Line 2: Use the second word from the Hughes list and the second word from the Lazarus/Youssef list).

Lines 3 through 9: Continue the same process.

What resulted were poems that melded not only the words but the poems' disparate ideas and images in ways that showed the students were weighing and measuring their messages, assimilating them into their own changing thoughts and feeling about the real and ideal America, the Civil Rights Movement, and their own lives.

America! So proud of its Colossus!
 Going towards its dream with brazen steps!
 Then it's lost astride two desires.
 Somehow, it missed the imprisoned;
 passed the exiles!
 It does not realize in the midst of its pomp:
 no one is searching among the masses who
 stand on wobbling feet, yearning for
 freedom, teeming outside America's barriers.

—Annalee

I embrace myself through freedom.
 I express myself by doing what I want.
 I refuse to do what I'm forced to.
 My dreams will come true and not be imprisoned
 Within my head.
 Liberty will guide me. I yearn for
 Justice and will not be conquered by fear.
 I have faith and will not be brazen.

—Sang

On the final day of my residency, I asked them, "What is a hero?" "Spiderman, Batman, Superman," they responded. "What makes them heroes?" "Superpowers. Except Batman: he just has stuff." "What about Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks?" "They're heroes, but they're real; they don't have superpowers." "But they have something," I said. "What did it take for Rosa Parks to sit down on that bus?" "Bravery," someone said. I wrote it on the board. Soon, we had a list of heroic qualities: wisdom, compassion, will, faith, love....

"Courage looks you straight in the eye," I read from J. Ruth Gendler's *The Book of Qualities*. "She is not afraid to weep." I asked what this meant. "Courage is a person," someone said. They began writing personifications of qualities from our list. "Can I write about perseverance?" Daniella asked. "It wasn't on the list." "Of course," I said.

Perseverance

She keeps on trying, she never
 Gives up! She is everywhere.
 She is in everything, she is a
 Hard worker who never gets
 Tired. If she falls down she
 Gets back up. She doesn't let
 People down. She is the past,
 Present and future. She is
 Perseverance, best friends with
 Independence and always willing
 To walk on.

—Daniella

After Daniella read her draft, I encouraged the other students to use their own concrete awareness to get to know an abstract heroic quality.

My Best Friend

My best friend is Nonviolence.
 Why is she always around? When the
 class bully picks on me, why is it she
 who helps me? Why do I have to be
 Stubbornness? When the class bully picks
 on her, why is it me who makes it worse?
 Can I never be like Nonviolence? Always
 helping, never yelling, always encouraging
 but never fighting, always forgiving, but
 never holding a grudge. Why is it me
 who is always yelling, never helping,
 always fighting, but never encouraging,
 always holding a grudge, but never
 forgiving? I am not allowed at her
 house, but she is always at mine.

—Sarah

Commitment

The mother of three,
 Will, Hope and Resistance,
 She always has Hope in her heart,
 Will, the will never
 To give up, and Resistance
 The oldest one, he will never
 Give in and always helps
 His mother get through her troubles.
 Commitment.

—Kanika

Middle school students want to wrestle with meaningful and tough topics. Focusing on particular questions (Where am I from? What is freedom? What is a hero?) in relation to the Civil Rights Movement, we didn't necessarily find answers, but we had serious discussions and wrote compelling poetry that personalized the struggle. Ms. Johnson laid out the facts of the Civil Rights Movement, reading aloud from the Jim Crow laws and showing a video about fourteen-year-old Emmett Till's murder and his mother's courageous actions that led to the prosecution, in the segregated South, of his killers. She taught us that while the Fifteenth Amendment, passed in 1870, granted voting rights regardless of race or color, many African Americans were prevented from exercising that right until almost one hundred years later. We learned that the Civil Rights Movement was not a distinct era in American history, but a contemporary, ongoing issue that involved us all. Who knows where our questions will move us next?

Notes

1. Saadi Youssef was born in 1934 in Basra, Iraq. He has published thirty volumes of poetry and has rendered into Arabic major works by such writers as Walt Whitman, Federico García Lorca, and George Orwell. He left Iraq in 1979 and has recently settled in London. "Freedom" appears in *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East* (Simon & Schuster, 1998).