Specimen Days

The Teaching Diaries of Miranda Field

This is not what I expected when I found out I would be teaching Girl Scouts. These girls are going to challenge me. Their whole attitude is, well, I don't want to say "bad," but it is totally defiant. I know they are testing me. All the rules I was told were part of the Girl Scout code—no eating or drinking in the classroom, no disrespectful manners, no slouching, no outdoor clothes in the classroom—are being completely flouted. *Big* discipline problems. A lot of aggressive joking with sex- and drug-related themes. I think they want to test how truly miss lily-white-and-tender I am.

What I have to resist is the urge to join in. I mean that I have this urge (and have had it in similar situations before) to try to shock them out of their assumptions about me. You know: I can use that language, too. I know what all of your double-entendres mean. I've been around the block. But you can't fight fire with fire, can you?

I must remember not to see them as the enemy. It feels very aggressive, this verbal onslaught. But it is really just a display. And from their side, it is serving a purpose. It must feel necessary to them. I think they're saying: "Here we are. Here we are. We're formidable, not to be underestimated, not to be patronized. We're not children, we're not young ladies, we're young women who are forces to be reckoned with." They are testing me. This is based on something that comes before me. Yet judging from the cleverness of their joking and verbal play, I bet they have some good writing in them.

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I think I'm actually going to enjoy teaching these girls a lot. I had a moment of reckoning with one of the ring-leaders of the most intense hazing. She made a snappy, quick-witted, sarcastic comment, and somehow (by what miracle I do not know) I found just the right comeback. I wish I could remember the actual content of our

exchange, but it isn't important. What matters is that (almost by accident) I honored my challenger's very formidable intelligence by rising to its occasion. "Don't be tempted to stoop to their level," someone had cautioned me when I'd told them about my teenagers, but there was no "stooping" to be done here. In their almost non-stop banter and verbal jousting, these young women's language resonates with as many subtle under- and overtones as a listener can handle—and then some.

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I brought in a selection of prose poems to show them just a fraction of the range of tonal possibilities, a few curious, disparate strains of "what a poem can be"—poems by Russell Edson, Amy Gerstler, Sandra Cisneros, and Marie Howe. I wanted to show these girls that the reinforced glass around "the Poem" has long since been broken into.

I chose prose poems, specifically, because—for all their defiance and apparent iconoclasm—these girls are actually pretty conservative when it comes to their notions of what poetry is. To begin with, to their minds, poetry is instantly, visually distinguishable from prose by its typographical characteristics: left-justified, with separated stanzas and lines that don't, for the most part, span the entire width of the page. So the prose poems instantly brought up resistance: "They're not real poems," and then the question, "What makes a poem a poem?" What I hope they took home at the end of the session was that the question "What is a poem?" is one that you can work to invent an answer to—but an answer that never settles, that shifts constantly. I tried to convince them (and I think they were at least beginning to believe me) that—though one wants to be original, to "write from the heart," to tap one's own dreams and imaginative landscape for the "poem-that-could-only-have-been-written-by-me"—it is useful to look at how other people write poems. It is useful beyond measure to look at what others have done before you, if only to know what you want to write against.

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We read some Old English riddles from the *Exeter Book*. After taking a few stabs at cracking the riddles, we talked about what it means to discover that the answers are no longer knowable. I suggested that the loss of the riddles' answers and their definitive meanings brings the sender and the receiver a little closer to the same playing field. In effect, it takes some of the sender's certain ground away, and gives some of it to the receiver to stand on. If the locked boxes of the riddles have become, over time, welded shut, it doesn't matter that no one possesses the singular key. Everyone has a reaction or response to the box's surface; everyone can project ideas onto the box, or use the x-ray vision of imagination to pry into its contents. We decided the riddles' open-endedness not only makes them available to multiple interpretations, but shifts the reader's (or listener's) attention from an "agitated seeking after truth" to a more creative or playful or magnanimous or receptive mode.

Then we zeroed in on the use of compound words in these riddles, and in Old English poetry in general. In "The Dream of the Rood," the speaker describes the holes made in the Holy Cross as "Mouth-wide hate dents." I also gave them a list of my own: "mouthblades" for teeth, "wombfruit" for baby, "inkwand" for pen, etc. I suggested that compound words serve to conjure up, and even intensify, the physical properties of the object being described. And, even more significantly, they also elicit from objects their non-physical resonances—their subtler implications, tremors, immaterialities, emotional limbs.

