



Writing the Past

Using Poetry to Explore Family History

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AS A SIXTH-GRADE TEACHER, I often find that my spring parent-teacher conferences begin with the same answer to my first question: “So: how does Kevin think things are going this term?” I will ask. “We don’t know,” Kevin’s parents will say. “He never talks to us anymore!”

Anyone who interacts with middle school students on a regular basis knows the familiar answer to the question “How was your day?” is usually some combination of “Fine!” “Whatever!” or “[Nearly inaudible grunt]!” As these young men and women try on new identities for size and experiment with their desire for independence, they often create distance—sometimes a crack, sometimes a chasm—between themselves and their families.

Ironically, it is during their formative middle school years that young adults struggle with some of the most pressing questions they have ever encountered: *Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I from, and where am I going?* As they work to answer these questions, they often want the support of those to whom

they are closest—although it can be difficult for them to ask for it.

The weekend after my conferences ended, I puzzled over the ways in which I, an English teacher, could try to bridge this communication gap through a writing assignment. I realized that one of the benefits of conversations with our family members is that it allows us access to stories about our past. Several years ago, my father was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease, and, as his condition worsened, I realized that there were so many questions about our family that I had never asked him and that now would remain unanswered; that there were so many stories locked up inside his increasingly-jumbled mind that would never be told. I knew that the only way to pass on meaningful pieces of family history was through conversations—the same conversations that my students’ parents said were lacking in their lives.

A few weeks after our conferences, I introduced a new poetry assignment: the “family history” poem. Students had spent the previous several weeks both reading and writing different kinds of poetry. We studied poems by a number of writers, including E.E. Cummings, Naomi Shihab Nye, Robert Frost, and Billy Collins, and we wrote a wide variety of poems, including a poem about spring that employed our senses and a poem based upon a headline from a supermarket tabloid. Most of the poems that students

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read and wrote were “free verse” poems with no readily identifiable rhyme scheme. This was intentional: I’d found that when students focused their energies on making their poems rhyme, it was often at the expense of content. I wanted the students to employ the other literary devices we had studied, to focus on the poem’s deeper meaning.

Here’s the assignment I gave them:

Family History Poem Assignment

Sometime over the next few days, sit down with someone in your family. This person could be anyone: a parent, a sibling, a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, or a cousin.

Ask that family member to share a story from his or her past. The story could be from the recent past—say, a few weeks or months ago—or from a long time ago.

While your family member is talking, have a pen or pencil and a piece of paper handy so you can take some notes on the story. Be sure to concentrate on the details. What is the setting? Who are the characters? What happens in the story? Do you notice anything that makes this story particularly memorable or unusual?

Once you’ve gathered your information, hold onto it for a bit. Think the story through in your head, and try to figure out whose perspective you might write it from.

Finally, sit down and write a poem about this event. My only guidelines are that your poem must tell the story using some of the literary devices we have learned—especially simile and metaphor—and must be written in the first person, the “I” perspective of the person telling the story.

Before giving my students this assignment, I e-mailed all of my class parents to let them know that a conversation with their children—mandated as it was—was on the horizon. On the day I introduced the assignment in class, there were some audible groans—

“What do you mean I have to *talk to a relative?*!”—but most students were excited about the opportunity to hear stories that they might never have heard before.

The following week, after some drafting and peer editing, the final versions of the poems began to roll in. I had no idea what to expect, although I had heard from several parents that the assignment had led to lively discussions and the sharing of stories that ranged from humorous to tragic. I was not prepared for the sheer power of the poetry I was about to read.

One of my students, Abby, heard a story about a relative who had written a letter to General Joseph Stilwell, the World War II general known as “Vinegar Joe.” This relative, a young soldier himself, had not expected to receive a response from the general and was surprised and overwhelmed when, several years later, he did. Abby’s poem was entitled “Letter from Home”:

It was a forgotten letter, I assumed.
A letter at the bottom of a pile of many,
sitting there, unread, unimportant.
It was a letter like any other.

It became special when I got a reply.

The red, white, and blue border;
the orange “Airmail” mark in the corner;
the approved signature at the bottom;
and then the name:
General Stilwell.

My hands shook as I tore it open.
My smile widened as I read it.
I imagined the tall, important general
who had written to me
two long years later.

I always wondered if he knew
how much it meant to me;
if he knew how happy it made me,
that simple act of writing back;
of spelling out my name on the envelope;
of reading my letter,
my simple little letter,
and writing one back.

I looked down at the letter one more time:

the letter from the four-star general
from my town, Yonkers,
“The city of gracious living.”
He had written me back.

I hoped that,
when he signed
“Sincerely, General Stilwell,”
he meant it.

Another student, Steffen, wrote a poem called “First Performance,” about a church concert in which his mother performed as a little girl:

The pastor asks for a Christmas song.
I step forward to sing.
Two hundred people watch me,
a little six-year-old girl.
I am filled with complete and utter fear.
My legs shake and threaten to buckle.
My teeth chatter.
Just as tears arrive,
I spot my dad,
his eyes filled with pride
and a big smile stretched from ear to ear.
I begin to sing.

Years later, I sit at the piano,
knowing each note and lyric,
looking out at the crowd of seven hundred.
My legs and hands begin to shake.
For a moment,
I glimpse that child
and remember the confidence
that my father had in me.

I begin to play.

A girl named Wilson went back even further, tracing her family lineage back to her early ancestors in a poem entitled “I Am a Hunter”:

I scavenge through the untamed forest,
hauling the minks and lynx upon my back,
their soft fur and heavy bodies draped across my
shoulders.

I can't wait to bring them to my family;

to show my children the lifeless creatures
then to sell them to the Swedes across town
so they can make them into coats and scarves.

I am still;
motionless.
My heart skips a beat.
Is that a fox I hear?
Or a bear?

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All of the family history poems—from Charlie’s poem about the baby alligator his sister bought at a carnival, to Caroline’s poem about the moment her parents met—were astonishing. Not only was each student able to explore a meaningful part of his or her family’s past, but each poem also reflected his or her distinctive voice. Development of voice in my students is one of my top priorities as an English teacher. If students can find comfort expressing themselves, their writing—both analytical and creative—will improve immeasurably. Furthermore, each of their poems demonstrated a deep level of meaning and understanding that went beyond the story itself. While Jack’s poem, “New Toy,” was ostensibly about a toy he gave to his newborn sister, it was also about the emotions of anxiety, jealousy, excitement, and love that accompany the arrival of a new sibling.

I plan to revisit the family history poem assignment again this spring, with a few adjustments. This time around, I am going to allow students more time to listen to and digest their family stories before sitting down to write. I am also going to introduce several more literary devices over the course of the semester so that the students will have more tools in their writers’ toolkits when they sit down to write their poems. It is my hope that this assignment gives my students a deeper, more meaningful appreciation of the art of poetry while it illuminates the ways in which their families—and their families’ stories—can help them become the confident, capable, and connected young men and women they are striving to be. 🍷