

*Using Poetry in Our Life and Work:  
A Reader's Companion for Teaching With Fire*

“Poetry is an intimate conversation with the wonders and difficulties of the world,  
a pilgrim path to a place where we are able to combine our fear,  
our fierceness, and our faith to make a life we can call our own  
no matter the difficulties that seem to surround us.” – David Whyte

We have been delighted by the wonderful response to *Teaching With Fire: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Teach*. We have heard from many educators who feel honored and inspired by the book's stories and poems. In addition, many people have shared their experiences and suggestions for using poetry in their daily life and work. This Reader's Companion is a compendium of these ideas on how to use poetry to inspire, to teach, to work with others, and to create community. We hope that you find many ideas you can use or adapt in the pages that follow. We'd love to hear from you about other ways you use poetry. We also invite you to submit your favorite poems and short stories of their significance to you, please send them to Megan Scribner at [megan@couragerenewal.org](mailto:megan@couragerenewal.org).

Our thanks to all the many contributors who sent in their ideas for this Reader's Companion or have made their work available to all via the web.

**Table of Contents:**

**Sharing and Giving Poems as Special Gifts**

**Weaving Poetry in the Classroom (no matter what you teach)**

**Making More of Your Meetings by Using Poetry**

**Using Poetry to Get People Talking to Each Other**

**Poetry Events as Community Builders**

**Great Poetry Links on the Web**

**Inspiring Poetry: Sustaining Our Minds, Hearts And Souls**

**Sharing Our Stories**

## Sharing and Giving Poems as Special Gifts

Here are some easy ways to share your favorite poems with your students and colleagues:

- ② post poems on doors or file cabinets as reminders, inspiration and invitations
- ② give poems as gifts to students at graduation; have copies to hand out in your office
- ② send poems instead of holiday cards
- ② read poems in the jails, juvenile and group homes, read poems to abused children.
- ② read poems in churches and synagogues, and in nursing homes and community centers.
- ② put the poem on a business size card to give to students at special times
- ② decorate the school with large posters of poetry that exemplifies the culture (diversity, respect, family, success, etc.)
- ② share poetry in your classroom – and when you read poetry be lively and energetic - bring poetry alive!
- ② create opportunities for students to perform their favorite poems as part of a classroom activity, a community event, production or poetry slam
- ② ask families to share their favorite poems (esp. traditional, cultural) with the students and the school
- ② bring poets into the school to do workshops, readings, etc.
- ② encourage local PTA's and PTOs to buy poetry books for all their teachers
- ② Sponsor an art contest where the piece of art is inspired by the author's words and the poem
- ② sign up your class (for those who use e-mail) for any of the many "poem a day" newsletters. Check out "Great Poetry Links on the Web" in this guide for suggested sites.

## Giving Poems as Gifts

- ④ I give poems as gifts. I hate the commercialization of the holidays. Poems are a lovely personal gift, and I don't have to hassle with wrapping (or money). This year I had the flu in February. In a foolish, feverish state, I bought a bag of chocolate hearts to give my students for Valentine's Day, then realized how that contradicted the "reduce sugar consumption" message of our nutrition unit, which they were taking so seriously. Instead, I made copies of a poem I wrote and folded each into a simple card with a little heart sticker on the front. I was still in the classroom, dropping off my lesson plans and valentines when the students came in. I stayed for the beginning of the morning meeting and told them about my valentine poem. They sat on the rug with their eyes closed, while I read it aloud, twice. Then they opened their eyes, excitedly raised their hands, and all shared what images they had from hearing the poem. That appreciation was far sweeter than any chocolate. – Mary Cowhey, elementary school teacher
  
- ④ I'm a "person encourager," and a "school coach." As a "person encourager" (when I'm talking/listening to a person involved in a discernment process) I often use the little poem of Shel Silverstein's "The Voice" (from *Falling Up*) in the conversation. As a "school coach" (when I'm attempting to help teachers find their "shared vision" and determine their next steps, I often use William Stafford's "The Way It Is." The reason that I use this poem (what I call "The Thread") with entire school groups is because of my belief that a school's vision is not "created anew," it is "polished." I think that you have to look and listen for what's really important in the work that you do with children in your community, identify that "fine work," and then move forward. This poem (found in *Teaching with Fire, Early Morning*, and many other books of William Stafford's) is, of course, great for use in encouragement work with individuals... but, I just love to use it with my school groups.  
  
