

EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

Maureen Hurley *on* Censorship

McCarthy in the Classroom?

Censorship has always been present in the classroom. As teachers and teaching writers, we are used to choosing *which* poems are appropriate for the end-of-the-year anthology, *which* story we will have a child revise for Parent Night. It's uncomfortable, but it's true. At its most harmless, censorship can operate to maintain equilibrium and respect. But since Columbine, and even *more* prevalently after the events of September 11th, censorship and subtle forms of censure have begun to hinder educators in their efforts to teach creative writing.

One California teacher I spoke with expressed her concern that school administrators (in conjunction with the courts) are gradually becoming the "thought police" of student writing. Write a scary story or dark poem, and go to jail. The case of California student George "T." is a compelling example. A San Jose Supreme Court appeal case this fall will test First Amendment rights when the court decides whether or not the 15-year-old student's "dark" poetry constitutes a crime. The bizarre case of George "T." is not an isolated one. Since Columbine, there have been a rising number of incidents in which school authorities and courts have arrested children for their art.

Homeland security and jingoism have only exacerbated the pressures on teachers. Since the war on Iraq began last winter, censorship has played out in myriad ways. One writing teacher in the Bay Area told how a colleague at his high school prohibited any student discussion that was critical of President Bush's policies. The end result? A host of student poems containing retaliatory pro-war rhetoric. On a similar note, another teacher said her principal objected to the idea of student peace songs being a part of their annual spring concert, for fear that some parents might object.

While I have not encountered outright censorship in California schools, I have noticed something far more subtle occurring in my own writing residencies—in a word, *self-censorship*. For two years now, I have found myself walking on eggshells in order to assure school administrators that I am “safe.” But my students are scared of terrorism and war, and naturally their concerns emerge in their writing. And it is not merely fear they express, but pacifism. I have frequently been caught in the double bind of wanting to please school administrators on the one hand, and of wanting to offer a safe haven for students to express themselves on the other.

During the course of researching this article, I discovered that I was not alone. Several writing teachers expressed an almost palpable fear, an unspoken code for teachers not to mention “the unmentionable.” And while these fellow educators assured me that they were not being censored, their actions spoke louder than words. With the exception of one teacher who plans to retire this year, not one would allow their names to be used in this article, for fear of future repercussions from both their school administrators and from parents in the community.

What ways have teachers developed to deal with this situation? In my own workshops I have begun to use a method I call “redirection.” By this I mean that I search for equivalencies that allow my students to explore “dangerous” subjects in a more neutral way. For instance, I gave students bellicose poems from Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt and asked them to pen imaginary translations of them. This allowed funnel their concerns over contemporary events through the voice of a person from another culture and a distant time. The poem “The Sword of Victory” (a “translation” from the Hittite by an Oakland sixth grader) demonstrates just how relevant this exercise can be:

War is a nightmare that never ends,
it's not the blood of victory,
it's always dirty by blood and tears.
There is no winning in war.
How can we fight for peace...?

I agree with teaching artist Dana Lomax, who told me that “poetry unleashes stress in very real and honest ways.” It’s up to us to guide (not to control) the manner in which emotion is unleashed. By choosing to assign a group list poem that repeats “Peace is” (in lieu of “War is”) Dana’s first grade class was able to confront the same issue but with a less fearful, anxiety-inducing outcome:

Peace is no fighting, no war, no guns.
Peace is your heart beating...
Peace is an ice cream sandwich...
Peace makes daisies bloom.
Peace makes friends and love happens.

One of our jobs is to pay attention to and point out the uncivilized civility of everyday cruelty in language.

I also concur with poet and teacher Daryl Chin, who added that “one of our jobs is to pay attention to and point out the uncivilized civility of everyday cruelty in language.” The job of the poet in the classroom is to civilize, to redirect violent or cruel thoughts and make something creative and graceful out of it. Daryl asks his students: “Is it art or is it a rant?” Then the real work begins—how to improve, how transform it.

William Carlos Williams famously wrote that it is difficult to get the news from poetry. During this uneasy time when our values are constantly being challenged, poetry is often the *only* clear voice that can be heard above the hubbub of media overload. As we face new educational crises during the coming year, it is important to remember that the arts are not extra, they are an essential and integral part of the lifelong learning process known as the humanities. One of my sixth grade students summed up the job of the teacher when he wrote: “I am the breath of the people.... I am the one who carries the heaviest dream for you.”

II.

TALES OF CENSORSHIP: A BRIEF SURVEY

I was teaching at an alternative high school prior to and during the beginning of the war we waged and are continuing to wage on Iraq. I felt it was important to discuss and write about issues of personal identity, as well as community and national identity, since these seemed to subsume any discussions about war. In one prewriting conversation, we were talking about President Bush and his policies. I cannot remember exactly what I said, but one of my students quickly warned, “You better not let him [the main teacher] find out you said that. He doesn't like it when anyone criticizes President Bush.” That gave me pause. Not so much for myself, but for the students who spent six hours a day with that teacher and were witnessing the build-up and launching of a major war—clearly no thought-provoking conversations were taking place in their classes.... That is my recent censorship tale. —A.

Of course censorship is in our backyard. California, poetry, kids, you name it. What happens to them is what's happening in the real world.... Poets are just barometers of everything else, remember, not the creators. Perhaps synthesizers.

I have an edgy long poem about name-calling. I talked about it with my seventh graders. Their reaction was, “Name-calling doesn't mean so much when we do it.” We. It was an African-American student who said that. So if a seventh grader calls someone else by the n-word, it's okay? I

think of Wynton Marsalis, who, in an inspirational talk, said, "Hey, do you really want to get used to this?" He opined that ancient Romans, in gladiator days, must have got used to this, this talk: "Hey, did you notice how that tiger ate that gladiator today, head first. It was cool, better than last week, when the other tiger just tore the head of the other guy..." One of our jobs is to pay attention and point out the uncivilized civility of everyday cruelty in language.

Isn't *that* the job of teachers (and writers), to civilize? To redirect violent and cruel thoughts into something creative and graceful?

There is, of course, an atmosphere of hatred and paranoia and fear. I don't know what to do about the kind of writing you describe, except to do things similar to what you do: redirect. Redirect. —Daryl

Outside of the overtly political realm, other situations have come up that require a degree of self-censorship. I had a fourth grader whose mom died unexpectedly during my residency. He wrote a poem about finding her dead before school one morning. The poem came out of an exercise that emphasized sensory detail. He wrote: "There was no smell. There was no sound." The last lines were something like: "She was very pale. She looked like a great queen." Neither the teacher nor I knew exactly what to say. I think I told him it was strong work, asked him to come up with a title, and moved on.

It's as if when poetry allows students to do exactly what we know it can—i.e., unleash the difficulties they encounter, in very real and honest ways—we (as poets and teachers) have to be careful about how we deal with the resultant intensity of feeling. I'm not sure what motivates this caution. What is the fear? Aren't aggression, angst, "darkness," lust, etc., all human traits? What is our role in opening young writers to these sides of themselves, or in shutting them down? —Dana