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Whitman's Words

by Kenneth Koch

> I celebrate myself
> And what I shall assume you shall assume
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
>
> I loafe and invite my soul
> I lean and loafe at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass.

IF YOU PUT THE THOUGHTS EXPRESSED IN THESE opening lines of "Song of Myself" into ordinary speech, they are rather flat and uninteresting:

> I myself am what I am celebrating; and everything that I am, you are also, since you and I are both made out of the same materials. I'm really taking it easy, lying around and communing with my soul, while I look at a blade of grass.

Whitman's lines don't rhyme and they have no regular meter. There must be other things about them that make them so interesting and suggestive and exciting to read. These things, of course, are the words and the ways Whitman puts them together. By looking closely at these words and uses, one may be able to get closer to the mystery of poetry, of Whitman's in any case, and to be inspired by "Song of Myself" and to write like it and to understand it. I ask my students to pick out words and phrases they wouldn't be likely to hear in conversation or to read in an essay or newspaper article. What's peculiar about the way Whitman is talking? My college students find most of the oddities in the lines; and, with a bit more help, I think younger students could also:

1) Nobody ever says "I celebrate"; instead one says "I'm celebrating." "I celebrate" sounds like someone making a speech on a formal occasion: "Today we celebrate the birthday of a great American."

2) *Myself* would never come after *celebrate* in normal talk or prose writing. What one celebrates is a birthday, a holiday, a wedding, a victory. Celebrating oneself seems crazy.

3) Repeating a word as Whitman repeats the word *assume* in line 2 with just two words between—what I *assume* you shall *assume*—draws attention to the sound of the word in a way that's not usual in talking or prose-writing. *Assume*, the second time it's used, is as much music as it is meaning.

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4) It's not completely clear what Whitman means by *assume*. In fact, the word seems either to be used wrongly or to mean two things at once. *Assume* can mean "take for granted" or it can mean "take or put on"—you can assume the role of king, and you can assume that it's nighttime, because it's dark. In conversation, or in an article, the writer would have to be clearer and to choose one of these meanings or the other. In poetry, having two meanings at once can be an advantage—it can make what you say suggestive, mysterious, true in some way it couldn't otherwise be.

5) The word *atom* is a scientific word that doesn't belong with words like *celebrate* and *assume*. It's unexpected and a little jarring—as would be, say, the word *oxygen* in the statement, "Come, let us walk through the oxygen."

6) The repetition of *belong*, like the earlier repetition of *assume*, puts an emphasis on sounds that isn't usual in speech or expository prose.

7) In the phrase "as good belongs to you," "as good" is a very folksy, plain expression, not at all what you'd expect in a discourse about atoms, and just as surprising after *atom* as *atom* was after *celebrate* and *assume*. (Another example of folksiness and science might be "This is mighty fine radium.")

8) There's a little rhyming in "assume... assume" and "you" (in line 2 and then another "you" in line 3) that probably wouldn't happen in talking or plain prose. Like word repetition, sound repetition (rhyme is one kind) draws attention to the physical qualities of words and gives them music along with their meanings.

9) The idea of *loafing* seems a big jump from the philosophical speculations on identity that precede it. Such an apparent jump in subject matter might make prose or conversation hard to follow. In poetry it can be exciting. In poetry, when there's a jump, you just jump, and afterwards you see where you are.

10) The lowly, folksy word *loafe* (an older spelling of *loaf*) seems out of place in the same sentence with *soul*, which is a very "high-class," serious word.

11) There's a partial rhyme in the words *loafe* and *soul*, which would tend to make one keep the two words farther apart in talk or in prose.

12) Repeating *loafe* the way Whitman does in lines 4 and 5 would be needlessly repetitious in prose.

13) The expression "at my ease" would seem repetitious and maybe even stupid in prose, since how else would you "loafe"—tensely? painfully? vigorously?

14) The word *observing* seems too serious and official for looking at a grass blade. Astronomers observe planets and detectives observe criminals, but why observe a plain old blade of grass?

15) *Spear* is a strange word for grass—the usual word is *blade* (which was doubtless strange when it was first used).

16) Like the repetitions and the rhymes in other lines, all the *s* sounds in the last half line draw attention to the physical qualities of the words and make some music.

17) Throughout the passage the present tense is used in a way that would certainly be strange in an article or conversation—as if one were to say, "I turn on the light, I go to the door and take you in my arms." Who talks that way?

To sum up, one finds in Whitman's lines a mixture of plain and fancy (including religious and scientific and colloquial) words, repetitions of words and sounds that tend to partly change the words into music, vagueness, seemingly "wrong" uses of words, odd combinations of words, jumps in subject matter, and an odd present tense. These oddnesses and "mistakes" make his lines different from prose and are part of what makes them poetry.

Reading such strangely mixed language so full of leaps and other surprises is not like reading the newspaper. It gives a different kind of meaning and does it in a different way.

Seeing the peculiarities of Whitman's language can help students to enjoy writing like Whitman as well as to understand "Song of Myself." A good writing exercise for students is to ask them to write four or five lines using as many of Whitman's oddities as they can; for example, to start with a phrase like "I celebrate" (or "I prophesy," "I command," "I entertain") and to follow that with something as unlikely as *myself* (Wednesday morning, ice-cold drinks, my dog, sleeping). Then maybe a line with a word repeated like *assume* ("And what I endorse you shall endorse") and so on. They are likely to have a good time doing this—it's silly-seeming but inspiring. It leads to something—for one thing, an enlarged sense of what can be done with language, if you try strange things with it, especially in poems.

Of course the sense of the opening lines, and of the rest of "Song of Myself," is closely connected to all that seems odd in the words. For example, for Whitman it makes perfect sense to announce a formal celebration of himself. A person's ordinary self is more wonderful than any special particular day or event. And the best way to celebrate the self is just to lie around and take it easy, to loaf and look at things. And a grass blade is exactly the kind of thing that's worthy of being observed: it's plain, it's common, it's alive, it's eternally reborn, it's fresh and green, it proves there is no death. What better thing to look at? No monument can compare to it. And if loafing is the right way to behave, you get a better sense of it from saying it slowly, from repeating—"I loafe" and "I lean and loafe at my ease." *Atom* is a fine word to use because scientific and literary and plain words are all equal and all part of the divine oneness and variety that Whitman finds in everything: words, people, animals, places. There are no privileged characters in Whitman and no privileged words. And so "as good belongs to you," folksy though it is, is just fine for a philosophical statement. What's easiest and most natural is what's truest; profundity's in plain talk and not in fancy academic or poetical speech. As for the present tense, it is perfect for saying "This is always going on, it's always true, it's always wonderful, it's always right here and right now."

Finally, what Whitman has to say about the oneness of all things is quite mysterious. It can't be logically proven, can't be rationally shown. But rhymes, repetitions, and even vagueness can help us to feel it. There is an exciting dreamy convincingness in "what I assume you shall assume" that would be lacking, for example, in a phrase such as "we're just alike." Once you see, and help others to see, the connections between the (not really separate) language and meaning of "Song of Myself," reading this long, complicated-seeming poem should be easier, and, as Whitman might say, luckier. ●

Teaching Whitman's "The Sleepers" to Younger Students

by William Bryant Logan

MY THIRD AND FOURTH GRADERS ARE ADDICTED to the verbs "go," "do," "say," and "be." I use Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers" to get them inspired about other action words. The poem is full of sleep: everyone and everything sleeping, and the poet able to sense and see the sleeping of them all. My students and I write poems that, like "The Sleepers," repeat one strong verb in many different ways.

When I work with "The Sleepers," I use most of the first thirty-one lines down through "And I become the other dreamers." The constant repetition of the word "sleep" (in lines 12-23) is delightful to us as we read the section, and we talk about how a rhythm is created by that dependable word returning in line after line. We notice how full and exact the lines are, including everyone from the peaceful husband and wife to the condemned murderer. I also discuss the poet's mind, not only his sympathy for everyone, but also the openness of a mind that, when it doesn't know something, asks a question about it: "And the murdered person...How does he sleep?"

