Praise for Teaching with Heart

“I wish I could afford to buy copies of Teaching with Heart for all the teachers I have interviewed in my forty years of reporting. My budget can’t handle that. Instead, I recommend that all of us non-teachers buy copies of this inspiring book for teachers we know. You will probably want one for yourself, too.”

—John Merrow, education correspondent, PBS NewsHour; president, Learning Matters, Inc.

“Teaching with Heart is the rarest kind of book: one that actually does justice to the full range of emotion and skill teaching requires. These remarkable poems, selected by teachers and accompanied by their moving commentaries, provide a personal and powerful antidote to the caricatures and misperceptions we often see in headlines or popular culture, and speak to the heart of the teaching experience.”

—Wendy Kopp, founder, Teach For America; chief executive officer, Teach For All

“Although we understand that teaching is an intellectual activity, we also understand that it is a moral activity. To do it well, great teachers engage both the mind and the heart. Teaching with Heart portrays that wonderful combination of the heart and mind.”

—Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kellner Family Chair in Urban Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison

“At its best, teaching is like poetry: it inspires, challenges, and transforms. In this exhilarating collection, ninety teachers use poetry to illustrate the ups, downs, joys, frustrations, and, ultimately, the redeeming value of both teaching and poetry.
In spite of the increasing demands on teachers, the disrespect with which they’re treated, and the appalling conditions in which so many work, these teachers, and millions of others, continue to practice their craft with courage, hope, and love. This book will be a bedside companion to teachers who need to know they are our nation’s unsung treasure, as well as a wake-up call to the nation about the value of its teachers.

—Sonia Nieto, professor emerita, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; author of *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Schools*

“As a poet and a teacher, I’m always looking for what is essential and how it can be of use. In *Teaching with Heart*, you will find both food and tools for anyone who wants to learn or teach. It inspires and models the use of what matters in life and community. A must for any classroom.”

—Mark Nepo, author of *The Book of Awakening* and *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen*

“‘Warn the whole Universe that your heart can no longer live without real love.’ Those words from the poet Hafiz are the reason you must buy this book, as the best possible field guide to accompany you through the brambles, over the chasms, up and down the treacherous slopes that every teacher with heart traverses every day of the year, while carrying society’s most sacred trust.”

—Diana Chapman Walsh, president emerita, Wellesley College
Teaching with Heart
POETRY THAT SPEAKS TO THE COURAGE TO TEACH

SAM M. INTRATOR AND MEGAN SCRIBNER, EDITORS

Foreword by Parker J. Palmer
Introduction by Taylor Mali
Afterword by Sarah Brown Wessling

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The late avant-garde composer John Cage was famous for his iconoclastic creations. Perhaps his most notorious work is his composition 4’33”, which was performed in 1952 by pianist David Tudor, who sat at a piano without playing a note for four and a half minutes. Cage was also a prolific watercolorist, and his canvases have been exhibited throughout the world. The caveat he imposed on museum curators, who are accustomed to agonizing over the precise order and arrangement of visual art in an exhibition, was that they had to roll a dice to determine the order of the prints in homage to Cage’s principle of “chance operations.”

When we worked on Teaching with Fire over ten years ago and then on Leading from Within, the first two volumes in this series, we operated with “anti-Cage” editorial principles. We fussed and wrestled with the order of the poems and stories to create a coherent metanarrative. In Teaching with Fire, after much give-and-take and many drafts, we decided to open the book with Bob O’Meally’s poem that begins, “Make music with your life,” and ends with the image, “walk thru azure sadness / howlin / Like a guitar player.”


We began with this “noisy image” because it celebrated a theme coursing through the teachers’ submissions. Teachers described how the teaching life is busy, unpredictable, and filled with challenges. It requires a spirit for improvisation that, as John J. Sweeney wrote, happens “in little chairs . . . reading, writing, drawing, and playing guitar.”

In working on this book, we still heard teachers describe the vital and creative passion they have for their work, and we read commentaries in which they portrayed teaching as a form of artistry alive with opportunities for aesthetic discretion and playfulness. But the general tenor of responses suggested that conditions have changed for teachers. The writing we received described how mandates and prescriptions at the school and district levels have affected how teachers teach and how they experience the profession. They attributed this formidable change to the prioritization of testing and accountability policies and an accompanying obsession with “data.” Teachers experience this as a narrowing of their creative autonomy and a discounting of their professional expertise. As one veteran teacher said, “I may make music, but it’s feeling less like the improvisational jazz that marked how I thought about my work when I was young and more like muzak.”

Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised. The process of collecting and analyzing data has become ubiquitous in our lives. Our consumer preferences, health information, online personas, and more are collected into databases where complex algorithms analyze our trends. As the New York Times columnist David Brooks observed, “If you asked me to describe the rising philosophy of the day, I’d say it is data-ism. We now have the ability to gather huge amounts of data. This ability seems to carry with it certain cultural assumptions—that everything that can be measured should be measured; that data is a transparent and reliable lens that

3. Intrator and Scriber, Teaching with Fire, 2.

A Note to Our Readers
allows us to filter out emotionalism and ideology; that data will help us do remark-
able things."4

Perhaps nowhere more than in education has the belief that “collecting and analyzing data will help us do remarkable things” gained momentum. The field has systematically moved to data-driven instruction, value-added evaluation, and other structures that attempt to pinpoint and coordinate objective and scientific educational practices that produce student learning. It’s an approach whereby all various data, such as standardized test scores, dropout figures, percentages of non-native speakers proficient in English, and so on, are collected and disaggregated by ethnicity and school grade, and analyzed. The rationale for collecting this expansive trove of data was explained by the noted education historian Larry Cuban: “With access to data warehouses, staff can obtain electronic packets of student performance data that can be used to make instructional decisions to increase academic performance. Data-driven instruction, advocates say, is scientific and consistent with how successful businesses have used data for decades in making decisions that increased their productivity.”5

These macrolevel changes, driven by technological trends and accelerated by policy and legislation such as No Child Left Behind, the Race to the Top initiative, and the design of the Common Core State Standards, have formatively altered the microexperience of teaching. What the outcomes of this shift have been in regard to improving student achievement and identifying specific procedures and pedagogies is still a live question. What we do know, according to Cuban, is that “now, principals and teachers are awash in data.”6

6. Cuban, “Data-Driven Instruction.”
In addition, the submissions we received conveyed that the day-to-day stresses and pressures on teachers take their toll. More and more teachers feel that they are expected to make up for the ills of society and the flagging ability of many of our nation's children to achieve. Teachers face excessive demands on their time; they work with students often wounded by trauma or pulled down and apart by the punishing toll of poverty; they feel undermined by policy mandates or by the presence of accountability regimes that narrow their creative discretion as teachers; and they struggle with a sense of loneliness that comes from working in an institution that provides little collaborative time and has meager norms of collegial interaction.

Yet despite these challenges and the profound shifts in the context of where and how they teach, the enduring story teachers tell about their work remains constant. Teachers believe in the exuberant potential and possibility of their work. They have a deep, abiding, and passionate sense of vocation. They come to teaching to work with children, to serve society, led by the conviction that through education we can move individuals and society to a more promising future. These core and animating principles draw people into the work, but they become tempered over time as teachers run into the obstacles and forces at work in our classrooms, schools, and culture.

In this book, teachers describe the rhythms and meaning of their work and lives through stories and poems. It is fitting, as the power of story runs through the profession. In fact, we have always believed that if James Joyce were to write a sequel to *Ulysses*—his sprawling, stream-of-consciousness, detail-thick novel that chronicles eighteen episodes in the day of Leopold Bloom—he could write about a teacher's life. The buzzing complexity of the classroom, the enlarged meaning of seemingly humdrum details, and the drama of so many individual and collective stories playing out in the learning and lives of students would make a suitable subject for a complex and layered novel. As Maxine Greene observed, at all levels of teaching and schools, "the sounds of storytelling are everywhere."  

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Stories help give meaning to our lives; define who we are; illuminate our relationships to others; and, as the philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) has told us, guide our future actions by highlighting where we stand in relation to our commitments. Stories help us to determine “from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what [one] endorses or opposes.” In other words, stories locate us in our present moment and shape our journey.

In this book, the teachers share revelations about their teaching life and their encounters with poems that have meant something to them. We believe poetry is particularly apt for this sort of examination, as poetry compresses meaning into charged particles of language and image. Poetry stirs up an inner conversation about questions, emotions, and things that matter. Because poetry slows us down and focuses our attention, it can yield poignant insights into what is most significant and enduring in our work as educators. It is a different form of “big data,” one that William Blake understood when he wrote:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

We sent out the call for submissions through emails, websites, networks, and conversations with colleagues, family, and friends. We contacted organizations involved in programs working with teachers, poetry, or both, including those that profiled and supported remarkable teachers. We told educators that this book would seek to provide a platform for teachers and educators to speak wholeheartedly about the teaching life and the challenges and possibilities that teachers

encounter every day in their work. We asked them to submit a favorite poem and
a brief personal story (250 words) that described why this particular poem held
meaning for them, personally or professionally.