So, there you are... a few words from me about how I use poems. I use them everywhere, actually. I am a cardiac rehab patient... and I actually read poems to my "docs." We've developed wonderful friendships as a result! - David Hagstrom, retired principal
  
- ④ I have been teaching a faculty seminar this year, on how to better teach writing at Mount Holyoke. I gave each seminar participant a copy of *Teaching with Fire*, a couple of months ago, and the responses have been really wonderful. – Penny Gill, college professor
  
- ④ I am writing short poems right now (first time!), and I have begun just typing one up and handing it to a visitor, or someone I am meeting for lunch. Personal postcard. – Penny Gill, college professor
  
- ④ Right now my class is doing a poetry drive. My sister, Karen Sohne, is a haiku poet who lives in Toronto. We read some of her moon haiku in our study of the lunar cycle and she suggested a wonderful design format for the publication of our two small volumes of haiku about the moon. In February, she and her husband (also a poet) were burned out of their apartment. While happy they escaped alive, our class thought it must be awfully sad for poets to lose so many of their poems. Around that same time, our school was doing a "Pennies for Patients" drive for leukemia. We also read *A Chair For My Mother* by Vera B. Williams, in which a family fills a big jar with change to buy a nice chair, after

their furniture was destroyed in a fire. Putting those elements together, we decided to write poems on folded index cards and place them in a large jar, marked with a "Poems for Poets" label. When the jar is full, we will give them all the poems. - Mary Cowhey, elementary school teacher

© We have been giving gifts of *Teaching with Fire* and book talks for lead mentor teachers representing 230 Fairfax County Schools and Centers in Virginia. We also did a book reading with the County Council of PTA's and they posted the book on their website as their recommendation for a Teacher Appreciation week gift. Given that the County schools system serves 160,000 students, this system is as big as many regional PTAs. Working through such large systems is a great way to share poetry with many people. Another idea is to give the book out to your own teaching staff and when one of those synchronistic moments occur, you can just mention one of the selections and the staff is joined in "instant community."

© Sharing *Teaching with Fire* has been a fabulous experience. I am excited that we were able to reach so many mentor teachers, principals and administrators but the thrill was much more. Each event and group was different but one thing was consistent: gratitude. I was amazed at the intensity of overwhelming gratitude the teachers expressed and how quickly barriers among strangers were broken down. I think we all are having the gift of being present in the grace of something very big. -John Marston, Administrator of Alternative Schools and Character Education

## Weaving Poetry in the Classroom (no matter what you teach)

Many teachers have used poetry in their classrooms in very creative ways. Read some of the examples below and get inspired. If you would like to share how you have used poetry in a classroom setting, please send a description to us at [info@teacherformation.org](mailto:info@teacherformation.org).

### In Elementary School...

- ② I use poetry as a springboard for the creation of student art, then display the artwork along with the poem... or have the students illustrate the poem and make a class book out of the work. When I do this, the theme of the poem is related to something we are studying. –Laurie Leahy, elementary school teacher.
- ② My first years of teaching in 1954 in Long Beach CA, I would play classical music (on a record player in those days) as a background to encourage children to create their own poetry. When I was teaching in Nebraska (1973-1991) reading to the children was always part of the curriculum. I always read after lunch, and sometimes chose poetry. I have a book called *Sing a Song of Popcorn* which is full of fun poems such as “Eletelephony” (Laura E. Richards) or “The Jumblies” by Edward Lear. The children enjoyed listening knowing that poetry can be light and fun as well as serious. – Marj Vandenack, retired elementary school teacher
- ② I like to give my students copies of poems printed on a page with space to illustrate. It really makes them look at the poem closely, think about what the poet is saying and respond to the poem. This is useful for younger students because poetry can elicit feelings that are difficult for young students to verbalize. I suspect that this could be useful for readers of all ages as it can be intimidating to attempt to respond to a poet's words with our own words. Illustrating also provides students with a personalized copy of a poem to cherish and can create a long lasting connection to the piece. – John Sweeney, elementary school teacher.
- ② I use poetry to provide examples of interesting word use/choice. Even kindergartners enjoy this! – Laurie Leahy, elementary school teacher
- ② I integrate writing and appreciating poetry with scientific observation. Haiku, with its appeal to the senses, is especially well suited to heightening students' powers of observation. I still remember one a girl named Gretchen Ravenhurst wrote my first year teaching:  

tadpoles  
swim fast  
sink slow

- Mary Cowhey, elementary school teacher
- ② I use poetry as a focus-piece for a unit of study. For instance, I have used Rossetti's "Hurt No Living Thing" as a discussion focus for my third graders' study of the environment. – Laurie Leahy, elementary school teacher