Next, we make a list on the blackboard of all the actions that we might want to be able to see the way Whitman sees sleep. It's fun, almost a poem in itself: jump, laugh, yell, roll, fly, command, flip, dance, giggle, fish, run, walk, swim, whisper. . . . All by itself, this list gives us an entrance into Whitman's paradoxically full but always spacious world, a world of action and possibility.

Because this poem uses line-by-line repetition, it's a natural to try out first as an oral collaboration. Sometimes, I write the children's lines on the board, sometimes just let them flow by. When all the children's minds are working together, the results are strange and beautiful. Here, for example, is "The Swimmers" (The Spanish in the last line means "Come here"):

The red bugs are swimming.
Mrs. Glenn is swimming in the Bronx.
Animals are swimming in the sea.
Mr. Logan was swimming at the beach with a crab monster.
Bruce Lee is swimming, swimming in the Pacific Ocean.
Swim, swam, swum...Where is the bum?
My brother, he swims, swims, swims...
President Gorbachev is swimming in the classroom.
A sound. Is it swimming in my ear?
My mother swims in the hot blue water.
The seahorse...it dies, it comes alive and it swims in the sea.
My guitar is swimming in the sea.
"Ven aca!" it sings.

Whitman wrote that he wanted his poems to express the fullness of his own personality. It's interesting to see that, imitating him, third and fourth graders can give such a full portrait of their own wishes, wonder, cantankerousness, affections, and fears.

If the collaborations show the personality of a class, the individual poems let the students take what tone and attitude they will. I ask each of them to choose one action word—whether from the board or not—and to use the word as much as they can to make a poem that is full of the action. The variety of results is surprising. One student, obsessed by questions, writes a whole scary poem of questions about hanging, beginning , "Does the girl hang peacefully by her ponytail?" Melody Prosser stuffs her poem full of forms of the word *giggle*. Another student writes about a foot race between Carl Lewis, a goldfish, a dolphin, and a lamppost. Tanya James writes an extraordinary poem about her jumping heart and jumping frogs. Occasionally, a writer elects to use all the words on the board, like Makeda Benjamin in her piece about crazy action.

More than most imitations, these pieces seem to belong to the kids, since Whitman's breathless way of writing is similar to the way children think when they're excited. I find that the kids not only enjoy writing these poems, but that they enjoy performing them for the class. The oral energy is already in the poems, waiting to burst out.

My mommy is a giggler.
My father is a giggler.
Sam's a giggler.
Buck's a giggler.
The man of my dreams is a giggler and a giggler.
The frog is giggling.
I don't know if the pig is giggling.
Ronald Reagan. Is he giggling?
Even I giggle and giggle and giggle.
—*Melody Prosser*

My fingers are playing football with each other,
and my nose is dancing, and my toes are playing handgames,
and my heart is swimming in my veins.
My lips are smacking.
My teeth are having lunch and turning yellow.
Shoes are running down the street.
And the fruits are jumping into people's mouths.
It was raining clocks and plops on my block.
And the crayons are scribbling graffiti on the subway...
—*Makeda Benjamin*

My heart jumps every time I breathe
and jumps faster every time I run.
And every time little girls jump and sing
My heart goes the same beat.
Frogs jump into a blue pond,
and my heart jumps into a red pond
that's inside me. It seems
like my heart tells them to come to me.
They're jumping into each other's ponds,
because they're related to each other.
My heart jumps into the frog's blue pond,
and the frogs jump into my red pond.
—*Tanya James*

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Teaching Whitman in High School

by Bill Zavatsky

MY FIRST SUSTAINED READING OF WHITMAN took place in the fall of 1965 or the spring of 1966. It was his "Song of Myself," a good chunk of which I read while sitting in a lobby at the New School for Social Research in New York, waiting for a jazz improvisation class to begin. After three years at a small college in Connecticut, I had "dropped out" and worked for a year. When I resumed my education, I felt myself at a new beginning. Whitman confirmed my adventure—the new life on which I had embarked as well as the stirrings of a real commitment to writing, especially to poetry. That afternoon, at the New School, Whitman's rolling line forever fused itself to the long-lined solos of the jazz artists that I most admired; and all I had to do was look at the city around me to see that he was one of the great poets of New York.

But more than this, Whitman's work touched experiences in me that had long been buried, experiences the nature of which I can only call spiritual. A few years ago, when I started teaching his poems to my tenth and twelfth grade English classes, it was because he was one of those writers who confirmed a sensation that, up through my teens, I had now and again felt: the gift of seeing everything in my range of vision with a startling clarity, as if whatever I turned my gaze toward was bathed in the beam of a powerful searchlight, but not at the expense of surrounding objects, which retained their focus. Concomitant with this heightened sense of vision was the sensation of being connected to all that I saw, joined to it in a oneness that both dazzled me and left me with a feeling of inner joy. These states did not last very long, and they were so extraordinary that I was afraid to investigate them, even to mention them. (They seemed qualitatively *different* from the feelings of piety or devotion or exaltation that I experienced as a Roman Catholic boy.) The manifestation was not linked to creed or dogma, but showered down upon me when I least expected it—on a spectacularly clear fall day, or a summer afternoon as I walked down a tree-lined street, heading home from a baseball game. All I knew was that it "happened," that I was grateful for this visitation, and that I would remember the effect that it had upon me.

Before my students and I read Whitman's poems, I introduce them to Whitman by describing these experiences. I have discovered that there is a hunger in young people—"religious" or not—to discuss "heightened" transpersonal experiences. In doing so I never feel that I am forcing a belief system on my students. For example, as I gave my little personal introduction on the first day of our Whitman studies, two female seniors were madly scribbling notes to one another. With a frown, but really out of curiosity, I walked over to read what one had written: "I have these experiences *all the time*!" Her friend had responded enthusiastically in the affirmative. Indeed, adolescence brings with it the development of the ability to entertain abstract concepts of a sophisticated nature, making Whitman, the self-described "poet of the body and the soul," a perfect companion.

There are higher levels of spirituality in poetry than the writings of Whitman—the poems of William Blake or Hindu texts like the *Bhagavad-Gita*—but at present these seem out of my own teaching range despite my absorption in them. What Whitman seemed to have experienced, however, was far more profound than my own little moments of transport. What especially appealed to me was Whitman's directness, the sense that he was speaking from the heart of a great mystery in a language that I could understand. Neither I nor my students need to cut through a lot of cultural differences and symbol-systems to understand Whitman, and this is what I wanted to explore and to communicate to them: an apprehension of spiritual matters that was immediate. Not that everything in his work can be understood; the studies of what Whitman meant in "Song of Myself" are still tumbling off the presses. I simply wanted the excuse at least to touch on spiritual things, and Whitman supplied the occasion.

Of course, all poetry is spiritual to a greater or lesser extent. Whitman himself wrote:

> Much is said of what is spiritual, and of spirituality, in this, that, or the other—in objects, expressions.—For me, I see no object, no expression, no animal, no tree, no art, no book, but I see, from morning to night, and from night to morning, the spiritual.—Bodies are all spiritual.—All words are spiritual—nothing is more spiritual than words. (*An American Primer*)

In Class

After I had told the story of my youthful "experiences" and read aloud the passages from the "Song of Myself" quoted in the first item of the following list, my classes and I used the chalkboard to make a grand list of the features that seemed to be characteristic of Whitman's poems. (My seniors had already read "Song of Myself," "The Sleepers," "Faces," and "I Sing the Body Electric" from the 1855 text of *Leaves of Grass*; my sophomores read the final edition of the "Song" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Here's our list:

1) *Spirituality*: By which is meant an appeal to or manifestation of transcendence; an understanding that each individual is identical with the One. Everywhere in his work, but most notably in the "Song of Myself," Whitman refers to the central fact of his life, the spiritual experience which he evidently had sometime in the early 1850s, first memorialized in section 5 of the poem:

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I believe in you my soul . . . . the other I am must not abase itself to
you,
And you must not be abased to the other.
. . .
I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon
me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
tongue to my barestript heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my
feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and
knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers . . . . and the
women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love;
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder
and mullein and poke-weed. [ll. 73-74, 78-89]

And in section 7 he returns to it:

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.
I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed
babe.... and am not contained between my hat and boots.
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike, and every one good,
The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and
fathomless as myself;
They do not know how immortal, but I know. [ll. 122-129]

The erotic language of the first description is perfectly consistent with the narratives of saints and mystics. (One thinks of Saint Theresa's account of being pierced with a spear by an angel. We examined a picture of Bernini's famous statue for a better understanding of what Whitman is "about" in this passage.)

