

Prancing Poetry

Teaching Emily Dickinson in Elementary School

PHYLLIS MESHULAM

THE “BIG READ” is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) which aims to get communities reading, sharing, and discussing a common work of great literature. In the spring of 2013, the target author in my neck of the woods, Sonoma County, California, was to be the poet Emily Dickinson. During the March festivities, I would be working at a public elementary school with a diverse population, in this region fueled by vineyards, high-tech, dairies, truck gardens, and roadside fruit stands. My students would be third- and fourth-graders and one class that included fifth-graders. How best to celebrate Dickinson’s complicated work with these children? I am an independent contractor with California Poets in the Schools, which for fifty years has been creatively supporting poets-in-residence. And in this organization, we are all about appreciating poetry by writing it.

I signed up for one of the preparation activities, an afternoon workshop led by Bonnie Raines, a

third-grade teacher who had spent a week in Amherst learning to teach Dickinson to school kids. But educators like Raines had an entire academic year to familiarize their students with the “common meter” Dickinson used in her poetry, to sing it and dance it. Their kids had time to memorize poems and work in small discussion groups, untangling a tough stanza. I would only have five one-hour meetings with each classroom. During those fleeting hours, I also wanted to incorporate my regular curriculum, getting kids to use their magic wands of metaphor (*See this pencil? It can turn you into anything you want for a while*), the star of the five senses (*This will make your writing shoot off the page*), “alit-lit-lit-literation,” and the like.

Here’s the plan I came up with: I would introduce Dickinson to my students as a mysterious artist whom they would get to know better during our final session. I would mention her each time we met and request that classroom teachers reveal a bit more about her in between my visits. They could, for example, read the picture book *Emily* aloud to their students. The book, written by Michael Bedard and beautifully illustrated by Barbara Cooney, is a fictional account of a young girl meeting the poet. It is narrated by a young neighbor of Dickinson’s whose mother is invited to play piano at The Homestead. Said narrator pokes around and gets to meet the recluse briefly as

Emily Dickinson, photographed in 1846 or 1847.

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she sits out of general sight in a stairwell, listening to the music. The book includes a short biography of the poet at the end.

On my worksheet most weeks I included a copy of a poem by Dickinson on an illustrated poem-in-your-pocket business-sized card. (These had been provided by the NEA grant.) We briefly read and commented on each. Sometimes I would sing the poem to “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” a melody that conforms to Dickinson’s use of common meter. I made sure to spend some time talking about the meaning of the poem as well. Raines had wisely advised us in her training session that it was important to be interested in the kids’ interpretations. “Why are the blossoms on the bush adjusting their tumbled heads?” I asked after we read “The Humming Bird.” “Maybe because it was windy,” one child said. “Maybe they’re watching for rain,” said another. “They’re expecting a visitor?” “The humming bird?!” “Wow,” I told them. “You’re all right!”

In between my weekly visits, the classroom teachers continued sharing more of Dickinson’s poems. I printed copies of “A narrow fellow in the grass,” and “A bird came down the walk,” marking the accented syllables. Teachers could sing or exaggerate the stresses, making it easier for kids to discern the rhythm. (Sometimes it seemed that Dickinson had bitten a one-syllable word into halves, and this I annotated, as well. “*A bĭrd came dōwn the wāh-āwk. . . . And thén he dránk a dēw-ōo. . .*”)

On the fifth session of the residency, I showed up in a white dress that I had rescued from a closet purge, noticing it could be taken for a 19th-century costume with the addition of a floor-length ruffle. My pockets were full of poem cards. “Somebody ask me who I am,” I said.

One or two students confidently bubbled out, “You’re Emily!” I’d repeat, “Ask me who I am.” “Who are you?” said one. And I replied, “I’m Nobody. Who are you? / Are you Nobody, too?” Then I rewarded all

outspokenness with poem-cards.

“Why did you always wear white?” one kid asked. “Maybe so she could imagine any color she wanted on her dress,” volunteered another. I stayed in character as a ghost of Emily throughout the lesson—one who knew her life intimately, but had outgrown some of the phobias that afflicted her in life.

I gave out a worksheet that included the Dickinson poem, “There is no frigate like a book,” a drawing of a 19th-century frigate, a picture of a horse labeled “courser,” and definitions of vocabulary words like “traverse” and “frugal.” It also included several student poems written in Emily’s style, some suggested topics, and a couple of starter lines. The lines of the poems were marked with the stresses and the numbers four or three to show which lines were the four-beat ones, which the three.

