WHY I WRITE POETRY

Every day, I try to pay attention to the wider world, listening and reading news reports, watching videos and movies about others’ lives. I see injustice and pain and suffering, and I think about what those people who are in trouble are going through. Because I teach at a community college, and I ask my students about global events, I’m painfully aware of how unaware most people are of others’ lives around the world. Given most people’s reaction when they are told I write poems, which usually ranges from how much I can make at it to incredulity that anyone older than the age of 16 keeps writing, I am also aware of how ignorant most people are about poetry. Neither of these makes for great inspiration to either teach or write, except my inner voice says I must teach them to think differently.

My students are just a small portion of the larger American population. I have rich and poor, every ethnic and religious group, people who learned English just a year ago, single parents, vets, you name it. I’ve had pregnant homeless students, suicidal students, physically abused students. I’ve even had students who have confided in me that they aren’t here legally, that they don’t have driver’s licenses and fear getting pulled over, that they pay their tuition in cash. Almost every student I teach worries about paying bills, either now or later, and whether or not next year, or next month, they will be any better off. It’s hard for people in situations as stressful as theirs to pay attention to what is going on next to them, let alone what’s going on 2,000 miles away. It’s hard for them to focus on their education, try some critical thinking, or even enjoy learning. I remind myself of that when I have a woman who is chronically absent or a man who can’t stay awake in my class. That woman might be a single mom who has a kid with chronic asthma. Maybe the man works overnight because his parents kicked him out when he turned 18 two months ago, and he desperately wants to take classes to get a better job and not have to live in a dump apartment with four other guys.

What helps me as a teacher is that I know these problems plague my students and that I have a lot in common with them. I still often live paycheck to paycheck. Six years ago, I went back to school full time and kept teaching full time. It is common for the people who find themselves sitting in a desk in any community college classroom to be working and going to school full time. When I show them how a 12-credit semester is supposed to work, with two hours spent studying for their classes for every hour they spend in class, they laugh. Who has that much time to study? No matter how rough my life is, I know someone out there is having a harder time than I am. Often those people are next to me at a stoplight, or waiting in line to pay for groceries, or in front of me when I’m teaching. At least I had the luxury of getting a degree in creative writing, which meant I could write and read what I loved, while I went to a career I loved. I have the luxury now of calling on my creativity to bring me out of and through difficult times. Many of my students don’t have the time or energy and don’t believe that there is any poetry in themselves or the world they live in.

My students by and large don’t like poetry, mainly because they don’t get it, again mirroring the larger U.S. population. They might write poetry, but it’s in a notebook no one sees, and they don’t read others’ poetry at all. Their exposure to it was at a young age. They have forgotten that the Dr. Seuss books and nursery rhymes that they memorized and sang and loved are poetry. They had teachers who taught them the form of sonnets and haiku and required them to write their own without taking time to show the beauty of the form, how form and meaning go hand in hand. Those assignments made poetry into a form of torture that shackled them to doing what was in an assignment. They were told to take a poem apart like a jeweled
necklace, going at it with hacksaws, putting similes into one pile and images into another until all they were left with was a mound of scratched rocks and useless metal. They weren't shown how to savor a line for its sound, to enjoy the playfulness of metaphor, but to behave like sloppy student-surgeons, to cut out symbols from their connective meanings and poke and prod them until all that is left is a bloody mess that is no longer recognizable.

Teaching and poetry are my life’s work. They go hand in hand. I teach through analogy and metaphor. I communicate in imagery. I write about the people I meet and learn about through all sorts of interaction and media. Is it not my job in writing and teaching to get people to open their eyes, ears, and hearts to others’ lives and sufferings? If I want my students to be good critical thinkers, shouldn’t the 20-year-old boy sitting across from the 50-year-old woman understand something of where each is coming from? Shouldn’t they both understand something of what it is like to live under a dictatorship which would deny the woman an education and which would send the young man into an army to kill his own people? Wouldn’t our whole country be better off if everyone were better at paying attention, thinking, learning, and really seeing?

I often end a semester wondering whether I did any good. I explain to my students at the beginning of the semester that because they have been in the education system for at least 12 years, they have been molded and formed habits. If they are bad spellers or can’t tell the difference between a statement and a question, one semester with me won’t cure that. I work really, really hard at trying to get them to think, though. I try different topics, approaches, words, films, being funny, downright ridiculously goofy, even. All that work for maybe one student out of 100 to get it and leave my class understanding that our lives really are affected by what goes on next to us, outside of us, across the world. It’s the same with my poetry. I write and craft and agonize over a poem, which might get accepted at a journal, and maybe one person will see it and change her mind about something, learn a new way of seeing. Come to think of it, I probably have better odds with teaching. My students are not always happy or enthused about being in my class, but they are there two or three days a week for 16 weeks. The chances a person who isn’t enthused about poetry will find a poem of mine and bother to read it are slimmer than my chances at reaching a student who starts out not really caring, just wanting a passing grade so he can go on and do something important.

In the end, teaching and writing poems are both often exercises in futility. What keeps me going is knowing there’s always something new on the horizon to inspire me or be inspired by me. For all the dud classes and poems, there are gems that lift me up and make me keep going.