Another technique that Whitman uses to generate the feeling of "eternity" in many of his greatest poems is to keep to the present tense. In the "Song of Myself" one must search far and wide for any use of the past tense.

2) *Emphasis on the physical body*: That the body is good, clean, pure, etc.

3) *Celebration/praise*: All of creation is good and worthy of praise. In *Sleeping on the Wing*, Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell mention that the "Song of Myself" is an "exuberant inventory of the world (and so of Walt Whitman) in which he congratulates and praises all the parts of life in great detail, and all for just existing."

4) *Love for all things*: "Good" or "evil"—a repudiation of duality, which is merely the misreading of a unified principle, since the unenlightened human mind is incapable of grasping the One. Furthermore, the compassion that we find everywhere expressed in Whitman's writing may be seen as a form of imagination, allowing us to feel what others are feeling.

5) *Equality*: Of all humans; also, there is more than a hint in Whitman that the processes of nature exist on a par with human life. See section 32, which begins, "I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals . . . . they are so placid and self contained, / I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long." (ll. 684-85)

6) *The list or catalog*: That Whitman's lists "level" everything, thus making everything equal. This is to say that finally, in his lists, nothing takes precedence over another thing, and nothing comes first or last. The notion of the democratic—another key idea in Whitman's work—abides in such a conception.

7) *The simultaneity of the list*: Chains of events happening at once, which leads to a feeling of timelessness. The poet is thus godlike, standing at the center of time, able to see and feel all things at once. Also, the poet tends to disappear into his enumerations, a technique that increases the feeling of spirituality, of Oneness, the detachment from ego. Simultaneity also creates a sense of movement, often of speed, in the text.

8) *Repetition*: A phenomenon of the list. It creates an incantatory feeling, as in religious literature, that approaches the rhythms of the prayer or chant, heightening the sense of the spiritual. A discussion of Whitman's use of rhetorical devices such as anaphora (the repetition of the same word or words at the *beginning* of a line), epistrophe (the repetition of the same word or words at the *end* of a line), symploce (the combination of anaphora and epistrophe), and syntactical parallelism can sharpen the students' understanding of Whitman's poetic technique. These devices literally "make" his meaning.

9) *Highly physical description alternating with abstract spiritual musings*: Whitman gains a tremendous power in his work because he continually buttresses his spiritual insights with concrete particulars (observed facts), and vice versa.

10) *Sexuality*: Whitman does not shy away from expressions of sexuality; this connects several of the above categories in our list—spirituality, equality, democracy, physical description, love, celebration, and, of course, eroticism.

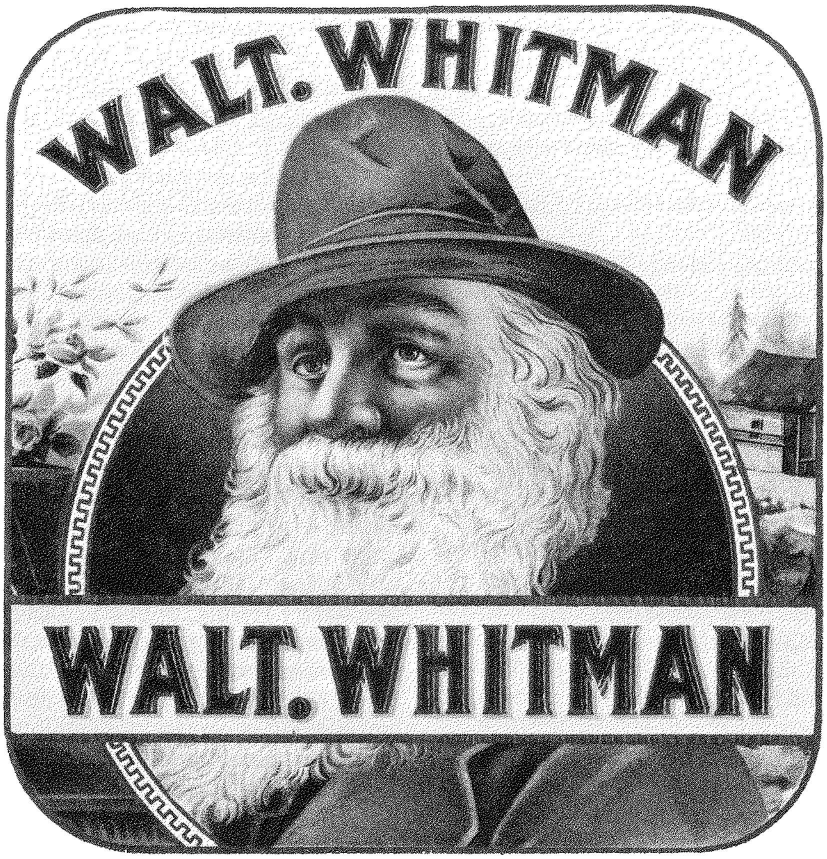
11) *Intimacy of address*: The voice of Whitman is warm, friendly, encouraging, sometimes even animated by the fearlessness found in face-to-face conversation. He addresses the reader directly, creating a sense of closeness rare in poetry.

12) *Individuality*: Despite the tendency of catalog poetry to "dissolve" the author's identity, his or her individual personality persists by virtue of the literary choices made and style adopted. (The students and I were forced to acknowledge a paradoxical element here: to know that one is an individual and at the same time one with the Whole.)

13) *Fearless use of the first person pronoun*: Whitman never shies away from using the word "I." The "Song of Myself" begins with it ("I celebrate myself") and virtually ends with it ("I stop some where waiting for you"). The constant use of the "I" is another element that creates the instantaneous intimacy of Whitman's voice.

14) *"And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier"*: This line concludes and summarizes section 6, which begins with the famous opening, "A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands." (6.1) The realization of individual death is transcended by the understanding that the soul is immortal.

15) *Natural diction spiced with 'poetic' diction*: Whitman's sound—his choice of words—is very close to



Box label for Walt Whitman cigar

ours, very "modern." The "everydayness" of his vocabulary reflects the common sights and sounds that he celebrates. Whitman's language is also highly concrete and sensual, as if it could be grabbed and held before the eyes and felt with the hand. At the same time, we note that his use of certain words and expressions (sometimes from the French, especially in the poems after 1855) may be a bit off-putting: "venerealee" for one afflicted with venereal disease; "amies" for "female friends"; "chef-d'oeuvre" for "masterpiece"; "ambulanza" for "ambulance"; "eleves" for "students"; "bussing" for "kissing," etc.

16) *A poet of the city*: Whitman was the first great poet to write of New York City, which connects to:

17) *The poet as reporter*: For many years Whitman worked as a newspaperman. He went out into the streets, using his eyes and ears to gather facts—sights, sounds, smells, textures—that informed his writing. This technique was to lay the foundation for everything that he would write. In short, observation—the merging of one's sensibility with one's surroundings—is another way of being-at-one with the "other." It is a form of meditation, and thus intersects with many of these other categories.