We were honored and overwhelmed by the outpouring of submissions for the
book. We received hundreds of poignant responses from educators. Each com-
mentary and poem shared a compelling perspective on teaching and education.
We were moved by the stories—heartfelt reflections that painted a picture of the
formidable challenges teachers face day in and day out—and by the intelligence,
heart, passion and courage these individuals bring to their chosen profession. It
was also a pleasure to hear how many found the process of writing their reflection
rewarding in and of itself. One of our contributors, Jennifer Boyden, wrote: “I want
to thank you not just for the opportunity to submit, but also for the conversation
this has opened up with my friends and me as we have selected poems, thought
about them, and discussed what we’re up to.” And Melissa Madenski, a middle
school teacher, wrote: “Whatever happens, to go through this process [of reflect-
ing on a poem] is a good one for any teacher!”

The editorial board carefully reviewed the submissions, selecting the entries for
the book using criteria that included the quality of the poem, the story behind each
poem, and how these poems and stories would work together to form a cohesive
whole that would represent the wide range of teachers’ perspectives and experiences.

We are delighted with the broad array of educators represented by these
ninety submissions. They embody the many faces and contexts of teaching: pre-
school, elementary school, middle school, and high school. They work in a variety
of institutional settings and schools: public; charter; independent; four-year col-
leges; community colleges; universities; and out-of-school settings, such as after-
school programs. They hail from across the continuum of experience, from
aspiring teachers, to novices, to midcareer veterans, to retired teachers. They
teach online, in classrooms, in cities and small towns, and through such leadership
roles as principals of schools, leaders of unions, or superintendents of districts.
Encountering the array of perspectives from these educators was a wonderful aspect of this work.

What is clear—no matter the background, level of experience, position, or context—is that all of these educators strive faithfully to honor the noble aspirations of their profession. They believe that the real work of teaching is an art form that when performed well encompasses skill, judgment, imagination, strategic planning, improvisational fluidity, and the highest levels of intelligence. The country is fortunate to have such dedicated professionals teaching in our nation’s schools and offering support to our students and fellow educators. We count ourselves lucky to have had this opportunity to work with them and feature them in this book.

In the course of describing our efforts, we often said, “This is not your typical poetry anthology.” Most anthologies singularly focus on the quality of poetry and the relationship of poetry to a particular theme. For example, one of our most treasured anthologies is Czeslaw Milosz’s A Book of Luminous Things. It’s a collection of three hundred poems that were selected because they render the emotional and physical realities of the world palpable, singular, and immediate. They are of luminosity. Milosz wrote that he assembled the anthology while he was in Berkeley, and he described how he uncovered the “hoard” of poems. “Berkeley has, probably, the best bookstores in America, and also good libraries, including the libraries of theological schools of various denominations. . . [It] possesses a quite high density of poets per square mile. As a consequence of all this, its bookstores afford a good opportunity to browse in poetry.”

Our approach has been fundamentally different. We have collected and arranged poems that teachers indicated were poignant and meaningful to them. The result of this work is that we have an eclectic collection that stretches across centuries, cultures, and genres.

In the spirit of offering *Teaching with Heart* poetry trivia, we can share that after Emily Dickinson, the poet most submitted to the selection process was Mary Oliver, and then William Stafford. The poem most submitted (six teachers sent in commentaries) was “The Writer” by Richard Wilbur. We may not have scoured the bookstores like Milosz, but we too found a rich source for poems, as each day we were fortunate to find our email full of poems and submissions sent by teachers. We browsed the poetic world in a different way.

The stories and poetry in the book are organized into ten sections that tell a broad-ranging story from the teacher’s perspective about the project of American education. Following these ten sections is a short resource section on how poetry can support teachers in their work.

The first section of stories and poetry, “Relentless Optimism,” considers how despite facing myriad draining demands and pressures, teachers find ways to believe in the promise of teaching and keep a spirit of optimism alive.

“Teachable Moments” homes in on moments of wonder within a teacher’s life and work. Commentaries in this section describe episodes in which the “light-bulb” goes off and illuminates the inside of a classroom—and powerful learning transpires.