“Does anyone know the song ‘Yellow Rose of Texas’? If so, you’re lucky,” I said. “It will help you write like me, Emily. If not, don’t worry.”

I divided the class in half—another idea I got from Raines’ session. One side sang or chanted the four-beat line

as I clapped/conducted from the front of the room. The other chanted the three-beat line. We did this with several of the student poems on the worksheet.

Then we looked at the frigate poem. In character, I asked the students some questions.

“What do you think I meant by, ‘There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away. / Nor any Coursers like a Page / of prancing Poetry?’” (Frigates and horses having been some of the fastest means of transportation of Dickinson’s day.)

This concept was pretty transparent to them. “Oh, yeah, a book can take you to the moon faster than a rocket ship!” someone said.

“What about ‘How frugal is the Chariot/ That bears the Human Soul—?’” I asked. “Well, libraries are pretty cheap. Free, even!” another student called out.

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Once we were ready to get down to writing, I told them they could choose to write about anything that interested them in whatever style, and let the rhythm guide them if that felt right. We clapped the Dickinson poem, too, so that they would know how to recreate it. We brainstormed a list of topics, which included: books, the sun, the moon, the ocean, a bird, a plum tree in bloom, the sky, a soccer field, a mustard flower, a baseball, and a skateboard. I pointed out how the frigate poem starts with a negative simile. And “Hope is the thing with feathers” starts with a metaphor—and suggested that either might be a good strategy for starting their own poems.

As a group we tried a few first and second lines:

A _____ is like a _____
that _____ in/on/around
_____.

In one class, Keira S. proposed: “My brother is like a kangaroo, he hops around the house...”. Popular idea! And a few other similes for siblings appeared on the kids’ papers. Nathaniel G. dictated the start of his poem: “A skateboard is like a story of rides / that flips you upside down.” After they made their own openers, the kids were to try to add at least a couple more lines. Then they could keep going, or try a quatrain on a different subject. As they wrote, I told them to try clapping their poems. Or to ask an adult to read it with them and figure out where the accent marks would go and if any tweaks might be desirable.

My aim whenever I teach poetry is to get kids writing passionately and experimentally—using writing tools they’re already familiar with and the new one of the day—about things that matter to them. With these ingredients, the fresh, intense, layered language of poetry often happens naturally. So as I taught, I emphasized that getting the “right” number of stressed syllables in a line was much less important than writing something they cared about.

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“Don’t *stress* about it!” I told them. “Pick something that matters to you. Try to come up with a strong simile or metaphor for that thing. Tell us more. See where it goes from there.”

Kids of a wide range of ability levels found inspiration in the poems of Emily Dickinson, and new ways to say something that mattered to them. Their enthusiasm took them “lands away,” and carried me with them. 📞

Wonderstruck

VIVIAN C.

The wind is like a joyous tune
that dances to and fro,
laughing like he doesn't care,
at everything you know,
struck by wonder, hit by lightning,
that is how you'll be
when the wind comes to town,
laughing at you and me.

Forge On!

AIDAN G.

The rush of the Sonoma Creek
sliding through the stones.
Forging past the city hall,
sliding past homes.

Flowing from Mt. Sugarloaf
to San Pablo Bay.
Slipping through Sonoma Valley,
making its own way. . . .

In a Movie

MORGAN D.

*The world is like a movie reel
that spins to show its life,
like running feet in the night
caused by a child,
terrified by scary dreams and shadows
and poetry of many kinds
and love that keeps the world in sight,
in a movie
in the darkened night.*



Untitled

HERNAN L.

*A skateboard is like a red and black dragon
that flies under the clouds.
It takes me to the sky to see the stars.
It feels smooth like a dragon's eyes
and sounds like a dragon around the sky.*

Quatrain

GAVIN R.

*A tiger's like a dream I had.
It came out of nowhere.
It took a sip of water
and went to the den of dreams*

Untitled

ISABELLA B.

*My paints are like the smallest creeks
with all colorful fish
swimming along. They glide, wait
and give me all their might. . . .*

Untitled

RUBY B.

*Archery makes you feel like
an arrow as sharp as a knife....*

Untitled

ANTON G.

*The moon is like a shiny ball.
It says good night to all.
It shines, it glimmers, it dances around
the sky. "Good morning,"
it says and flies away.*