



SPECIMEN DAYS

The Teaching Diaries of Sarah Dohrmann

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In 2002, Sarah Dohrmann taught poetry to SIE VII special education students at PS 162M in Harlem. "SIE VII" is a New York City Board of Education classification for children who "display severe emotional disturbances such as infantile behaviors, lack of self control, and withdrawn or phobic reactions."

JANUARY 8, 2002

My first day with Teachers & Writers. My first day at PS 162M. My first day ever.

I was incredibly nervous, and decided to begin my class by getting to the basics of writing. I asked, Why do we write? What makes writing special? For example, what would compel a person to compose a letter? How is writing a letter different from using the phone? Do we write, like Homer, to record myths and events? Do we write, like Anne Sexton, to recover something personal?

The students felt that writing is special because it takes time to do, because it's a way to tell someone about your life, because it's something concrete that will outlive you, will prove you existed.

I agreed, but also noted that writing is a way of considering something outside of ourselves, it's a way to honor the otherwise overlooked elements of life. For that reason, I decided to introduce the kids to Pablo Neruda. His odes glorify the small, unsung things of our lives, and they praise these things in a simple, understandable way. An ode, I told the kids, is a ceremonious poem that gives public or private dignity to something or someone. It is a poem in which personal emotion and general meditation are united. Neruda's "Ode to My Socks" is a good example of this:

Ode to My Socks (excerpt)

They were
so handsome
for the first time
my feet seemed to me

unacceptable
like two decrepit
firemen, firemen
unworthy
of that woven
fire,
of those glowing
socks.

I was aware that the Nerudan ode, which has no fixed form, might be difficult to teach to a group of third through fifth graders struggling to stay at a second-grade level. Unlike the haiku or the acrostic, it does not offer the relief of rules. But the ode's very flexibility and wide plain of topical options seemed a good way for me to gauge the kids' creative muscles. Here's Braden Holliday's ode:

Ode to My Brain and My Glasses
by Braden Holliday

My mom brought me to the eye doctor and then I wore my glasses
and my mom said, "You're smart."

My brain was getting smarter and I could see the blackboard.

Beautiful, right?

JANUARY 15, 2002

After teaching a free-range poetic form like the ode, I wanted to give the kids a bit more of a crutch this time. I decided on the list poem, an itemization of things and events that can be found in almost every culture: Polynesian list poems offer an inventory of local islands; Book II of Homer's Iliad catalogues the major Greek heroes in the Trojan War; and the Book of Genesis traces Adam's lineage through a sequence of begats.

Today, I told the kids, the list can be found in many forms: to-do lists, grocery lists, a meeting's minutes. The list can also be seen in more ceremonial forms: the names engraved in the Vietnam Memorial's granite or the incantation of casualties on September 11th. A list poem is essentially a never-ending wellspring of people, events, places, and the images they create.

To begin the lesson I asked students to vote on a subject for a collaborative list poem: not surprisingly, for a class composed of no girls, Mr. Thompson's class chose boys. What did surprise me, however, was their response to my request for specific descriptions of their gender: "Ugly!" and "stupid!" and "ignorant!" Once one boy shouted "Fat Albert," the idea spread like wildfire, unleashing a list of male cartoon-characters and superheroes. "Let's talk about real boys for a minute," I said, attempting to rein them

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in to something real. "Tell me what makes a boy different from a man?"

"Men are just bigger," one boy said, shrugging his shoulders. The rest of the class concurred, until I said: "But boys don't have families to support or bills to pay, and men aren't in fifth grade, are they?" Though this seemed to succeed in getting them to think, I wonder if such a distinction was true to their lives. Somehow I suspect that many of them are expected to take on adult responsibilities at a very young age. From that moment on, I felt a steady resolve that during my residency I would just let my kids be kids.

In Mr. Vogel's and Mr. Marcus's classes, I refined my strategy, passing around notecards with topic suggestions like "My Clubhouse Rules" and "Things That Don't Scare Me." This worked better for the kids, and I was very happy with Natasha Butler's poem. Upon rereading it, though, I can't help but feel that her poem reflects a similar need to act grown-up far too soon.