## In Middle and High School...

- ④ One of the things I do, but it's not just a quick thing (this takes place over a few weeks), is to have students choose a poem or poet they like. Then they do a presentation where they come to class dressed as the poet and give some biographical information, they do a dramatic reading of one of that poet's poems, and they relate the poem to other pieces of literature (including poetry) that we've read during the semester. Not only do they get this experience but I get a collection of poems from students that I can put in the files under particular novels, short stories and plays. Then when we study that piece, I might use one of the poems as an opening, for use in a comparative essay, etc. - Suzanne Strauss, high school English teacher
- ④ One thing I like to do when a student is leaving (i.e. moving away) or when the course is coming to a close, is to do circle poems for the students to keep as a memory. The poem begins with the line, i.e. "the time we've spent." Each student adds another line to this poem and then passes it on to the next person who then writes the next line of the poem, pass again, and so on until everyone has written a line. – Ali Stewart, middle school art teacher
- ④ I use poems the students like to invite them to write poems in the same "form" or "format" or whatever... poems which come from their own hearts. This has proven fun and rather wonderful over the forty years I taught! Recently, I got a letter from a young woman who is today an attorney in Chicago. I hadn't heard from her since she finished sixth grade. She wrote to say hello and to tell me that the most important experience of her school life was in sixth grade when I invited the girls to write their own poem after Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" (if you remember that's the one that says 'if you can do ... (lots of things) ... you'll be a man, my son.') She sent me a copy of that writing and explained how she had tried to live up to what she'd written. – Marianne Novak Houston, retired middle school teacher
- ④ I use *Teaching with Fire* as a reference when I'm looking for a poem and most recently picked a few to discuss and include on the final. For the final, I asked the students to analyze a poem and offered a Roethke poem as well as "Saturday at the Canal" by Gary Soto from *Teaching with Fire*. These poems capture the idea of making one's own way in the world. Our senior year world lit class starts with thinking about school and ourselves (we read some selections by Leon Botstein), I have found that Rumi's "Two Kinds of Intelligence," and Havel's "It is I Who Must Begin" also work well for this. One of my hopes is that students will see school as "for them" and not about "what my parents want" or "what I need to do to graduate." These three poems address how it FEELS to be a teenager. – Suzanne Strauss, high school English teacher
- ④ I have used a couple of essays out of *Teaching with Fire* in my class with leadership students at the undergraduate level - part of my curriculum focuses on the interior of the leaders. My students have told me that the poems and essays I have used have helped them in their development as young leaders. - Mike Poutiatine, college professor
- ④ I frequently use poetry as part of what I call a "copy-change" activity that helps students with fluency and word choice while instilling confidence in their own abilities and a deeper appreciation for poetry in general as well as the poem they are working with.

The activity goes as follows (and can be used for worthy prose passages as well):

Step #1: Read the poem aloud without giving students a copy of it-ask them to listen to the language, rhythms, and look for the imagery.

Step#2: Dictate the poem to them, giving them the punctuation, etc.

Step #3: Hand out a copy of the poem and analyze its syntax and structure. For example, look at the quality and quantity of descriptors, the way the lines are strung together, the images used, etc.

Step #4: Ask students to select a topic/subject they feel strongly about and then replicate (copy) the poem, using their own words and images to create a new poem that has the same rhythms, line lengths, syntax, use of imagery, etc. as the original.

Step #4: Put students in groups and ask them to read their poems aloud and select the poem they think best replicates/imitates the original.

Step #5: Collect the selected poems, number them, and then – after reading the original poem aloud one more time – read the students' poems aloud to the whole class, giving only the number for each poem so that the authors are anonymous. Ask students to rank each poem from 1-10 (least like original to most like original). Collect the results, total the points given each poem, and announce the winner.

Step #6: Close by reading the original poem and the winning imitation aloud one after the other.

Done frequently with both poetry and prose, the activity will produce amazing results in student writing!! Trust me. And they are soooo proud of the work they produce.

– Libby Roberts, high school teacher development coordinator

- Ⓢ I used poems as read-alouds probably at least 3 times a week in my high school English classes and the graduate courses. Also, I have a framed copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Success" in my office and a refrigerator magnet of it at home. This is one of my favorite poems when I'm feeling down about teaching. – Angela Peery, high school English teacher
- Ⓢ A high school librarian, who loved *Teaching with Fire*, filled out a book evaluation form so that the book could be entered in the county school system. She thought several of the high school English teachers might use it in their poetry or biography projects.



## In College and beyond...

- ② I often have my students create collective poetry as a way to process a difficult or emotional piece of experiential curriculum. It's very simple. I pull a provocative line from a known poem, (i.e. "How does water do it, strip a world of its bones..." (Linda Hogan 1993, "Breaking" from *The Book of Medicines*) Then students free write in response for 10 minutes. Following that I have them circle words or phrases that stand out to them, that move them in some way. Then in groups of 6-8, I have them share their favorite lines, and construct a group poem from those words and lines with the original line that I gave them as either the first or the last line. Each group prints their poem on a large piece of newsprint and recites the poem together to the whole. It is a very powerful exercise that energizes people and helps metabolize painful experiences. - Catherine Johnson, college professor
- ② At points of the semester that I just know the students will be weary and worn out, I take a poem in and just read it to them, telling them they need a little present. – Penny Gill, college professor
- ② Cheryl King of Grande Prairie, Alberta introduced me to a great poetry writing exercise. You can encourage learners to create their own poems by engaging with texts filled with rich and evocative language. For example, you might ask them to peruse two to three randomly selected pages of a really well written non-fiction text. (Parker J. Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* or Robert Grudin's *The Grace of Great Things* come to mind.) The learners highlight or underline the words and phrases that speak to them. Then they use that set of words and phrases as a springboard for creating a poem that reflects their own thoughts on the topic.