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I went once around the room and had each student say a compound word off the top of her head. Then I gave them some time to think and compile their own written lists of compounds. They were immediately absorbed by the task. When I called, "Time's up," they were very excited to read out their inventions. Some are particularly worth quoting: "footboats" for shoes, "bloodprison" for family. I pointed out that the latter almost stands alone as a poem in itself—that it contains an enormous sense of the writer's experience of life, of her feelings about familial love and connectedness, about all the various ties that bind.... The girls really enjoyed this class, and I think they got a glimpse into how language can be pressured and manipulated into bearing more and more freight—and how networks of such compressed words can make, if the dynamics are successful, pretty thrilling poems.

The next time I teach the class, I think it might be helpful to give the students some examples of compound words (and hyphenations) in historical and contemporary poets. Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Clare come to mind, and Charles Wright. This might also lead to a discussion on neologisms, and on how open to inventiveness, how far from set-in-stone language really is. We might take a look at César Vallejo's private coinages and at Wallace Stevens's use of exotic words. I think this will be fruitful territory to explore—and might challenge, again, some of the girls' more entrenched ideas about what is and isn't poetically valid, meaningful. I want to show them how elastic—no, volatile—language really is, and how many catalysts are available to the writer with which to wake up the language, to make it fizz and crackle. I'm thinking alchemy—how transformative messing around with the available materials can be.

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One somewhat painful incident still haunts me a little. As we approached the end of the semester, I went through all the work generated during the past seven classes to make sure each student had produced at least one finished poem. I discovered one girl had handed nothing in. Although she had attended class more faithfully than most, she had not spoken, hadn't seemed to want to participate in class exercises, and so forth. I felt a little annoyed, felt that she was being disdainful, casual in a defiant way. I suggested that she try a "name poem"—one in which the poet mentions her own name in the first and last lines of the poem—as an easier exercise, since she didn't seem too interested in any of the more complicated ones.

When I looked over her shoulder after a few minutes, though, I saw that she was really struggling to put anything down at all—she was all but illiterate. And she was embarrassed, afraid of being found out. It hadn't occurred to me that a kid her age (15)—among these Girl Scouts, whom I'd been told were "college track"—could have gone so far in high school without learning to read and write. I felt terrible for not noticing what was really going on with her, for not being more sensitive. Also angry that the system (and her own life) had so failed her and, more immediately, that I hadn't been informed about her situation. It seemed she'd been made to hide herself, to stay in the shadows and suffer unnecessary humiliation. I helped her put the words down—literally taking dictation—and the poem she wrote was moving and beautiful, beginning: "I'm Francis the cat, / a cat who knows no home but her own body."

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I felt exhausted but triumphant at the end of the last class. I believe the girls truly felt that they'd accomplished something significant, too. Some of them had written amazing poems. All of them had improved greatly—foregoing clichés for more startling, accurate images; reaching for more intensity, veracity, and formal complexity. I'm very proud of the anthology of their poems, and I know the girls are, too. We titled it *Invisible Hands*, an image from one of the girls' poems. The title speaks to how the poems were generated: Using poems by established poets as templates or armatures on which to build new poems, we were led by hidden guides—the ghostly presences of accomplished poets helping the younger poets toward poems of their own.

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I think I must have harbored a slightly solipsistic dream of teaching, long before I faced the reality of it: I'd walk into a classroom and face a gathering of students just like—well, just like myself. And of course I could teach them anything, easily, and we'd experience the thrill of insight after insight together, because we'd naturally understand each other right off the bat, and my expectations of what would be accomplished each session would be mirrored by theirs. So I woke up pretty quickly, with a big jolt. Teaching this class was one of the hardest assignments I've ever been given, in any job. These young women really put me through my paces, not allowing me any slack at all. But, of course, I learned many crucial lessons (and this may sound like cliché, but oh, it's *so* true) from my students. About power relations in the classroom (no, you don't get to walk in and bestow the blessings of your higher learning on willing neophytes—not just like that), about communication across cultural and even generational divides. And, of course, about the varieties of poetry that can be made by the varieties of imaginative mind-sets the world teems with. But thank god my initiation is over—next time maybe I'll be spared the worst of the hazing. With any luck.

Photograph by Charles Gullung/Photonica