“Beauty in the Ordinary” and “Enduring Impact” describe how teachers, although awash in a sea of data and quantitative representations of what constitutes learning, still find enduring satisfaction from the intensely human and relational aspects of their work.

“The Work Is Hard” and “Tenacity” contend with those forces that can demoralize teachers: testing, high rates of poverty among students, intensified scrutiny around test scores, large class sizes, and other depleting challenges. These sections look at how to meet these challenges both within and outside the classroom.

In “Feisty,” “Moment to Moment,” and “Together,” teachers look at what they can do, both as individuals and as colleagues, to resist the status quo and create
inspiring new ways to teach, learn, and work with students. Part of this is acknowledging that they will not always hit the ball out of the park, and part of it is recognizing and accepting their imperfections. These educators also describe how they take care of themselves and note the importance of adult relationships in schools in helping them sustain their engagement in their work.

And finally, in “Called to Teach,” teachers describe their abiding relationship to teaching as a vocation. They depict teaching as a calling—and despite the challenges, they believe that what they do matters. Their words are evidence of the almost inexplicable, relentless optimism of teachers—for which we’re very grateful.

Sam M. Intrator
Megan Scribner
May 2014
Foreword

Parker J. Palmer

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

Teaching with Heart is full of good news about our schools. This news comes not from the mass media, which carry an endless stream of bad-news stories about American education—or, more precisely, about the political football American education has become. The good news comes from ninety gifted and committed educators, each of whom shares a brief personal story about the teaching life, accompanied by a poem that embodies insights, values, or a vision that helps sustain him or her. These stories and poems take us inside the heart of a teacher and offer proof positive that our school-age children are in the care of many competent, compassionate, committed, and courageous adults.

For the past quarter century, I’ve had the privilege of working with thousands of teachers across the United States. I can testify from personal experience that the contributors to this book are not random miracles in their oft-maligned profession.
They represent countless unheralded professionals who give endlessly of themselves to help their students fulfill the potential that every child possesses. The miracle is that so many teachers like these have found ways to sustain themselves in a profession that we depend on and yet denigrate on a daily basis.

If we are fully to appreciate the courage that keeps these teachers returning to their post, we have to understand the impact of the bad news about American education—which brings us back to the mass media. The New York Times recently reported that in a reputable survey of teacher morale, “more than half of teachers expressed at least some reservation about their jobs, their highest level of dissatisfaction since 1989. . . Also, roughly one in three said they were likely to leave the profession in the next five years, citing concerns over job security, as well as the effects of increased class size and deep cuts to services and programs. Just three years ago, the rate was one in four.”¹

Statistics of that sort are brought to life by a million anecdotes like this one. A friend of mine recently learned that her son, who had always loved math, was doing poorly in his fifth-grade math course. “That class is so boring,” he told his mom. “Every day our teacher writes our homework on the board and makes us write it down so we can take it home.” When my friend asked the teacher why she took up valuable classroom time with such a primitive practice, the answer was simple: “Because the school can’t afford to xerox the homework handouts, and neither can I.”

Here’s another statistic about what American teachers and their students are up against. An appalling one-fifth of the children in this country—that’s sixteen million kids—come from food-insecure households, and two-thirds of American teachers “regularly see kids who show up at school hungry because they aren’t getting enough to eat at home.”² Every day, teachers in this affluent country are


reaching into their own pockets to buy food for some of their students, to say nothing of basic school supplies their students need that their school cannot afford.

Then, of course, there are the “high-stakes” tests that do little to improve the quality of American education but cause widespread grief, all for the sake of helping politicians look “serious” about public education. Our obsession with testing is punishing teachers whose students don’t get on base, even when those students began with two strikes against them, making teachers and students alike feel like failures in the process. It is creating a culture of “teaching to the test” that leaves no room for the open-ended exploring that real education requires. It is pushing important subjects like art and music out of the curriculum because their “learning outcomes” can’t be measured quantitatively. And it is driving many good teachers out of the profession because they are being told to put test scores ahead of their students’ real needs.

To add insult to injury, teachers are often used by politicians, the press, and the public as scapegoats for a raft of problems that teachers did not create and cannot solve, at least not by themselves. People complain endlessly about “all those incompetent teachers” who turn out children with subpar skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic. But the root cause of many children’s failure to learn is not poor teaching. It is poverty and the way it deprives children of the resources they need—from adequate nutrition to strong adult support—to succeed at school.3

Against that bad-news backdrop, let’s get back to the good news that is reinforced on every page of this book: American teachers are our “culture heroes,” the true “first responders” to societal problems that “We the People” and our political leaders lack the wit or the will to solve, problems that show up first in the lives of the vulnerable young.

