



Poetry and Possibility

Offering All Students an Invitation to Participate

PETER MARKUS

WALK INTO THE CLASSROOM, wait for the students to settle into their desks, then say, “Today is going to be a day that at least one of you is going to remember for the rest of your life.” A few students look up, others look away. One boy laughs, and gets a few laughs from others when he says, “Mr. Pete’s gonna get naked.”

“No, I’m not getting naked, and I’m not gonna start dancing,” though here I do wiggle my hips. “Two words,” I tell them. “Let me begin by giving you two words.” I hold up my right, my writing hand.

“Pay attention,” I say. “Pay attention to what you are about to see and hear, and also to what you are about to think and feel and want and wish for and whatever else enters your head.” I say those two words again, “Pay attention.” It’s not so much a command as it is an invitation. *Take my hand*, is what I’m really saying. *See what’s up my sleeve*.

And here I take hold of a red Magic Marker, turn my back to the class, take off the cap, and with the flair of a sword swallower at a carnival, I raise the marker into the air and draw a long red line across the

white marker board.

That’s it.

When I turn back around to face my crowd, I ask this question, one word at a time, four words in all, one word per finger, “What have I done?”

A few hands go up immediately, as if to keep the ceiling from coming down. But most of the hands remain hidden, or maybe they are even fingering their cell phones. I’m sure more than a few students are rolling their eyes at me.

I call on Eddie, a beaming-eyed boy, a natural-born dreamer who is always eager to participate and please. He answers, with light leaping from his lips, “You just drew a line on the board.”

“Very good, Eddie,” I say, “thank you.” Then I stand there patiently and half-pleased, and wait for another voice to speak up. “Anything else?”

“It’s a red line,” Jacaris proudly states, knowing that I am always one to fish for more details.

“That’s true too,” I tell him. “It’s a red line that I just drew on the board. Thank you, Jacaris. Anyone else?”

“It’s a diagonal line,” points out Rebekkah.

Here too I offer my thanks for the specific, tell her she’s right, that it’s true, the red line runs diagonally down and across the white marker board. Again I ask, “What else? Who else?” Then I add to the pot

the words, “Don’t be afraid to use your imaginations. See what nobody else sees. See beyond what this *seems* to be.”

“Maybe it’s not just a line,” Pharez says, setting the record straight. “It could be the side of a mountain.”

I grin, nod my head. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

Others soon follow. Now the line is more than just a line: it’s the side of a mountain, it’s one half of an X, or the roof of a house, a shooting arrow, a magic wand, a pencil, a lightning bolt, a fishing line dangling off the side of a boat.

Every single one of these responses is right. Everything has suddenly become possible. Which is the point of what I am here to teach them. Anything else, a poem even, is simply gravy.

Half the class of thirty-five has offered up a response, but there are still a number of kids who haven’t taken the bait. I want to know what they’re thinking, want to know what they’re feeling right now too, or what they were feeling or thinking a few minutes ago.

“What are you thinking right now?” I ask one boy whose head, I can tell, isn’t where I want it to be. He’s been fidgeting this whole time, as I would have been if I were in his shoes when I was thirteen and wanted to be anywhere but in school. “Go ahead,” I say. “You won’t hurt my feelings. Tell it like it is. What are you thinking? What have you been feeling these past ten minutes? Tell me something that you felt or wanted to say or do. I bet you’ve been thinking ‘My God, how long are we going to keep talking about a stupid red line on the board?’ I bet you’ve looked at least twice at the clock to beg it to move faster.”

“I want to sleep,” he says, sleepy-voiced and puffy-eyed. “I want to be in bed right now.”

“Who else wishes they were in bed right now?” I say. More than a few heads nod. “I hear that,” I say.

