



📅 40th Anniversary

The Start of Something Big

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IMAGINE YOURSELF BACK INTO THE LATE 1960s. Enter huge Northrop Auditorium on the University of Minnesota campus. Erase all cell phones and computers except for large government and insurance honkers. Imagine the big plat of our country steaming from many fissures cracked over the previous decade—civil rights, anti-war protest, free love, rock 'n' roll—all giving rise to new voices and some new ideas about revitalizing education.

On stage at Northrop a bevy of poets is about to read their work. Some, like Denise Levertov and Robert Bly, have written poetry against the Vietnam War. But this is not a political rally. Teachers in the Minneapolis school district, as part of a populist educational experiment, are about to hear contemporary, well-known poets, largely from out of the state—a rare occurrence. Imagine the tremor of excitement, even shock, as ears accustomed to Sandburg and Dickinson respond—perhaps to Galway Kinnell's surreal promises to daughter Maud:

I would blow the flame out of your silver cup,
I would suck the rot from your fingernail. . . .
— “Little Sleep’s-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,”
from *The Book of Nightmares*

Or perhaps Levertov’s confession:

Who-I-am
slowly, slowly
took lessons
from distant Asia; and only then
from near-as-my-hand persons. Black sisters.
— “The Long Way Round,”
from *Life in the Forest*

The philosophy fueling this event—which brought practicing poets (prose writers added later) into contact with K–12 teachers—had a revolutionary fervor. These face-to-face encounters would flip the switch of creativity for every student, the planners believed. *Every* student—not just the brainy or literary ones, but also the disaffect-

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ed, the poorly trained, those on the fringes of the educational system—all would come alive, ignited with literary inspiration. Creativity would spread like sweet, hot manna. Classrooms would sound like heaven.

The New York poets and educators dreaming up these innovations spawned three pilot projects, the one in Minneapolis, one in New York which led to the formation of Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and one in California. Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), these initiatives were so successful that soon other states clamored for their own versions.

What struck me, as a second-wave participant in this creative, populist experiment, was the absolute newness of its primary practice: using new-minted work written by adults, for adults, to teach K–12 students. Adult literature had been taught before in secondary schools—what are Shakespeare, Milton, Dickinson, Whitman if not exactly that? But except for the stray sonnet-writing assignment, K-12 students hadn't been encouraged to think they could write snazzy, wild, innovative stuff themselves. Using this new model, local writers also urged students to write about their own locale and time: farmland or city corner, day-to-day muck and encounters with the surreal.

Such directives had a surprising effect: they inspired full-fledged emotions from students. Sad, scary, furious emotions which made their teachers perk up in their seats, and sometimes react in fear. This fear had an authentic educational jolt. In the past, when students mimicked works by dead masters, only rarely did they unearth the core of young existence. But as they listened to adult poets and writers explain their artistic struggles, these students began to see how to turn life into art. Through this open door the students passed, and what they wrote was illuminated by this new vision.

Kids who skipped school, who had poor grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation skills, sometimes wrote the most moving poems and stories. Classroom teachers and friends were blown away, or shocked into stunned or annoyed silence. Then came the questions: What was the best way to teach good literature and composition? How much weight should be given to grade-point averages and good English mechanics? Why didn't "gifted," smart Advanced Placement students write better than average, less industrious students? What had these writer-visitors unleashed?

Consider this: though the writers chose work appropriate to the students' age, their poems and stories didn't talk down because they spoke to peers. They had no cute-and-fuzzy, little-people feel. Kids, especially from fourth grade on, hate being patted on the head. They rue the all's-right-with-the-world sensibility found in a lot of old-fashioned literature written for children and dished out by adults who can't bear to imagine childhood innocence stained. Such work is often rather bland as well; its metaphors and plots predictable.

Under the new writer-visitors, kids received sober and zany, silly and surreal examples. And they responded with startling originality. Children, especially before group pressure and hormones kick in, own astonishing metaphor-making ability. Discovering just how far third-graders could follow me into wild metaphors was one of

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the excitements of my K–12 initiation. Elementary school classroom teachers guided me: they knew their students' rich abilities. By then, the early 1980s, the first wave of poet/writer teachers had done a magnificent job of unlocking doors. The teachers had become believers and practitioners themselves. But there were still moments of shock and awe at what a particular student could accomplish:

Item: A fifth-grade boy with a severe stutter insisted he wanted to read his poem at the public reading. His teachers and I stood backstage, nervously watching as he approached the podium. He looked out over the upturned faces and delivered his poem without a hitch. It was one of the first times his school had heard him enunciate fluently. Why was this possible? We speculated that the music of poetry, coming from a different part of the brain than words, smoothed his speech. But there was also the confidence gained by writing something he was proud of, a poem that spoke to and for himself in an authentic way. It changed the way we thought of him, and probably the way he thought of himself.

This kind of miracle, sad as well as marvelous, suggests the potential in teaching authentic literary creativity. Here's exactly how potent: In the 1970s, eighty institutions of higher learning offered degrees in creative writing. As of 2004, there were 720, according to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP). Did it all start with three pilot projects in the mid-1970s? Maybe so; maybe not. But it's worth considering that the work of T&W and other organizations to free the literary imagination in classrooms across the country just might have overcome the entrenched English Department scholars who, according to AWP, once "fiercely resisted" creative writing programs. Perhaps more important for young students, education departments and the classroom teachers they serve now pay a lot of attention to the writing process. Writing today is understood to mean more than grammar and punctuation and the five-paragraph essay. K–12 textbooks contain poems and stories written by multi-generational, multi-cultural contemporary writers. The NEA program "Poetry Out Loud" aims to help high school students give voice to English poetry from the middle ages to the present.

The magic of creative writing still transforms a classroom. The experiment which began forty years ago has grown muscles; it's got punch to it. Usually I step back and let the academic experts duke out the implications. I enjoy best my function as a visitor, opening a door with my own poems and listening as new immigrants from around the globe write about hopes and struggles. Poetry can cross even this high wire of new language and experience with dazzling aplomb. ☺

Margot Fortunato Galt has published six books, two of them with T&W; The Circuit Writer: Writing with Schools and Communities (T&W, 2006) and The Story in History: Writing Your Way into the American Experience (T&W, 1992). Her book of poems, Between the Houses, was published by The Laurel Poetry Collective in 2004. She lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, and teaches in graduate programs at Hamline University and the University of Minnesota.