Despite poor working conditions, teachers show up at school every day with welcoming smiles and thoughtful lesson plans developed on weekends and by the

midnight oil. Despite the fact that they’re often underpaid and their schools are underfinanced, they do their work with full hearts, faithfully, and well. Despite the drumbeat of “accountability” that puts test scores above all else, they never forget that their ultimate responsibility is to this child, and this child, and this child. Despite the fact that they are surrounded by public misunderstanding and political interventions, they keep investing themselves in the promise with which every child is born.

Where do teachers find the resources necessary to continue to serve our children in such difficult circumstances? In the two places where people of conscience and commitment have always found the power to resist and transform external circumstances that might otherwise defeat the best of human possibilities. They find it within themselves, in the human heart. And they find it between themselves, in communities of mutual support.

For millennia, poetry has helped our species evoke, nurture, and sustain the human heart and connect with each other in supportive communities. So the poems that accompany the teaching stories in this book are more, much more, than grace notes. From the nonverbal poetry of the paintings in the Lascaux Caves (estimated to be more than seventeen thousand years old), through ancient texts of wisdom traditions around the world, to the work of contemporary poets, poetry has given human beings a way to tap into insights and energies that allow us to keep our finest aspirations alive and come together in the endless struggle to achieve them.

To take but one example from this book (spoiler alert), look at the entry by seventh-grade teacher Annette Breaux. From her first day of teaching, Annette has had a poem by Emily Dickinson on her desk, a poem that begins, “If I can stop one Heart from breaking, / I shall not live in vain.” One day she discussed that poem with her students, and sent them home with a simple assignment: “Do something nice for someone.” When you learn what that assignment did for a student named Thomas and his mother, and for Annette, you will know what I mean when I say that poetry has the power to arouse the human heart and help create communities of mutual support.
William Carlos Williams got it right when he wrote the poem with which this foreword begins: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” For millennia, men and women have been turning that truth around by relying on poetry for news that is life giving and empowering, as the stories in this book demonstrate.

In the mass media, today’s bad-news stories about American education will be old news tomorrow. Of course, we cannot ignore these stories—they point toward problems we need to solve if we want our teachers to have the support they need to keep serving our children well. But we who care about education, and those teachers whose work we value, must find sources of sustenance for the long haul, and poetry provides some of what we need.

Unlike the stories told in the mass media, the stories told by poetry will not be old news tomorrow. “Literature is news that stays news,” said the poet Ezra Pound, because it taps into the bottomless resources of human community and the human heart.4 For that—and for all the competent, compassionate, committed, and courageous teachers in our schools—we can give great thanks.

Parker J. Palmer, founder and senior partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a well-known writer, speaker, and activist. He has reached millions worldwide through his nine books, including the best-selling Let Your Life Speak, The Courage to Teach, A Hidden Wholeness, and Healing the Heart of Democracy. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, along with ten honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010 Parker was given the William Rainey Harper Award, whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011 he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”

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Toward the end of every summer, when the air begins to change, I can’t help but count the years that have passed since I left the classroom as a regular teacher back in 2000. Part of me will always associate that quality of early-autumn air with the beginning of school, whether as a student or as a teacher.

In the Northeast, where I grew up, that time of year is a mixture of mown grass, cooler nights, and a smell I can only describe as *imminence*. Something about to start. As a student, I followed a yearly ritual to prepare for it: binders stocked full of loose-leaf; backpacks stuffed with pens and calculators; new clothes purchased; shots and immunizations obtained; and soccer practices attended, which, as a goaltender, I always dreaded just a little (glory, failure).

As a teacher, too, autumn meant it was time to get serious again, finish those lesson plans, put the schedules on the refrigerator, take a deep breath, and get ready for the onslaught: every student a striker on a mad breakaway heading straight for my goal.

Even after I quit my teaching job to see if I could pay the bills as a wandering poet and an itinerant creative writing consultant, the feeling of imminence that comes with the onset of early autumn never ebbed. My only job now, really, is to write and be on time for the readings and airplanes that have been set up for me. Yet each year in the last days of August, part of me starts thinking, *Summer’s over. It’s time to buckle down and go to school.*
For years I couldn’t figure out why as a poet I still felt this way. But it makes perfect sense. Because on a very basic level, being a poet and being a teacher are inextricably linked. Whether teaching or writing, what I really am doing is shepherding revelation; I am the midwife to epiphany.