Study groups find that this exercise is a fascinating introduction and/or conclusion when working with a text. The year I first experienced this activity, a group of us were studying *The Courage to Teach*. Cheryl got us started by asking us to create the poems, and then record them on flip chart pages that were posted on the wall. We noted the themes that emerged in Palmer's writings and our poems, and then we kept referring back to them as we studied the text. At the end of our time together, we revisited the poems, noting how they had foreshadowed our discussions and acknowledging other themes that had emerged during our examination of the text that weren't reflected in those initial poems.

When you note that an author has "a beautiful way with words", this is a good sign that a poetic response to the author's writing may be in order. And the good news: those who resist writing poetry because they perceive that they don't possess this talent discover in this exercise that while poetry making is magical, it is not impossible. – Glynis Wilson Boulton, educational consultant

- ② I have students write or bring a poem as a response to a reading. For instance, after reading Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, write a poem or bring a poem that relates to the reading to share in class as a part of the discussion on the topic. This keeps poetry and emotion in the front of the conversation. – Elizabeth Meador, professor



- ② I create a *Teaching With Fire* assignment for my students. Ask your students to take a favorite poem and write what the poem means to them. The following is one student's response to a poem by Robert Frost:

Too many times, we as teachers get so caught up in all that we have to do to keep our classrooms running and our kids learning that we forget to take the time to stop and just be there. "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" is all about those beautiful moments that exist in the busiest of days. It is in these queer moments of easy wind when our students, and ourselves, are truest. While the pressures to move onward come from everywhere, it is these places between the woods and frozen lake, between reading and math, science and social studies, lunch and recess that we can stop to see all that is lovely and deep in our students. We must seek out these moments and pause to see that they are as miraculous and captivating as a field slowly filling up with snow. Frost reminds us that though we may have miles to go in our journeys, we as teachers must always find time to stop along the path because these stopping places are the real reasons why we began the journey in the first place. – Katie Gerry, education student at Smith College.

- ② During writing workshops with teachers throughout the country (Navajo Land, Detroit, New York, Mississippi, the Midwest, etc.) *Teaching With Fire* is woven into the structure of our learning, reflection, and dialogue. I will read particular poems during relevant moments throughout the workshop sessions. Usually a particular poem will help us support our pedagogy with conversations that include personal stories. A meaningful poem can take our dialogue from workshop theory into the realities of the classroom. This not only helps teachers construct new understandings, but helps them transfer this knowledge into their students' learning experiences.

Sharing poems and excerpts from educator's stories in *Teaching With Fire* also offers teachers the opportunity to listen to a short but powerful written message and then have five minutes to engage in a "Quickwrite" (from *100 Quickwrites*, by Linda Rief). This is a model for lessons that teachers with students of any age can use in the classroom. When students listen to poetry and are then given a short period of time to 'let the pen flow' without any requirement for revision and editing, they have a safe space for plunging into the heart of their writing.

When writing time is over (hopefully most students don't feel finished and will want to return to their thoughts later) two follow up activities are suggested. 1). Ask students to turn to the person next to them and choose to either read their written response or to discuss their reaction to the poem. Even if some students are reluctant to share their writing, they are usually comfortable sharing their ideas. 2). Ask the whole group if there is anyone who would like to share their writing. It is essential that it is clear to a group of teachers or students that sharing is optional and considered a gift to the learning community. We are not listening as critics in a revision process during this activity. We are building community as we reach out to understand another's way of seeing and responding to a common experience (the poem).

I have been grateful and humbled when listening to teachers share their personal responses to various poems. A tangible change comes into a group when people open their minds and hearts to each other's stories. We begin to understand that although our histories may be different; there is a thread of trust forming. This trust allows us to extend

our comfort levels and reach out to new ways of seeing and understanding each other, the children we teach, and our pedagogy. – Jani Barker, education consultant and teacher

- Ⓢ Performances of writing (like the "author's chair or tea" events) tend to play to a passive audience. The students are somewhat anxious about what and how they'll read and whether or not their family member(s) will show up, be late, etc. The family members tend to focus on the performance of their own students. In other words, the students and family members have a brief, intense focus that tends to minimize appreciation of most of the other poems or stories, which they sit through in the hope that refreshments may follow.

What might an alternative poetry event for students and family look like? What would be the goals for such an event?

- 1) active literary engagement of adults and students in both writing and appreciating poetry and
- 2) cultivation of poetry comprehension and appreciation through use of text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world connections (see Mosaic of Thought)

In thinking about how to do that, I thought about a wonderful poetry writing workshop I attended this fall with Martin Espada. He presented a poem or two of a particular genre. After some discussion of the poem, he gave us some time to write a poem in that genre. It felt like a total luxury (most of us were teachers and aides) to have the time, space and permission to just write. Then any one who wanted to could share. Others could give positive feedback (i.e. it wasn't the time or place to offer criticism).

