



The Teacher as Poet

On Modeling an Approach to Writing and Maintaining One's Sanity

ALAN FELDMAN

EACH YEAR I'M ASKED TO GIVE ADVICE to the student teachers at my university who are headed to high schools and middle schools here in Massachusetts to do their practice teaching. I've taught creative writing for many years, both at my own school, Framingham State, and for twenty-two years at the Radcliffe Seminars at Harvard University, and I see this request for advice as an opportunity to share some things my experience has shown me to be essential in teaching poetry writing:

First, to teach poetry to students as something they can attempt to do themselves, like student athletes watching sports on TV, and emulating what they've seen out on the field.

Second, to help students understand not only what poems might mean, but also how poems are made—integrating poetry writing with poetry reading.

Alan Feldman often writes while his students are writing. For example, "In November," in Best American Poetry 2011, was written in class while everyone was working on one-sentence poems. He has recent work in Southern Review, Yale Review, Ploughshares, TLR: The Literary Review, Cincinnati Review, and Catamaran, and forthcoming in Arroyo, upstreet, Salamander, and Poetry East. For more of his in-class assignments, see "Mockingbird: Exploring Poetry Through Imitation," available on his website, alanfeldmanpoetry.com.

Finally, to understand the importance of the teacher as poet. In order to teach writing enthusiastically and with conviction, I tell these student teachers that they themselves will need to write, an activity that will have a mysteriously powerful effect on their students and will probably be good for their own sanity as well.

No assignment will succeed as well (and some of the riskiest, most interesting ones might not succeed at all) if the teacher doesn't try it out first before attempting to convince a class it can be done. This is important for the students, I say, but also for the teacher; teaching is a truly unselfish occupation and can result in a kind of burnout. Devoted so much to their students, teachers may come to feel that their inner life is starving. To preserve that life, it's good to write, and writing a poem, even briefly during the day, can be like throwing a bucket down into the well of your own mind.

To help teachers understand how this might be done, I recently put together a handbook in which I share my advice, along with several poetry assignments. These assignments are based on imitating certain features of the poems I include with each lesson. Whether consciously or not, all poets reverse-engineer poems they've stored away in their own reading memories. Imitations like these—based al-

most always on imitating the way the poem is made, not its subject—stretch a writer’s idea of what’s possible. They can also help, when the desire to write is there, to provide a container, or a method, a starting place, a road map, a chord structure, a dance rhythm. The paradox in teaching writing is that the more specific the writing assignment, the easier it is to do, so that the constraints of imitation are often liberating. More than that, such assignments can also give students—and teachers—the experience of engaging in a common activity with poets of all eras, making them colleagues. 🍷

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