18) *The poet as storyteller*: There are anecdotes and short narratives throughout Whitman's long poems, especially in "Song of Myself," even though this poem is thought of as a non-narrative work. "The subject was so large that anything, it seemed, could be part of it and could be included." (Koch and Farrell, *Sleeping on the Wing*, p. 37)

19) *The idiosyncratic ellipsis (. . . .)*: Four suspension periods rather than the usual three. This piece of punctuation is Whitman's hieroglyph for the drawn breath, the pause for thought, the opening-up of the poem into timelessness, the intrusion of the eternal into consciousness whenever we leave off speaking—that is, when the individual ego is adumbrated. At the end of a poem the ellipsis usually means something like, "I have nothing more to say." In Whitman it means something quite different: a unit of breath; little stars or planets rolling by. . . .

20) *The long line*: Whitman's long lines contain or generate many of the above qualities. His line is a rolling wave, an oceanic motion; a planetary orbit; the process of drawing and exhaling breath—as a focus in meditation. (The long line also testifies to Whitman's devotion to opera.)

The origin of Whitman's line in Biblical literature seems evident. Here is a passage from the Old Testament (which I have arranged into verse lines) that contains the seed of Whitman's major theme in the "Song of Myself":

> Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
> Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
> The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,
> Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
> Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:
> And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.
> The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field:

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the
  Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.
The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God
  shall stand for ever. (Isaiah 40:1-8, King James Version)

The voice of God speaks through the mouth of the prophet, and Whitman himself for a time thought of his book as a "new Bible" for the American masses. Grass recurs as a life-image throughout literature and mythology. The Oglala Sioux holy man Black Elk, at the beginning of his autobiography, says: "So many other men have lived and shall live that story [of an individual life], to be grass upon the hills" (*Black Elk Speaks*, p. 1). We grow, flourish, and die like blades of grass. Whitman's title suggests the leaves (pages) of a book, at once eternal and transitory. We can also imagine a book printed on blades of grass, each blade being the page of the book of eternity. In *The Geography of the Imagination*, Guy Davenport notes that "this one universal plant [is] absent only in the deserts of the poles," and that "the first paper was leaves of grass, papyrus" (p. 76). Hence Whitman's description of it as a "uniform hieroglyphic." Grass, tenacious and ubiquitous, is also a perfect symbol for democracy. (Again note that Whitman's image is oxymoronic: grass that may need deciphering, but also is universal, accessible to all.)

Naturally there is much more to be said on all these subjects, and there are plenty of insights attendant on a close reading of Whitman. My students and I arrived at these ideas in a class session of "brainstorming," and I offer them as points of departure for further discussion. Use them as best suits your purpose.

Imitating Whitman

My students wrote imitations of Whitman using our list of twenty characteristics, trying to include in their poems as many of them as possible. If students had experienced "cosmic" moments that my personal introduction or Whitman's poetry reminded them of, or that Whitman's poems revived, I urged them to include these moments in their poems, and to be as specific as possible.

Whitman's poems give the feeling of being *in* reality, so I took the students outside to a little community park in our neighborhood where all of us could sit and write. (This exercise proved useful to students who found it difficult to identify with the spiritual aspect of Whitman's poetry; direct observation gave them images and events to "hang on to." Thus a "Whitman imitation" can also be a transcription of reality—a meditation on what passes before the eye and ear. These observations could be written down in prose, then later arranged into Whitmanic verse lines. (According to biographer Paul Zweig, Whitman ultimately found his poetic voice through years of writing prose—everything from newspaper articles to journal entries. His early poetry is mediocre, at best.) Here's a first draft of my foray into the garden:

Small apartment buildings being built in the air around us.
I watch the workers in yellow helmets and heavy-soled boots walk
  the rooftops, banging and buzzing away, shouting and
  laughing.
An airplane flies over. What am I thinking?
Strands of cassette tape festoon a nearby tree.
I sit on a bench in the garden planted with dozens of blossoming
  flowers and shrubs,
alive with immense bees that flash in and out of the Indian summer
  sunlight, strong because of the clearness of the air.
Small gnats attracted to skinny black trees attack my face as I
  write.
I puff my cheeks and whoosh, they go spinning upwards!
There is the shadow-work of these little trees to try to get down
  in words, the twisted puppet patterns
thrown on the white-washed brick sides of adjacent brownstones.
The shadows remind me of the black ink that unrolls from the tip
  of my black pen, shiny in the sunlight.
Tiny suns race up and down its barrel like meteorites!

I look at the students as they write, ranged in odd or formal
  positions around the circular garden, scribbling in our
  notebooks,
and think about making a list of what each of us is doing.
Are they sneaking looks at me, too, I wonder, as I note this down?
Alton creeps near some bushes, training his ever-ready camera on a
  black cat that has suddenly appeared.
Half of us are watching him and madly trying to write it down.
Alison sits on a rock, crosslegged, staring her eyes down at her
  pad, looking like Buddha.
My pen is moving along the page—I can't stop writing!

Other observations—drawn from reality, from memory, or from the imagination—can be interspersed with this "on-the-spot writing." This new material may be of a philosophical or cosmic nature, but should be balanced by the "minute particulars" captured for the pen by the eye and ear. The point is to let abstract ideas be generated and controlled by concrete images, and not the other way around: start with the skinny black tree in the garden that a thousand gnats are whirling around and *then* speak of the years that fly so quickly at Time's frozen face. Then move back to another concrete image—the splotchy, neon-like colors on the bow tie of the assistant principal, for example.

It would also be a good idea to use some of the rhetorical devices employed by Whitman that I mentioned in the eighth item of the list of qualities: anaphora, epistrophe, symploce, and syntactical parallelism. It's easy to find examples of these techniques in Whitman's poems.

If it isn't convenient to go outdoors, students can rely on remembered images. Writers can start with something that they know well—the trip to school in the morning, for example. They can "borrow" material from magazines and books if there is a danger of running out of steam. (News magazines and the *National Geographic* are good sources of images.) In fact, if your school has a library, it might be the ideal place to do this kind of writing, as long as students aren't too distracted by the temptation to do nothing but browse through books and periodicals.

Once students have achieved a Whitmanic *flow* in their work, this kind of poem can keep going and going. It can be stocked with anecdotes, little stories, and fleeting descriptions. It can be broken into sections that are more or less self-contained, or ones that spill over into the next section.

Study the endings of Whitman's poems and you will note that they often simply trail off, or end rather abruptly, even arbitrarily; many of them might end anywhere. The impressions simply stop coming, or in some way cease, as if the poet decided to step out of the river of being that created the images. This quality, too, is a mark of Whitman's work, or of the kind of poem that records a stretch of mental time in which anything might happen. Some critics have felt that Whitman's writing is a sort of stream-of-consciousness or free-association technique. Here too the spiritual is invoked: the feeling that one is centered in one's body and in no need of heading anywhere. One *is*, and whatever swims through the mind is registered, then let go of. That is how students might learn to think of this kind of writing: grab the image, get it down, then be ready for the next image. What unifies the perception of these images is the mind—and, in the largest sense, the Mind that watches over the whole universe; which *is* the universe.