I also thought about a Family Movie Night event we had last year at my school. We watched the PBS documentary "Oliver Button Is a Star" (about bullying and challenging gender stereotypes), then broke into discussion groups of 3-5 families each. We just asked adults to talk about what in the movie reminded them of a childhood experience with bullying as victim, aggressor, bystander, etc. The stories that parents shared were incredibly moving; some choked up or cried. Their children were deeply affected and it had a significant impact on changing behavior. Most importantly, it started a conversation in many families that has continued. Many parents said how much they appreciated that. Months after the event, one mother said that that conversation completely changed the way she communicated with her son.

Putting those pieces together, maybe you could choose a few poems, particularly by poets of color, reflecting the demography of your students, perhaps in a certain genre or theme, like identity or friendship. Briefly explain and model the comprehension strategy with the text-to-connections (better if students are familiar with this from class). Break into smaller groups (students staying with their families) for discussion of connections. Provide paper, pencils and give everyone time to write (in whatever language they choose). Depending on the size of the group, share the newly written poems (by students and adults in whatever languages they were written in) in large or small groups, with supportive feedback.

I think it would be very powerful for the students to hear how their parents/adults respond to the poems presented, and to see their parents/adults writing and sharing. I think those voices could be strong and beautiful. - Mary Cowhey, elementary school teacher

## Making More of Your Meetings by Using Poetry

- ④ We use *Teaching With Fire* for our English Department staff development meetings. Each person does their own poem and shares it with the others. – Dan Mindich, high school English teacher and editor of *FacultyShack*
- ④ Working with a poem puts people into the world of metaphor (like dreams) and gives us insight into the unconscious ideas driving our work -- the things we don't talk about because we don't have the words. Once we're out in that territory, there's more freedom to talk about the fears, rages and loves that really push and pull our everyday efforts to make change in schools. The use of poetry always/often uncovers closet poets/poetry lovers, and allows people to bring more of themselves to the work, suggesting that there are skills and passions that they are not employing in their everyday activities. – Linda Powell Pruitt, organizational consultant
- ④ *Teaching with Fire* is a remarkable resource. I just used it in a resource for a keynote in Tucson for the library leaders of the big university research libraries. The work was wonderfully received. The library leaders were particularly appreciative of the message about playing the full instrument of the self, as a leader, and being willing to "be out there" with ones own poetry. I was a bit surprised at the strength of that reaction, the appreciation that I was present not only as a leadership educator but as a poet. – Judy Brown, poet and facilitator
- ④ The poem I used to set the tone for an evaluation was Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front". I wanted to encourage and give permission for more courage, innovation, and risk-taking in my role as a Dean. – Jay Casbon, CEO and Provost, Oregon State University – Cascades Campus
- ④ Sometimes I like to create a cooperative read at the end of a workshop. I cut up a poem in sections and have folks volunteer to come up to the front and read their section - they do a choral reading of the poem. It's great. - Linda Lantieri, Director, Project Renewal - Tides Center
- ④ When I conduct meetings of an English department at a school, I often open meetings with a provocative poem and allow the teachers to speak to it in whatever fashion they wish. A useful resource for these poems is the Poetry 180 website, where teachers can find a poem a day to use with high school students. – Angela Peery, high school English teacher
- ④ Here's an idea that I learned several years back from Cheryl King of Grande Prairie, Alberta. It is wonderful as a closing activity: The teacher picks a poem that relates to the final message he/she wants the class to leave with. Each line is written on a small piece of paper. The papers are handed out in order to students standing in a circle. The reading takes place in a circle one voice after the other, and sometimes the poem is read a couple of times to get the full impact. This is powerful at several levels. The poem is heard in many voices which can be very moving. The full group shares responsibility for communicating the closing message. And each member of the group focuses on one line which can be interesting. When I first experienced this, my line was "a book with no last page" which got me to thinking about endings. That phrase has resonated for me for several years. – Glynis Wilson Boulton, educational consultant

## Using Poetry to Get People Talking to Each Other

- ② It is quite amazing to be sitting, silent and spellbound, in a large audience while listening to a poem being read. It is a way of being intellectually and spiritually intimate in public, of being as Parker calls it, "alone together." And it is a wonderful way to be intimate in public across generations. A few months back, Marcy and I attended a public reading by national poet laureate Billy Collins. A few years ago when he first came to Bainbridge Island, he read in a private home to a couple dozen people. When he returned two-years later, he filled the Island Center Hall with two-hundred eager listeners. And when he came this year, he packed the high school gym with over a thousand - a standing room crowd of all ages: elementary, middle and high school youth, and adults of all races and walks of life. At some point during the reading, virtually everyone laughed and cried without hiding either. He helped Bainbridge Islanders come closer together in community through the intimacy of words shared in public. – Rick Jackson, codirector Center for Teacher Formation
  
- ② I belong to an arts group that partnered with the public and college libraries to send out a challenge to meeting chairs from all walks of life in our community to open at least one meeting with a poem during National Poetry Month last April. The City Council did it, as did many volunteer and other groups. It was fun that month to experience poetry readings all over the community. – Glynis Wilson Boulton, educational consultant
  
