

END NOTE

Acceptance Speech of Bertha Rogers

Recipient of The Association of Teaching Artists' 2007
Distinguished Service to The Arts In Education Field Award
at the Common Ground Conference, 2007

BERTHA ROGERS

My heroes have always been teachers. When I was in the second grade, I stopped sucking my thumb for the whole school year (I knew it then, and I know it now) because of Mrs. Burns, who made sure all the books I wanted to read were available to me. When I was in eighth grade, I fell in love with Mr. Bickert, who was fresh out of college and incredibly handsome; he introduced me to the Saturday Review of Literature and encouraged me in writing and public speaking.

When I was in the ninth grade, my English teacher, Mrs. Hutloff, was discussing careers; she mentioned “free lance” and, when she told us what the term meant, I said, “That’s what I’d like to do; I want to be a writer and an artist.” Mrs. Hutloff, who also taught Latin and inspired her students to publish a Latin newspaper, said it was a hard life.

Ms. Frank, my eleventh-grade English teacher, guided me toward Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and I was instantly transported from the rural Iowa community where I was raised to a dark and enticing world of degradation and sorrow. There were no teaching artists then, but I was a lucky student.

When I went to college, where, majoring in art and minoring in English, I became incredibly sophisticated and worldly, I heard the prevalent expression, “Those who can’t. . . teach.” And I, being a pure artist, believed it, heart and soul.

Then, in the 1970s, in California, when my older daughter was in the fifth grade in a newly designated arts magnet school, I was asked to teach drawing to her class. The school was situated in some rooms in the corner of an old building in a city park. I remember taking the students out to draw some trees and trying to explain to them how to make the eye and hand work together. I was trying to find the words for what I knew was teachable, what I knew I surely could teach.

Now, some 35 years later, I am still a writer and a visual artist. I have worked in many different occupations, including founding and directing Bright Hill Press, a not-for-profit literary organization. But I am still, and have been, aside from some for-

ays into other jobs and commitments, a free-lance teaching artist, and every year I love this work more. I know that, because of the path I've chosen, I'll probably work until I'm dead; retirement just isn't in the cards.

But here's what I've learned: very often the best artists are the best teachers, and the best teachers are artists at heart or in practice. There is unsurpassing pleasure, for me, in passing on what I've studied and implemented, knowing that every day of teaching is a day of learning, not just for the students, but for the teacher. I've watched seasoned educators, women and men who've been in the field for twenty to thirty years, who've tried everything their administrators have asked of them, who've hung in there through innumerable educational philosophies handed down by different political regimes. I've observed, with great admiration, how they begin each school year with a clean room and hope, and how a great many of them sustain that hope all the way through June. I've taught in brand-new buildings on stunningly landscaped campuses and structures with floors that buckle, faucets that leak, toilets that don't work. I've taught in public schools where thirty-seven languages are spoken and schools where there are only Caucasian children. I've taught autistic children and children on the verge of suicide and profoundly disabled children. I've been in residence in private schools and led community workshops for kids, teachers, and adults, including one woman who was 102 years old.

It's not always easy—we teaching artists have to learn fast, have to read the classroom quickly, adjust to distinct mores; sometimes we're assigned to classes where the teachers would rather work alone. But these challenges are what keep us trying to find new ways to communicate just why that sentence works, or doesn't; why figurative language is so much more eloquent than straight narrative, and why it's essential to the poem (that ultimate form of distillation)—the joy of watching a student's eyes when he finally understands metaphor, of seeing her hands grasp spatial relationships! And we're lucky because we get to learn new ways of teaching from those very educators and students with whom we work.

I like the variety that comes from being a teaching artist. I could never teach every day, I don't have that kind of long-term stamina, but I love residencies—walking into the classroom for the first time, meeting new students, from kindergarten through twelfth grade. I like to collaborate with teachers and administrators, knowing that the experience will be just one day long, or three, or, if I'm fortunate, ten. I love the intensity that the life of a teaching artist provides. And I know I'm not alone in this.

Most of us teaching artists are also practicing artists. Whenever a student asks me what kind of money a poet can expect to make, I tell her that being a poet is a wonderful thing because you never have to worry about money, that you'll find other ways to earn your keep and, if you're lucky, you'll become a teaching artist.

I am deeply grateful for this award. When I was told it was being given to me, I was stunned. I will cherish this very great honor, and I will do my best to continue this work, in this amazing field.

I'll end with another poem, written while sitting in my car in an upstate New York school parking lot, between classes, on a rainy November day.

Lessons

At sixteen I cut into the worm, I
contemptuously dissected the frog,
laid out on mirrored metal—I saw my face.
Who, you ask, will kill the cat that murders
the bluebird's chick? In the doomed orchard
dying trees forget how they edged toward
bees, convulsed to fruit. High in the woods,
beneath the hawthorns, the skirted brambles,
deer the color of dying leaves turn and
turn and go to sleep. The clock in the kitchen,
time-swollen, ticks. I talk to the dishes,
the immortal cats. Days like this, the dew
dazzling the sky, it's all beauty to me;
even the stopped wing; the bent, wet grass.

“Lessons” was first published in Off the Coast.