Additional Writing Ideas

For academic or research papers, students could explore some of the following ideas:

- *Whitman and the Spiritual*: A good introduction to the mystical tradition can be found in *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). *Cosmic Consciousness* by Whitman's disciple, Dr. R. M. Bucke, was praised by the poet, who claimed that "it thoroughly delineates me." The psychologist William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library) was originally published in 1902 and contains a good deal of material on Whitman. The connection between the metaphysics of Hinduism and Whitman can be probed in V. K. Chari's *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism—An Interpretation* (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1964). For a contrast to Whitman's view of the One in a poem like "Song of Myself," see "The Eleventh Teaching: The Vision of Krishna's Totality" in *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), which keeps the verse form of the original. Transcendentalism, the socio-philosophical movement of the nineteenth century that had a powerful impact on Whitman, can be scrutinized in *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, edited by Perry Miller (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950). Justin Kaplan's and Gay Wilson Allen's biographies of Whitman and Allen's biography of Emerson also look into the relationship between Whitman and Transcendentalist thought.
- *"Walking Around" Poetry*: Whitman is one of a number of poets who have written poems "on foot" (or who created the illusion of doing so). For other masters of this genre, see work by Guillaume Apollinaire (in translations from the French), Charles Reznikoff, and Frank O'Hara. The "walking around" poem is predominantly a city genre, so it is no surprise that all of these poets (and there are others) lived in New York or Paris.
- *Poems on the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*: Not surprisingly, many poets besides Whitman wrote tributes when Lincoln was murdered. Some of them were collected in *Poems of American History*, edited by Burton Egbert Stevenson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), pp. 537-544. To find this fascinating book, long out of print, you will have to hunt it down in libraries, but the search is worth it.. The assignment could be extended to compare the reaction of poets to John F. Kennedy's assassination in *Of Poetry and Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).
- *Emerson and Whitman*: For many years the poet and great essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson beat the drum for a new kind of American poetry. Whitman was quite familiar with Emerson's essays and lectures and with the chief ideas of the Transcendentalist movement "fathered" by Emerson. (When Whitman sent him a copy of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Emerson wrote back to say that Whitman's book was "the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed." Students could read Emerson's essays "The Transcendentalist" and "The Poet" (see Emerson's *Selected Essays*, edited by Larzer Ziff [New York: Penguin Books, 1982]) to search for his ideas about the new American poet, and see how applicable they are to Whitman.
- *Contemporaries and Followers of Whitman*: Older poetry anthologies and histories of American poetry (such as *A Short History of American Poetry* by Donald Barlow Stauffer [New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974]) contain interesting selections from and commentaries on the poetry of Whitman's contemporaries. Beginning with Emerson, students could compare and contrast the writings of various poets to those of Whitman: William Gilmore Simms (1806–1870); Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882); John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892); Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849); Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894); Christopher Pearse Cranch (1813–1872), whose use of a long, prosaic line may have influenced Whitman; Jones Very (1813–1880); Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862); Herman Melville and James Russell Lowell (both 1819–1891), born the same year as Whitman, who outlived them by one year; Frederick Goddard Tuckerman (1821–1873); and Bayard Taylor (1825–1878).

  Whitman disciples whose work could be examined include Edward Carpenter (1844–1929) and Carl Sandburg (1878–1967).
- *Whitman's Poetic Language*: In the foreword to *An American Primer*, Whitman said: "I sometimes think that the *Leaves* is only a language experiment." Using *An American Primer* as a guide, students could put Whitman's language "under the microscope," studying what makes it visceral and what gives it its spiritual quality. What are his favorite words? From what sources does he derive his vocabulary? The same could be done for his rhetorical devices—anaphora, epistrophe, etc.
- *Whitman's Prose Works:* Whitman's prefaces to his various editions of *Leaves of Grass* repay close reading. Students will find them collected in Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett's edition of *Leaves of Grass*. *An American Primer* is a delightful excursion into the American language, and could be updated by students to include current slang and catch-phrases. Students could also write their own *Specimen Days*.

P.S. 49: A Special Place

by Christian McEwen

Editor's note: People ask us what a Teachers & Writers school program looks like, so we invited Christian McEwen to visit one of our programs and to write about it. The fact is that there is a lot of variety among our programs, and we knew she would be visiting a school where mostly good things have been happening. So we emphasized to her that we did not want a "puff" piece, and that she should be clear-eyed and impartial. Here is the result.

GOOD TEACHERS COME IN MANY SHAPES AND sizes. They can be white (even if all the students happen to be black), they can be women (even in a boys' school). They can be old or young, slapdash or scholarly, graceful or awkward, enthusiastic or shy. What does matter is that the teachers trust the students, and somehow because of that the students trust them back. Years later, a stranger asks what school was like for you, and at once a name jumps into your mouth: *Miss Englander, Mr. Lomax, Mr. Silverbrook.* The time you spent in their classrooms changed your life.

When Robert Wells was a little boy in the South Bronx, he had a teacher called Miss Englander. In all his years of going to school—elementary school, high school, a college degree, two graduate degrees—she was the only person who really inspired him. "I will never forget her. Do you know what she did? Not only was she a disciplinarian and a good teacher, she taught me how to play basketball. Gave me something I could do well. Gave me a reason not to become a gang member, because I was more interested in the basketball and the playground. Got me a college scholarship. One third grade teacher."

These days, Robert Wells is principal of P.S. 49, the "Willis Avenue School" on 139th Street, not ten blocks from where he grew up. It has always been a difficult neighborhood, but, as he put it, "Back then, somebody really cared about you. Parents, the community, they responded. Now the apathy and the violence, that's the thing. They care but they're afraid. Those days somebody on the block would say,'Don't you sell those drugs. You get out of here. I'm calling the cops.' They would move. Nowadays the dealers will set your house on fire. And that's the difference."

Last year an innocent boy was shot dead in the playground at P.S. 49 and another wounded in the thigh. A lesser man might have withdrawn into the privacy of his office or requested a transfer. But Robert Wells is made of sterner stuff. Before coming to P.S. 49 in 1983, he worked in the District Office, holding a series of highly demanding positions. Yet the way he tells it, he enjoyed every minute: "I was one of the most fortunate people, because every four years I had a new challenge. I started out as the director of a substance abuse center. Then I became the health supervisor, which meant I was involved in a lot of the small community clinics, in terms of family living, everything: immunization, drug abuse. After that I had one of the most beautiful environmental education programs in the world."

It is this kind of attitude (and this particular layering of experience) that makes Robert Wells the superb principal that he is. Over the past eight years he has drawn around him an excellent fulltime staff, including such teachers as Margery Barwell, Richard and Yolanda Gross, Anna Sanchez, and Delores Johnson. He makes himself totally available to all his teachers. "It's the only school I've ever been in where the principal's office is always open. You can just drop in. Teachers drop in and have a cigarette, talk to Mr. Wells, and leave. I just walk into his office whenever I feel like it. And it's a nice feeling that spreads throughout the school. Even kids come into his office. He's got a big table in the center of his office where they can just sit down and write" (T&W writer Mark Statman).

Robert Wells makes himself available to the neighborhood as well. It is not usually seen as an easy thing to be a black principal in a Latino community—P.S. 49 is 60% Latino—but once again Mr. Wells is different. "He knows all the kids. He knows all their parents. He's always calling them." He even has good relations with the police department. "Police will come in, just to talk" (Mark Statman).

Apart from Miss Englander, Robert Wells did not enjoy going to school. "It was not a pleasant experience, and I don't remember anything in elementary school that could be considered extracurricular." At P.S. 49, he has gone out of his way to provide extracurricular activities. "I bring in dancers. I bring in a percussionist. We have another teacher with the timbales and the congas." As far as he is concerned, these classes are not luxuries. "Most of us who have taught know that there's something every child can do well. And when you have enough of these activities, you cut down on a lot of bad things. You cut down on vandalism, because the kids have pride in the building. You cut down on discipline problems, because 'All right, the first few periods are a drag, but before lunch I am going to music class.'" Such improvements start to add up. Little by little the glitter of them enters the airwaves. They transform the atmosphere of a school.

One of the ways in which Robert Wells has transformed P.S. 49 is through his alliance with Teachers & Writers Collaborative, who sent him Julie Patton in 1985 and added Mark Statman in 1986. Over the years, different T&W artists— a visual artist, a dancer, and other writers—came and went. But Julie and Mark stayed on. Between them, they clocked up some twelve residencies. As a result of their presence, an entire "culture of writing" has developed in the school. Older children write poems and stories and type them up on the school computers. The younger ones draw pictures and "dictate" them to their teachers. Parents come in at

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lunchtime to write pieces of their own. The classroom bulletin boards are ablaze with children's work. It is, as Mark says, "really quite wonderful."

Without Robert Wells, of course, none of this would have been possible. He is the one who initiated the program, the one who made sure, year after year, that the funds would be available to help pay the writers. He is indeed a master teacher, a man with a clear and powerful vision of what he wants his school to be.