Things I Wish People Would Say to Me
by Natasha Butler

I wish people would say nice words to me.
Because nice words are polite to say to people.
pretty girl
sassy girl
nice girl
pretty young girl
sassy young girl
nice young girl
pretty young lady
sassy young lady
nice young lady
And I wish people would say,
"Can I go out on a date with you?"

JANUARY 22, 2002

Yesterday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which is impossible not to notice, considering every bulletin board in every hallway and every classroom is lacquered with posters of and about him. If these kids know anything about American history, they know M.L.K. Jr.—from how many kids he had (four), to how many degrees he earned (three), to what date he was assassinated (August 28, 1963). Kids in Harlem look to Martin Luther King Jr. as a demi-god, the kind of man they hope to someday become. It's not

unusual to hear a teacher say to a child: “Do you think Martin Luther King Jr. would have used the f-word with his teacher? Is this the way you’re planning on becoming a great man?”

I started today’s class with a recitation of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, which he delivered on the white marble steps of the Lincoln Memorial. After reading the speech aloud, I asked volunteers to come to the front of the classroom and utter the stirring words he once bellowed to an integrated crowd of over 200,000 people. I wanted to let these kids be “that kind of man” momentarily; I also wanted to inspire them to consider the very nature of dreams.

What are dreams, after all? There are sleeping dreams, of course, and daydreams, and personal dreams we each have (to be an astronaut when we grow up, to see Africa someday, to own a Lamborghini). Then there are the bigger, loftier kinds of dreams—of an all-encompassing nature—that are not for oneself alone but for the betterment of mankind. We talked about how King’s larger dream was rooted in his “smaller” dreams: dreams of a black man in a segregated society, an educated reverend, a parent and a husband, a civil rights leader of a divided country.

Dreams are elusive things: they’re intangible, they’re personal, they’re ever-changing, they’re sometimes so burned in our imagination they become the very thing that dictates our entire personality. I wrote “I have a dream” four times on the chalkboard and asked the kids to write four dreams of their own. “Really dig,” I said, “dig into that place inside yourself that has high hopes, big ideas, crazy notions about who and where you’ll be in fifteen years.” In a classroom of children who are up against so much, who struggle to control their erratic behaviors, whose frustrations about their place in the world often gets the better of them, I wanted to let them really dream for one 45-minute class period.

I Have a Dream
by Tavazia Amaker

I have a dream that I could be a scientist and make an invention better than everyone’s. Everyone would like me. Even other scientists.

I have a dream that my invention would pay for everything that people buy and carry groceries for people.

I have a dream that I would know more about history because Martin Luther King, Jr. is part of black history. God let him rest in peace.

I have a dream that everyone lives forever and that there will be no more violence.

Come to think of it: Isn’t King’s speech the very

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sort of ceremonial list I was discussing in last week's class? Could Tavazia's poem be the list poem I was striving for? I think so. I think, Why not?

MARCH 5, 2002

My soul moves like nothing
Dreams about nothing
Feels like nothing
Smells like nothing
Has never been seen.

Kareem Cross's poem is not a very uplifting one, but I include it here as evidence of my students' low self-confidence. Kareem is an adorably small boy who probably suffers from a lot of bullying due to his size. He is an exceptionally negative child, with whom I spent a great deal of in-class writing time today. I don't know if his poem can ultimately be published in the anthology, but I thought it important for him to get some of his self-hating thoughts down on paper. I wanted Kareem to know that whatever he says or writes with me is okay, that I'm not going to think him a bad kid just because he has "bad" things to say.

And perhaps there's nothing that makes one look inside oneself more than a conversation and, ultimately, a poem about the soul (which was our assignment today). The soul, like a dream, is invisible and difficult to define. It is a religious, philosophical, and immaterial aspect (or essence) of a human being, which is believed to confer both individuality and humanity.

Perhaps my self-admitted "lapsed Catholic" status caused me to be sincerely shocked today when Natasha Butler wrote a whole poem about how her soul can "feel like Jesus." Naturally, her soul can feel or do whatever she conjures it to, but the issue of religion stopped me today. A conversation about Jesus in the classroom felt suddenly "naughty," or even illegal. I couldn't help but wonder what other classes might discuss religion in a public school classroom. Do issues of the soul emerge when one is learning math, music, or traditional language arts? Or is poetry the sole remaining forum in which such conversations can occur openly?