- ② At the 2004 Near East South Asian Council of Overseas Schools (NESAS) Teachers' Conference in Bangkok, the executive director David Chojnacki made the following opening remarks: Welcome to another NESAS spring conference. Once again it is a well-deserved opportunity for each of you to take time out from the normal, often manic, rhythm of our professional lives and learn from our consultants and from colleagues from across the region. If you have had a chance to review the conference program, either on line or in hand, you will see that there is a wide array of outstanding consultants from which to choose. We hope that the choosing will be difficult, that we've presented you with 'an embarrassment of riches'...

how This conference also gives us a time to rediscover and to rekindle the passion that brought us into this most challenging and most important of professions. *Teaching with Fire* is Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner put it in their book of the same title.... [He then quoted from the book and read a poem entitled "Fire" by Judy Brown.] We, the NESAS board and the NESAS staff, hope that this conference gives you both the logs and those necessary spaces so you can indeed rekindle that passion for the high calling of our profession, and return to your schools renewed and ready, once again, to 'teach with fire'.

## Poetry Events as Community Builders

There are communities and organizations (both large and small) that regularly create poetry events:

### 🌐 Call for Poetry: Seventh Favorite Poem Evening

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there . . .

– William Carlos Williams

The Seventh "Favorite Poem" evening in April, sponsored jointly by the English Department of Columbia Union College and the Takoma Park Maryland Library Members of the community are heartily invited to share with their neighbors and friends a poem that has been meaningful to them in their lives. We hope for a widely diverse group to be reading, including poems read in a language other than English. Even people normally too shy to read before a group have found both courage and pleasure in sharing a poem during the community's last six annual events, and this year the as-yet-undisclosed setting will be inviting, we hope, for even the most reticent.

Inspiration may be found in the hundreds of poetry books in the Takoma Park Library collection. One particularly inspiring volume is co-edited by Takoma Park's own Megan Scribner. *Teaching with Fire: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Teach* is a collection of 88 poems from well-loved poets, each accompanied by a brief story by a teacher who has derived courage and meaning from the poem for his or her life's work.

If you are interested in participating in this year's event, choose a poem you have read and admired by a published poet (other than poems written by you and your friends.) Please include an English translation for any poems written in a language other than English. Send a copy of the poem you have chosen, and your name, address, phone number, and occupation (in generic terms) to Takoma Park Maryland Library. As before, the Friends of the Takoma Park Maryland Library will sponsor a reception following the readings.

- ④ **Young Chicago Authors** offers a wide variety of workshops, performances and publication programs reaching over 30,000 young people and adults each year.  
[www.youngchicagoauthors.org](http://www.youngchicagoauthors.org) Here is a description of some of their programs:
- ④ **Louder Than a Bomb 2005: The 5th Annual Chicago Teen Poetry Slam:** In its fifth year and bigger than ever, Louder Than a Bomb this spring boasts the distinction of being the largest teen poetry festival of its kind! Featuring a four-day poetry slam, showcases for teen writers and a comprehensive community arts fair, LTAB is the pre-eminent teen literary arts festival going. Using friendly competition to gather the best and brightest from Chicago's teen poetry community. LTAB is a safe space that emphasizes community building, education, and youth empowerment. By carrying on the rich tradition of oral storytelling and the spoken word, LTAB will engage over 400 youth participants representing over 30 area schools and community organizations to share stories, break stereotypes, speak the truth, challenging themselves and their audience. Over 4,000 Chicagoans will attend to witness the readings and support the youth.
- ④ **The Young Chicago Authors Saturday Writing Program**, now in its thirteenth year, is an intensive three-year writing program that accepts students beginning their sophomore year of high school. Over sixty young writers, referred to YCA by English teachers, community centers and former students, attend small group workshops in poetry, fiction writing, non-fiction forms, playwriting, performance writing and selected author studies. The best of student writing is collected and published in *Watch the Steps* magazines. Upon completion of the program, students are eligible to receive college scholarships. Since 1995, over 160 scholarships have been awarded.
- ④ **The Writing Teachers Collective**, formed by and for writers who teach and teachers who use writing in the classroom, offers workshops on special topics in creative writing. The WTC has been integral in several initiatives, such as the Chicago Teen Poetry Slam, WordWide, GirlSpeak, and Say What, a literary magazine tying together creative writing with youth culture and personal expression.
- ④ **WordPlay** is an open-to-all workshop and reading series. A writer-in-residence facilitates four writing workshops each month for high school and early college students. The workshops encourage the development of writing aptitude and literacy while providing a space for youth to build community with one another through creative writing. Next is the open mic and featured reading series. The readings enable young writers to share original work on an open mic and to hear the work of acclaimed adult writers. Youth artists are encouraged to participate in the open mic through spoken word, poetry, short fiction, playwriting, free-styling, music, etc.