But there can be no doubt that in Teachers & Writers Collaborative Mr. Wells found the perfect ally. In Julie Patton and Mark Statman, he saw a warmth and humor and flexibility that echoed his own, a love of teaching, a tenacious idealism. When he talks about those two, it is with great pleasure, as if their presence in the school confirmed something important for him, reinvigorated some private faith. "They don't believe that children can't learn," he said. "They don't go at things like that."

Mark and Julie, Julie and Mark. They are almost always spoken of in the same breath, and yet they could hardly be more different. Mark is Jewish, a lively, energetic man in his mid-thirties, with many admirers among the teachers. "I just love him," says Delores Johnson. "I love his method, his terminology. I get angry when I can't have him." She enjoys the fact that he is so speedy. "I like them hyper. I can relate to that because he's just like one of the kids."

Mark once wrote of one of his interns that there was nothing in her body language that said, "Look at me, I'm the person who's most fun!" Consciously or not, he always takes the "most fun" role himself. Julie Patton, a young black poet, has a different presence in the classroom: altogether gentler, more internal and intuitive. In a recent article in *Teachers & Writers* magazine (vol. 22, no. 5), she spoke of centering herself in "a sympathetic understanding and approach to [her] own childhood." "I play," she told me. "I would really like to create other types of spaces in the classroom, dreaming spaces as well as realistic ones."

Whatever the differences of style and presentation, that playfulness, that desire to create "other types of space," is something Mark and Julie have in common. They share too a commitment to the internal life of the school. In the midst of busy lives, they manage to get up to the South Bronx for open school nights and parents' meetings. Not long ago they accompanied some members of the parents' group downtown to help them buy copies of modern poetry (in English and Spanish) not available in the neighborhood. Walking down the hallways at P.S. 49, they stop by former classrooms to say hello. The effect of all this is plain to see. When I was interviewing Julie in the school cafeteria, a girl ran up just to stroke her hair. "Hi, Ms. Patton!" she sang out and she was gone again. When the children catch sight of Mark in the corridor, they stick their heads out the classroom door and call him by his first name. Parents stop him in the street or wave at him. "Hi Mark, how are you doing?"

At P.S. 49, Mark works exclusively with the younger children: kindergarten through second grade. His bilingual kindergarten class is especially endearing. The day I visited, they sat on the floor in the half-light, eyes lifted attentively to this strange man, this poet, who yet was addressing them in their own language. "Make a happy face," he told them in Spanish. "Now a thoughtful one." He demonstrated. "Now angry. Now sleepy. Now frightened. Now funny." The little ones shifted and giggled, trying to keep up with him. "Now sad. Now happy again."

Before they had time to get bored, Mark was on to something else. "What noise does a cat make? A dog? A train?" He paused a moment, to see if the children could come up with the answers themselves. They weren't so sure about the train. "Woo—woo—" Mark demonstrated vigorously, arms moving like pistons. "Woo—woo—" yelled the children. "Now birds, what sound do birds make?" (A rush of tiny creaky whistles). "Children in school?" (A great stamping of feet.) "Now the wind in the trees, now the sound of the ocean. Now a car, a truck, a radio. Now snow falling. Rain. And the sound of silence."

For an instant the children sat entranced, their hands folded quietly on their laps. Mark guided them back to their tables and handed out paper and pencils. "This time," he said, "I want you to write about night and day. How do you feel at night? How do you feel during the day? What sounds do you hear? Are they the same or different? Write me a poem."

When Mark asks a five-year-old to "write a poem," what he actually means is "draw me a picture." Even a child who does not know the alphabet can still make some kind of record of what he or she is thinking. It is from these private hieroglyphics, later translated back to an adult scribe, that "the poem" or "the story" comes to be. When everything is drawn and explicated, the adult writes down the words and the child copies them. That piece of writing is then the child's own.

To begin with, of course, the children don't really understand what they are supposed to be learning. The details of writing get mixed up with the details of Mark's presentation. "I liked Mark," says Stanley Gilmore, now in the first grade. "He taught me how to write poems. He taught us about bird whistles." Juan Zapata, now in third grade, was fascinated by him. "Mámi," he begged his mother. "You have to come to the school because Mark writes so fast. I can't see his hand. He's a good writer, And very funny, Mámi, he is."

Mark was happy when I repeated this back to him. It pleased him to think that "bird whistles" and "writing fast" and "being funny" should all be associated in the children's minds with poetry. He wasn't worried. He trusted that the other aspects of writing (letters, words, sentences, spelling, grammar) would fall into place in due course. In the meantime, why *not* let the children enjoy themselves?

One anecdote that told me clearly just how successful such a method could be was Yolanda Gross's story of her student Angela. "Angela came in the other day, with a wrinkled-up piece of paper. It was wrinkled up, it was ripped on the side, and she said, 'I wrote a story last night.' Sunday night. She'd written a story. All on her own. And she stood there at my desk and dictated the whole thing. 'A little girl went out to play, and then it was so hot outside she wanted some ice cream, and she missed the ice-cream man and started to cry. And when she was running home, she fell down and she hurt herself.'"

Ms. Gross was quite surprised. "Angela Ferrer was one of the children who didn't do a lot when Mark was here. She couldn't care less. Now, all of a sudden, here she is! And she's writing her story at home, and she's bringing in her little corner of paper, and 'I wrote a story last night!'"

It is the sort of tiny moment a less attentive teacher might have missed. But Ms. Gross knows what she is doing. "You have to just go with that flow. Sometimes I want to start a class by talking about America, and somebody tells me, 'I wrote a story.' I have to sit down and translate it. You know, *forget America*!"

It was actually because of Yolanda Gross that Mark started working with kindergarten children. Week after week she gave up her prep period to sit in on his first and second grade classes. "I'd go there and sit in the back of the room and watch him. And when I saw how the class reacted, I said, 'Why can't he come to kindergarten and do this?'" She approached Mr. Wells with her idea, and he found the money through a program called Program Child, especially designed for kindergarten and first grade students. The only requirement was that the parents also be included. In June of 1989 Mark taught six workshops for parents and their first grade children, and one workshop for parents only. In that last session, the parents themselves asked to continue. Mark and Julie have been teaching parent workshops ever since. Juan's mother, Zelideth Zapata, is a fervent advocate. "If Mark weren't here, and Julie, I wouldn't be here either. I would be in my house, washing, cleaning. But this time is very important for me. When Mark comes, you see me finish everything early, because I know at 12:30 I have to come to Mark's class. And I don't do any compromise, with nobody, with anything, because that time is very special for me."

"Special, very special"—it is a phrase that recurs. Across the street from P.S. 49, the vacant lots are strewn with garbage: a rusty fridge, an ironing board, even an artificial Christmas tree. Light catches in the shards of broken glass, smoothes the chrome of two abandoned cars. But when you enter the school itself—a pleasant, yellow-washed brick building dating from the mid-sixties—when you scribble your name for the guard at the door and look up the open stairwell, you see a sign: "P.S. 49: A Very Special Place."

Robert Wells had baseball caps made, bearing that phrase, and matching t-shirts in blue and white. There are times when (for all its triteness) it just seems true, simply and blissfully true. And then there are other times when the word *special* tilts to one side, bringing with it other, more complicated phrases: "special pleading," "special case." When I asked Zelideth Zapata why there were so few other parents at the weekly workshops, she took a deep breath and decided to tell me the truth. "This is a territory, this is a neighborhood where plenty of homes are involved in big troubles. Drugs, alcohol, prostitution, different bad things . . . for *me* are bad things, for *them* are normal things."

Zelideth herself has escaped the worst of this. She is one of the many unsung heroes of the Bronx, a hard-working immigrant from Puerto Rico. She loves literature and has the makings of a fierce and passionate poet. But for all that, as Julie says, "Zelideth is a woman who's been strait-jacketed." Only now is she beginning to feel her power.