The kids wrote about their souls with the sort of giddy freedom that one finds in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. So many of the poems were

incredible—and the kids really vied to read their work aloud at class’s end. Not only that, but they actually listened as their peers read their poems aloud. Writing about the soul, irrespective of religion, seems to have allowed soft light and good air into their innermost thoughts.

MARCH 26, 2002

Today was a big day: Mercedes McAndrew, a friend and photographer, came to the classroom to take pictures of the kids. To accompany the theme of photography, I handed out portraits and close-ups of people from all over the world. I then made a list of questions about the people. What did I eat for dinner last night? What is the color of my happiness? What do I see when I look out the windows of my home? What am I afraid of? I wanted to encourage the children to speculate, to risk putting themselves into another person’s shoes.

I started today’s class by writing compassion on the chalkboard. I broke it down, separating the “com” from the “passion,” and asked the kids to brainstorm its definition. Passion was easy for them to venture: “It’s love!” someone exclaimed. I agreed that passion is often referred to when talking about love—it is an affection for sure—but the word is also synonymous with suffering. I then explained that the prefix “com” is a Latin term meaning “with.” So the entire word means suffering, affecting, or feeling with someone. This makes it entirely different from plain ole boring passion.

So often we read literature simply to feel that there’s someone out there who feels “with” us as readers. I distributed Langston Hughes’s poem “Troubled Woman” in the hopes that the kids might understand a writer’s ability to see through another’s eyes.

Troubled Woman
by Langston Hughes

She stands
In the quiet darkness,
This troubled woman
Bowed by
Weariness and pain
Like an
Autumn flower
In the frozen rain,
Like a
Wind-blown autumn flower
That never lifts its head
Again.

Clearly Hughes isn't a woman, so his ability to think creatively and to feel another's "weariness and pain" is well executed in this poem. The kids instantly hooked onto it. Hector Figueroa wrote the following poem about a small boy in Bali:

I am good at laughter and hugs.
I am 2 years old.
The color of my loneliness is black.
The color of my happiness is white.
I listen to Japanese rap.

As an aside: it occurs to me that there was a certain irony in introducing Hughes to children like Kareem, whose soul dreams of nothing. Naturally, it's impossible not to think of Hughes's inspired poem "Harlem [2]" and wonder if Kareem's dreams of nothing might very well fester like a sore, sag like a heavy load, or even explode.

MAY 2, 2002

It is the final day of my residency, and I'm already starting to feel separation anxiety. Last night I spent a lot of time thinking about their anthology and wondered what was missing from it. I picked up one of my favorite books and looked at the back cover for a moment. Suddenly I realized that what was missing was the kids' bios.

None of them had written an autobiography before (let alone, a contributor's note), so it was fun to watch them attempt to break down their accomplishments and reflect on the goofy little things that make them pure individuals. It also helped that I'd gotten to know them so well, that I could push them a bit and say, "Don't you want to mention how much you love cheeseburgers? Or that your fish's names are Mike #1, Mike #2, Mike #3, and Mike #4?" Some of the kids would giggle when I suggested that such things were bio-worthy. "Why not?" I dared them, "This is your publication."

I've never been a great fan of writer's bios. At literary readings, for instance, I hate hearing other readers' wonderful accomplishments and then the brevity of my own. But I reminded myself that biographies have a more well-meaning history: the earliest biographical writings consisted of funeral speeches and inscriptions, praising the life and example of the deceased. It's an odd thing to write about yourself in the third person (as if absent from the proceedings), but a freeing exercise as well. I wanted my students to have the chance to consider their lives in this manner, to tell the reader, in just a few lines, what they were about. Here's one of my favorites:

Pedro Gutierrez's hobbies are making up comic books, telling jokes, and playing pinball. He is 8 and weighs 40 pounds. His favorite food is pizza with pepperoni made in a restaurant. He was born in Mexico and now lives in Manhattan. He dedicates his poems to his mom.