## Poetry Links on the Web

- Ⓢ Robert Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project includes videos of poems being read, <http://www.favoritepoem.org/thevideos/index.html>.
- Ⓢ Poetry readings from Bill Moyer's Fooling with Words [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main\\_video.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main_video.html)
- Ⓢ The Academy of American Poets has a listening booth where you can hear poets read their work <http://www.poets.org/booth/booth.cfm>
- Ⓢ Garrison Keillor reads a poem a day at the Writer's Almanac Garrison Keillor's "The Writer's Almanac" <http://www.writersalmanac.org/>
- Ⓢ Web Sitings: Powerful and Playful Poetry: Share the joy of poetry in your classroom with these hand-selected sites by Paul Janeszko (author of *Opening a Door: Reading Poetry in the Middle School Classroom*, Scholastic, 2003), at Scholastic's website: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/instructor/powerfulplayfulpoetry.htm#bio>
- Kids' Haiku Crew By Gary Gach (gary@word.to ) A great listing of links to sites for haiku and other poetry especially geared to kids -- some are designed for teachers – and references to Places that publish kids' poetry, books and magazines.

### Poems as Inspiration: Sustaining Our Minds, Hearts and Souls

Poems are a way to keep a promise.  
Poems are a way to send a secret message.  
Poems are a way to write a little and say a lot.  
– Mary Cowhey, elementary school teacher

- Ⓢ We all need as much inspiration and courage as we can muster in these very trying times. I use poetry as kind of vitamin supplement for my spirit each and every day. It works! Jay Casbon, CEO and Provost, Oregon State University – Cascades Campus
- Ⓢ Diane McClain, my next door neighbor in the English hall and the English teacher I wish I had when I was in high school told me that one of the poems in *Teaching with Fire* today helped her see a kid differently and she definitely changed how she responded based on this poem in the book which she has been reading lately after I gave her a copy. – Jim Burke, high school English teacher
- Ⓢ I'm using Teaching with Fire in my class this semester...after a faculty meeting yesterday, several of us just hung around reading our favorite poems to each other that happened to be in some Billy Collins book someone had with them, or one they had stuck in their daytimer...it was really, really revealing about our faculty, and humanizing beyond belief. We are SO living *Teaching with Fire*!!! Anyway, I'm putting in a bulk order for those folks! – Kenda Dean, theology professor at Princeton Seminary



## Sharing Our Stories:

One of the things we learned with *Teaching with Fire* is that teachers have powerful stories of their experience in the classroom and in using poetry to reach out to their students and beyond. We encourage you to send us your stories – of your connection to a poem, how you use poetry in the classroom and in your daily life, or your story of teaching – to [info@teacherformation.org](mailto:info@teacherformation.org).

The following story is by Shannon Applegate a bilingual (Spanish) reading specialist for a grade 4-6 school. She has worked with low income Latino children for 13 years and teaches a college prep course for underprivileged kids called “Pre Avid.” Inspired by the stories and poetry in *Teaching with Fire*, she arranged for a book to be published with a poem by each of the 6<sup>th</sup> graders at her school. Thus, *Poetry is Magic: A Poetry Anthology by the Sixth Grade Students of 2004, Skyline Elementary* was born. In the following essay, Shannon describes the challenges she faces and wonderful potential that emerges when she teaches poetry to her students.

They are the invisible ones, the kids I teach. They weave themselves in and around the white rich kids, trying to fit into the pristine tapestry of our school. As an intervention reading/writing teacher in an affluent suburban elementary school in Southern California, almost all the children that need my instruction are poor and Latino, living in a little blip of a neighborhood in an otherwise perfectly-white world. Most of my students’ parents illegally crossed the border as adults and had their children here, making these kids American citizens. While their poverty might not look like much compared to what their parents faced in Mexico, it certainly does to the kids, who see it three times magnified in the surreal affluence surrounding them. These kids make up a fifth of the school community and are most often referred to by administrators as “English Learners”, making their school failure easier to dismiss because of their supposed language “deficit”.

But after having lived with them every school day for thirteen years, I understand their truth—it is not language or even race that is their defining separation; it is their class. These kids that I face every day are separated by their poverty, or from an opposite perspective, it is the white kids’ affluence that throws the wall up.

These kids are little rocks of poverty in a sea of wealth that is always surging, lapping at their sides with the threat of submersion. Intellectually I know that half of them will sink, slowly disappearing into California’s 50% Latino drop-out rate. But when I get my 20 twelve year-olds every September, a time when most of them are really starting to understand their fate in life, I have at least *that* year.

By sixth grade they are tired and worn from the six years since kindergarten. Keeping your head above water all those years makes your neck sore, makes it hard to learn. It takes about four months to really crack open their writer’s voice; voices that, like little sunflower seeds, fresh and interesting inside their salty shells.

During these first four months their suspicion of me is punctuated with the familiar, “I don’t have anything to write,” and the blank stares at the even emptier notebooks. They believe that if they stare long enough, I will have to move on to the next student. That is where their disbelief, (which some call “laziness”, “uncommitted”, etc.) meets my relentless modeled writing. Thankfully, writing is the one thing I can rely on that I *can* do, a true love that every year I hope my students will be able to recognize.