Unlike Mark, Julie works with the older children, where the question of power and powerlessness is especially important. "I really want to know what's happening with the kids these days, what kinds of home situations they have, how they're dealing with things. One day Mr. Wells said, 'You know, quite a few of these kids' parents are on drugs.' You see the kids coming to school all neat and dressed up, and you don't know that. So I stare at them, like, 'This kid comes from a crack home, you know, how are they coping?'"

Again and again, Julie looks for ways to help the children write about what really matters to them. She wants them "to have the confidence to trust whatever their minds are producing. And to see the ways their minds work, and their power of creativity." This spring, she asked the children in her third grade class to write about what marriage meant to them. The work that resulted was sharp with adult skepticism: "Men always want to sit down and watch TV and women have to cook and wash and take care of children. If you ever find a man that wants to serve you and care for you, then marry him." Or: "When you get married, the wives always have to be the slaves. The men go out every Friday or Saturday and on Sunday they sleep. They never try to help their wives."

One of the teachers tried to argue that the kids got these attitudes from television, but Julie disagreed. "It reflects what's going on in their homes. They are writing about things that are very specific to them." The work was raw and direct and sometimes painful, but she was happy to see it anyway. What matters to her is that her assignments be emotionally capacious enough for the stories to be told—told as the children want them told, with no sense of adult presence coaxing and cajoling them from behind.

But to give only this example of Julie's teaching would be to misrepresent it, to emphasize the therapeutic and realistic at the expense of the imaginative. More important, as she wrote, is "to weave together the real and the imaginary so that, in Gaston Bachelard's words, 'the child knows the happiness of dreaming which will later be the happiness of the poet.'"

In her early years at P.S. 49, Julie used to try to come at that "happiness of dreaming" by thinking of poetry as a way of questioning things. "I would get the kids to teach the class. 'What are you wondering about? What's your question? So next week it's your turn. You present the theme.'" Not surprisingly, the children loved it, both the power they were being given, and the experience itself. They paid far more attention to each other's lessons than they ever did to anybody else's.

Another of Julie's techniques involves, very simply, reading aloud. The catch is that while she reads, the children free associate and write down whatever comes to them. "I read quietly and softly. I tell them that the exercise will not be that much different from doing their homework while watching TV or listening to M. C. Hammer, making mouth-noises and rapping, and jazzing math at the same time."

There are times, of course, when this exercise does not "take." Some children require more specific instructions, and find Julie's open-endedness unsettling. Others leap at the chance to say what's going through their minds. Third grader Romel Wilson, for example, told me in no uncertain terms that freewriting was his favorite. "When it's time for us to leave, I keep writing."

There have been many committed young writers in Julie's classes (Yunes Quiñones and Cynthia Martinez are the current stars), but the one who stands out, at least in all the stories a visitor hears, is a 12-year-old poet named Arthur Sheridan III. Arthur was the boy who was wounded in the thigh last fall, the one who survived when the other boy was killed. He was a troubled boy with a painful and complicated past. But when Julie came into the classroom, "Arthur was an entirely different kid. He just liked her," said Richard Gross. "He liked her manner."

For Julie, meeting him with no preconceptions, Arthur was "a big tall chocolate-brown dark-skinned bunny rabbit," who "seemed like he was bent on being a good boy in spite of everything around him." She enjoyed the fact that he loved to write, and wasn't embarrassed by it. "For him it was great to be a writer. He didn't feel it was sissyish to be a poet. He liked it, and he grew from it."

When Julie's residency ended in June of 1990, Arthur Sheridan III had five pieces in the school's official anthology. Mr. Wells was entranced by Arthur's success. "You'd have to look very hard to see that thread in him that's there, that Julie pulled out. You look at his situation and you say, 'Oh, this child doesn't have a chance.' You read those poems and you say, 'He might be president.'"

When Julie and Mark first entered P.S. 49, the opportunity for students to write in this way—to explore their own, child-centered truth, and to excel through doing that—was not available. There was, said Richard Gross, "a void, a huge void." Poetry meant jingles and nursery rhymes. Writing meant grammar and mechanics, the obligatory essay on "My Summer Vacation," followed by a year of comprehension questions in the basal reader, rexo sheets with fill-in exercises. All too often, writing would be used as punishment. No wonder the children weren't interested. No wonder Mark and Julie speedily became so popular.

Throughout their residencies, Mr. Wells has gone out of his way to adapt himself to the changing needs of the school and to the T&W program. Most writers appear at their schools one day a week, teach three classes in succession, perhaps eat lunch, and afterwards stay for a fourth hour of pull-out groups or meetings with staff. At P.S. 49, Mark and Julie have more freedom. As Mark explains it, "The residency is a little unorthodox. Invariably what I'll do is I'll teach two classes, and then I'll be meeting with parents, or teachers, or I'll be sitting in Mr. Wells's office talking about what we're doing. Even though it's not quite the usual scheduling, it's been better for this program."

Too few schools—and indeed arts organizations—seem to recognize the value of such an apparently casual process. But P.S. 49 (as run by Robert Wells) and Teachers & Writers (as run by Nancy Larson Shapiro) are exceptional cases. Both people would rate flexibility above mere orderliness, both would adapt the rules to keep a good program on target. And it is because of this that the collaboration has flourished.

Nonetheless, human beings are human beings. Trust, ease, and intimacy come slow. When I interviewed the teachers at P.S. 49, I felt as if each one wanted to convince me (or perhaps themselves) that in their case, anyway, the perfect collaboration had developed instantaneously, the moment the writer entered the door. There had been no misunderstandings, no differences of opinion, no sense of turf invaded, no indeed! It was only after I talked to the writers, and read their teaching journals, that I began to understand that not everything had been picture perfect. There was the teacher who forgot to send notes home to the parents, so that no one turned up for the parent workshops. There was the teacher who sat at the back of the classroom during class, loudly discussing her next shopping trip. There was the loud, bullying teacher. And worst of all, there was the teacher with a blank face who never interacted, except to tell someone to sit down and shut up.

Some of these problems could be sorted out easily and quickly. Others took months or years. Questions of attitude and taste—attitude towards the children themselves, and taste as it related to the children's writing—were the most intractable. Julie described one particular teacher. "At first she would say, 'Oh, this stinks!' She wouldn't say those words, but that's what she meant. But the work she was being so rude about was exactly the work I was looking for. So she was always going against my grain, and I was going against her grain, too.

"But teachers are given this agenda to teach a certain way, and then we come in and say, 'No, no, no. . .' So they're taken aback, and they have to adjust to us. It's really a delicate thing. And she meant it well. I feel sorry if I think about her having this strange poet come in, reading these odd, abstract pieces to her students."

Part of the difficulty here is that the teachers often had bad teachers themselves. Richard Gross, for example, had a painful (and a painfully common) story to tell.

"I remember when I was in the third grade and I lived in Brooklyn. I had to write an essay, so I did it on the Borough of Brooklyn. And I started off, 'I live in a very special part of New York City called Brooklyn. . . .' The teacher didn't like it. She put an arrow through it. And I never could understand why she didn't like it, because I thought it was pretty good. I think that turned me off. You know, I really do."

Long after the torn pages of the essay had found their way into the school incinerator or been mashed down in some anonymous landfill, the wounds made by those "arrows" remain unhealed. When I asked the teachers about the kind of schooling they themselves had had, I heard the same ugly stories again and again.

Margery Barwell had been educated in the West Indies. "Where I went to school it was strict you know. Everything was guarded as if knowledge only came from the teacher. The teacher had all the answers. And until today I don't give my opinion as freely as I should." Delores Johnson had grown up in North Carolina, but her experience was the same. "My teachers were real stuffed shirts. Refined teachers. White gloves. 'Do this and sit like this.' They never did anything to humor you." Yolanda Gross, who grew up in the five boroughs of New York, summed up her entire elementary school career with wry efficiency: "A roomfull of people and a sour-face up there in the front."