“I’m hungry,” a voice chimes in, adding hunger’s

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M. Degas Teaches Art & Science at Durfee Intermediate School

Detroit 1942

PHILIP LEVINE ¹

He made a line on the blackboard, one bold stroke from right to left diagonally downward and stood back to ask, looking as always at no one in particular, “What have I done?” From the back of the room Freddie shouted, “You’ve broken a piece of chalk.” M. Degas did not smile. “What have I done?” he repeated. The most intellectual students looked down to study their desks except for Gertrude Bimmler, who raised her hand before she spoke. “M. Degas, you have created the hypotenuse of an isosceles triangle.” Degas mused. Everyone knew that Gertrude could not be incorrect. “It is possible,” Louis Warshowsky added precisely, “that you have begun to represent the roof of a barn.” I remember that it was exactly twenty minutes past eleven, and I thought at worst this would go on another forty minutes. It was early April, the snow had all but melted on the playgrounds, the elms and maples bordering the cracked walks shivered in the new winds, and I believed that before I knew it I’d be swaggering to the candy store for a Milky Way. M. Degas pursed his lips, and the room stilled until the long hand of the clock moved to twenty one as though in complicity with Gertrude, who added confidently, “You’ve begun to separate the dark from the dark.” I looked back for help, but now the trees bucked and quaked, and I knew this could go on forever.

growling belly into the mix. “I’m thinking about what’s for lunch.” A few more nods and a couple “hell yeah’s” let the boy who just wants to sleep know that sometimes our words can express what others have been thinking. I believe poetry, too, teaches us this: that what begins in the first-person singular often crosses over into the universal.

“Let’s take a look at a poem,” I say, and hand out copies of a poem by former poet laureate Philip Levine, Detroit-born and Detroit-raised, just like most of these kids.

When we read poems in class, the first thing I always ask—the question they have learned to expect—is this: “What do you notice about this poem?” They might notice how many lines are in the poem, or how many stanzas, or they might notice a particular image in the poem, or something that the speaker says. Here, as with anything poetry-related, anything and everything is open for discussion.

Once again, Eddie—the Gertrude Bimmler of the class—kicks things off, as we have all come to expect: “This poem,” he says, “is what you just did with us. The teacher drew the line on the board and asked his students what he’d done. Just like you did with us.”

“That’s true, Eddie,” I say, and again I thank him for noticing and making the connection between the world of the poem and the world of the here and now.

I make it a point to tell the students that this poem was written by a poet who was born right here in Detroit, went to Detroit public schools, and that the event in this poem took place in middle school, in 1942, in a classroom in Detroit, and if the speaker of the poem is anything like the poet himself, who was born in 1928, that would make the person who is calling forth this memory to be fourteen years old at the time that this experience with the line on the board took place.

This speaker, I go on to say, isn’t one of the outwardly engaged students who are hyped up to participate in the discussion about the line on the board and the question that’s been posed: “What have I done?” I make it a point to note that the speaker in this poem

is a boy who seems to be not paying attention, who is not listening, who is looking day-dreamily out the classroom window thinking about the beautiful spring day outside and the candy bar that his belly is hungering for. And yet, I tell them, he is the one student who retells the story, who makes out of this seemingly insignificant moment, this hour of school-day boredom, the poem that we have not only just read but also re-enacted.

I like to bring this poem into the classroom because I think it speaks to and speaks for those students—like wise-cracking Dwayne in the back of the class who likes to make light of the situation to get a laugh, or like the speaker of this poem, who withdraws inside himself and stays silent until memory gives him no choice but to speak. The student in this poem doesn’t respond to the given prompt in the way we poets in the schools might want our students to respond, immediately engaging with what we are here to offer. But over the almost twenty years of doing what I do as a writer with the InsideOut Literary Arts Project in Detroit, I have learned that some fires are slow to ignite, or in the words of a poem by Jack Gilbert:

We think the fire eats the wood.
We are wrong. The wood reaches out
to the flame. The fire licks at
what the wood harbors, and the wood
gives itself away to that intimacy,
the manner in which we and the world
meet each new day.

Poetry invites us to reach out to the flame. It allows us to help our students find what they harbor in their hearts, oftentimes without even knowing it. It shows them that the heft and intimacy of being present and alive inside their own interiors can be made visible and audible through the power of language. It lets us capture the music and musings we might hear when we lift off or drift off or gaze off, inside of our own reverie. And it all begins by inviting students to pay attention, even when they’re not sure they want to. 🌀