We always discuss a piece of writing for a specific element of style; anything they can attach to their minds and lives. Then I light candles because it needs to feel, smell, and look different from any kind of “school” association they might have had in the past, and I write on my overhead projector. I use many sheets of transparencies, and write just like I do everyday in

my notebook, just as I am writing the draft of this essay now; furious scribble with no thought for punctuation or spelling.

At first my 12 year old students watch, fascinated with this white woman who dares to discuss the sensory details of her childhood spent in poverty; this teacher publicly sharing of bunk beds with no sheets, the long hours taking care of brothers and sisters while a single mother is at work. As we grow closer and I hear more details about their lives, I draw on any similar circumstances I might have had as a child to make more connections to them.

Then eventually, they start to write words----words that they have been told for years are spelled wrong and incorrectly put together. It is scary business, scarier so because it would be tragic if anyone lost the tentative trust that we are starting to have in each other.

Then they start to play, kicking up the surf in the freedom of owning the words for once, instead of having the words squeeze them by the throat as they walk to the front of a class. The play stage is wonderful and lighthearted but it is important to pull them out and guide them to more thoughtful pieces. It is at that point that I pull out my big rod and read to them from Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* and San Francisco Writers' Corps *Believe Me, I Know*. Inevitably the work always turns more serious then, and armed with greater confidence and writing fluency, now they bow their heads down deep to their own notebooks as I scribble on the overhead.

The pieces are straight and genuine, telling of crossing the border and running like cheetahs from *la migra*, getting bitten by scorpions and tales of dads getting stabbed by angry bull horns. There are poems about anger and dads that get too drunk on Christmas. There are stories to celebrate everything from the comfort of a friendship to the crunchy mouth explosion of a red-hot Cheetoh.

One of my students is the fourth girl in a family of seven children, who lives with her family of nine plus an uncle in a studio apartment across the street from a tennis and country club. She is labeled as "at-risk" because of her test scores. When I met her she hated almost everything about school and as a result was failing most of her subjects. This is one of her recent poems:

*My Name Is*

*My name is pink and black mixed together  
a color that has never been found until now.  
My name is Chicana --  
Mexican blood running through my veins,  
my name is freedom.  
My name stands up for all my homies  
back in my real country  
and for the past and present, the good and the bad.  
Call me a judge that makes decisions  
Call me jewels that help you look prettier.  
My name is for everything that stands for me--  
my name is gold.  
My name means friendship, kindness,  
and being cool....  
my name is angel and devil.  
But call me little Miss Perfect,  
call me the wind that blows in your face  
call me  
Maria.*

This poem was accepted for publication in the Young Poet's Digest and won her \$200.00 in a local arts contest. She now wants to be a poet when she grows up.

I believe that through writing poetry a teacher can build a true relationship with children, because when they write they trust that they are sharing with you in a way that a teacher could never imitate orally because there is never enough time in American public schools; schools packed with all of our children, each with their own screaming needs. But when students write, they must slow down a bit to look at their thoughts, experiences and feelings on paper, and step outside themselves, perhaps for the first time. I have had children confess the darkest, scariest secrets to me after they have shared everything else on paper, and I believe it is because they have grown to recognize their secrets through the self-reflection that writing brings.

The problems my students face are typical of inner-city life: drugs, unstable homes, terrible poverty, and domestic abuse. But perhaps it is even more confusing to face these problems deep in the heart of suburbia, where it seems like you are the only ones facing such struggle. The expression that writing can provide for children that don't fit into a mainstream culture of a school can be a powerful wake-up call for teachers who often have no way of understanding their students with diverse backgrounds. This poem was written by a boy who according to his report cards "has very low functioning skills" and has a fourteen year-old sister that has been struggling with terminal bone-marrow cancer for the last four years.

*Hello EVIL,  
the one who is inside me---  
you're worth \$50 dollars.*

*When my life is bright,  
you come and darken it.*

*I promise to get you inside a cage...  
use you I shall not.*

*Release you I shall not--  
or else  
you will make me destroy things  
or even kill someone.*

He considers this his best poem so far.

Here is another poem written by a girl who has been involved with some very dark domestic abuse issues:

*Waiting is like a bush of beautiful flowers  
that are waiting to be picked but never are  
It's like a perfect apple that is waiting to be eaten  
But are never touched.  
It's like a ball  
waiting to be bounced,  
It's like a new born baby  
waiting to be carried to a dream land  
where it can play for hours and hours.  
It's like a baby waiting to grow up  
Or a person waiting to die*

*It's like a Mexican waiting to have a better life,  
waiting and waiting until that day comes.*

I am a fortunate person to be the one closest by when that special power comes to work; when the writing voice comes to these children struggling to make sense of their world. The rush of helping them feel their humanity, feel the sensation of clutching it in their hands, and then bow their heads to their notebooks and write about it...to me there is no greater magic.