If this were the only thing most teachers had experienced, it would hardly be surprising if their own teaching were in various ways thwarted or ungenerous. Luckily, almost all the teachers I talked to had also had at least one "Miss Englander" in the course of their school careers, one person who excited or inspired them. Richard Gross remembered his social science teacher, Mr. Silverbrook. "He had humor in his class, and he was interesting. He was the only one who treated us as seventeen-year-olds, and not as kindergarten children." Yolanda Gross spoke of her sixth grade teacher, Mr. Lomax. "He was alive. He did fun things. We were not allowed to look up when he came into the room. He was really a joker, you know. And his shoes were always spit-polished." Her entire class loved working for him. "It was a pleasure. The reward was just the smile on his face." She smiled herself as she remembered him, becoming for a moment almost bashful, the grateful eleven-year-old who had so badly needed that particular adult on her horizon.

Some people are able to build by contraries, to recognize what is lacking in the world around them and to invent it for themselves. But most people find things far easier when they have a role model. Miss Englander may have had her tough side ("Oh, she'd never smile"), but she did teach young Bob Wells to play basketball. "And when I played basketball, all the girls liked me. So why bother about drugs?"

Four Works by Arthur Sheridan III

Sixth Grade

I Remember

I remember a skinny dark lady who lives in the highrise apartment building I live in. She lives on the 8th floor. The 8th floor has a very quiet hallway with lots of writing on the walls. People in my building say she's been raped so that's why she mumbles in a low voice so no one will try to go by her. She moves like she has a broken leg. She stays in her house, and the only time anybody sees her is when she goes to the store to get some cigarettes. She doesn't make any unusual sounds, she just talks to herself.

Poem

smooth
  hands
   playing a piano
takes me somewhere
  but not far
      right across the
street,
            as I play in the
dirt and soil
      get my white shirt
            dirty and darker
      dark, dark
like the dirt
      in the yard
as I look across the
street,
there's the woman
playing a piano

Pantoum

Words are strange
The way they're put together
Letters become sounds
Sounds become words

The way they're put together
Like magnets and iron
Sounds become words
A broom and a gray gym floor

Like magnets and iron
Chalk and board
A broom and a gray gym floor
Like an eraser and pencil

Poem

an old haunted house
blended into the ground
  the hot earth before we
were on the planet,
  the green moon
in the mist
  was a round night
shadow, put there before
  the old black well,
a well with no water
in it, only a sneaker

It is a rhetorical question. Nonetheless, the difference playing basketball made to Robert Wells, like the difference writing poems has made to Arthur Sheridan, is, far too often, the difference between survival and failure.

Bringing a writer into the classroom widens the options, changes the rules, creates new possibilities. This is easy to see in the case of the children. It takes longer to see that it can be true for their teachers as well.

To a varying extent, Julie and Mark have become inspirations for the teachers they work with. Yolanda Gross, for example, who gave up her prep period week after week to watch Mark teach, still does her best to emulate him. "I just try to get the same enthusiasm from them that he does."

Margery Barwell, too, has learned a great deal from the writers. "Before, with my other classes, I wasn't really writing every day. But after Mark left, I realized that writing is an important topic too. Very often it is shrugged off into the background." In the course of working with him, she began to change her methods. "I always used to correct their spelling, but I noticed that they were writing short pieces. With Mark, they wrote much longer ones."

These days, Ms. Barwell tries to emphasize content rather than correctness. Instead of marking up the individual papers (Mr. Gross's teacher's arrows!) she checks them through in search of the most common errors and plans her lessons accordingly.

In Richard Gross's class the transformation has been the most impressive. Partly it is a matter of technique. "'Roses are red/violets are blue/I'll hit you and—whatever whatever.' That was the typical thing. And all of a sudden you have this poet coming in and saying you don't have to do it that way. You can have one word on a line: 'it.' Or two lines: 'Why/not?'" But it is also partly a matter of attitude. "The work can be corrected, or made a little different, but Julie never says to a child, 'That's wrong.'"

Clearly Mr. Gross himself has blossomed in this partnership in which she teaches creative writing and he picks up on the technical details. Every child in his class is allocated an hour and a half to type his or her work into the computer, proof it, and print it out. The classroom's fifteen bulletin boards are jammed to the frames. This spring Lizzeth and Claudia Sabio entered their story in the citywide Ezra Jack Keats Contest and succeeded in winning a bronze medal. Julie was delighted. "Mr. Gross really does want to empower the kids' expressive abilities. He really has a lot of respect for writers and writing."

All of the above, of course, are examples of good old-fashioned collaboration. But when writers are in a school for five and six years, as Mark and Julie have been, something else can happen. The teaching can take on a life of its own.

When Elizabeth Fox from the T&W office came by to visit Mark's classes last fall, she stopped in to watch Ms. Sanchez. And in Mark's words: "The kids were doing this great writing, and it was really beautiful, and Elizabeth asked me, 'How long have you been working with this class?' And I said, 'I'm not working with them at all now. I worked with them last year as first graders. And I worked with Ms. Sanchez. But this is the product of last year's work."

Such a "culture of writing" cannot, of course, develop on demand. But when a writer comes back to the same school week after week (and better, year after year), when the children who saw Mark in kindergarten and first grade see Julie in third and fourth and sixth grade, then indeed extraordinary things can happen.

Anna Sanchez, meanwhile, continues to teach creative writing on her own. The day I visited her, she had been using *El Libro de la Escritura*, the Spanish version of T&W's *The Writing Book*. She showed me the work her second graders had been doing, under the heading of "Invenciones" (Inventions). "I have a crayon that has hands and can write." "In the window of my house I have five hearts that are very happy."

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The windows of the houses opposite P.S. 49 are boarded up. In the vacant lot alongside, a black and white dog lifts his head sharply as I pass, and goes off to scavenge among discarded paint cans. But inside the school, despite the budget cuts, despite the lunchtime racket, the future is looking good. Iris Patten, the assistant principal, wrote a grant proposal to the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, and P.S. 49 has just been awarded $15,000—$10,000 for 1991-92 and $5,000 for 1992-93. She is exhilarated by what this means. "Next year we can have continuity. The writers can be here the whole year, and see many more classes. So that will be a good year to really see the program flourish."

In Mark Statman's eyes, the program is already flourishing. He wishes more people would use it as a model. "I've been doing a lot of research on community-based projects. I don't think anyone's done this before. I don't think anyone has tried to be as holistic about what a program in a school can be. We're working with kids, we're working with teachers, we're working with parents, we're working with administrators. We're *in* the community. People know us. This is taking community and school-based management to the *n*th degree."

The presence of the writers has in fact touched an enormous number of people: children, like Angela Ferrer and Arthur Sheridan; teachers, like Margery Barwell and Richard and Yolanda Gross; parents, like Zelideth Zapata; administrators, like Iris Patten. Standing behind them all (as Julie once said) "like a dad" is Robert Wells, and, behind him, Miss Englander. "I'll never forget her. Do you know what she did? She gave me something I could do well." ●

BOOK

A Life Worth Living: Selected Letters of John Holt
Edited by Susannah Sheffer
(Ohio State University Press, 1990)
285 pp., $45 cloth, $18 paper

by Marvin Hoffman

DENNISON, HERNDON, HOLT, KOHL, KOZOL. For those of us who were drawn to progressive education in the much-mythologized sixties, they were our pantheon of god-practitioners. These men had been in the trenches, worked in real schools with real children and had emerged with a nobility that made us yearn to emulate them. There were others—Friedenberg, Goodman, Ilich—whose writings influenced us; but they were critics or theoreticians. They had not "experienced" schools and thus disqualified themselves as active models for how to live our lives.

This list is an interesting reflection of its times. All male, for one, although Dennison's *The Lives of the Children* was constructed largely around the work of his wife Mabel at the First Street School. In a profession so heavily dominated by women, the sex role division between the celebrity master chefs and the everyday cooks was preserved.

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