Consider this job description, attributed to the Roman poet Horace, who wrote during the time of Augustus: “The task of the poet is to either delight or instruct, and we must reserve our greatest approbation for those who can do both at the same time.” Isn’t that still true today? Aren’t the best poems the ones that enchant us while teaching us something at the same time? And isn’t that also the gift of the best teachers?

A teacher instructs, certainly—that’s obvious—but the best teachers know intuitively that part of their job is to bring to the acquisition of knowledge and skills as much delight as possible. Students spend more time studying for the classes they care about—even though they may be challenging—than for the classes that bore them or don’t seem to be relevant to their lives. A good teacher can capture their attention and imagination, and they can find themselves falling in love with the subject, sometimes in spite of themselves.

For a spoken-word poet, one whose work is written first for the ear rather than the eye, Horace’s dictum is equally true. As I craft and rehearse my performances, I must not forget to delight, entertain, or even provoke my audience as I present my commentaries on the world. Trying to wrap whatever wisdom I might wring from my life lessons in beautiful turns of phrase and memorable imagery, I think often of the poet John Dryden, who may well have been channeling Horace when he wrote that “delight is the chief, if not the only, end of poetry; instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poetry only instructs as it delights.”

All of this may help explain why a book like *Teaching with Heart* exists. Why so many teachers turn to poetry to sustain them, to remind them why they chose to do what they do, or simply to accompany them on their journey. There is something about the place whence good poetry springs—to say nothing of the places it can touch us or take us—that is familiar to the soul of the teacher. As I read the poems contained in this book, many of which I have known and loved myself for years, but *most* of which were new to me, that truth kept announcing itself to me over and over again: poetry replenishes the well because it is another way of teaching.

When I was a regular classroom teacher, I never once claimed to understand truly how anyone learns anything. And now that I’m a poet I still don’t know. Sure, I’ve read the theories taught in colleges of education, and many of them make a lot of sense to me, especially Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Domains. But there’s still a lot of mystery surrounding how the brain works and how knowledge gets acquired, comprehended, applied, analyzed, and so on. Part of me is completely at ease with that mystery, that *not knowing*. It’s the same part of me that loves poetry, I think, because poetry possesses mystery as well; as T. S. Eliot said, poetry can *communicate* before it is understood. But many policymakers who continually create new approaches to education have never been able to trust what they can’t measure.²

The learned astronomer so enamored with “charts and diagrams” mentioned in Walt Whitman’s poem, chosen and eloquently introduced by Ronald Gordon, a professor at the University of Hawai’i, is alive and well today and working in the US Department of Education, revealing through his prodigious mastery of policy and statistics his utter ignorance of actual teaching. Children, like the stars at the end of Whitman’s poem, are distant, beautiful, and mysteriously rejuvenating. To believe this on the most basic level requires *gnosis*, an unexplainable knowledge akin to faith. As Ronald himself writes in wonderfully haphazard rhyme, “Heart,

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head, and hand united, we reach. And then, we teach.” Not all the poetry in this book is to be found in a poem.

Of course, it’s difficult to celebrate this spiritual, intuitive knowledge that all good teachers know exists but can’t talk about without being laughed at or fired. And that’s because the process of acquiring it can be as arduous as it is beautiful, as exhausting as it is transcendent. Wisdom is hard won, and not necessarily in the way you want it to be. Teaching is like “Crossing the Swamp,” the Mary Oliver poem chosen and introduced by Maureen Geraghty, a high school teacher in Portland, Oregon, and as Maureen writes, the poem encourages her to “press on”: “I read it often, especially when I want to give up and simply pass out worksheets that fence off the swamp and deter any opportunities for engagement and interaction.” Many other teachers have presented poems here that speak to the necessity of persistence, persistence despite not knowing all the answers or sometimes even feeling remotely ready or prepared. Where there is no path, you make one. And despite the desire to give up, you go on.

Why? Because teachers are famous. Maybe not to the world at large. Maybe not to history. But teachers can be famous to their students, as Safaa Abdel-Magid, a teacher at the Khartoum International Community School in Sudan, says in her discussion of “Famous” by Naomi Shihab Nye, just as “the tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek” (Nye). Our fame comes from our insistence that teaching is not a job we merely do but a thing we are. Or, as Vicki Den Ouden, a reading teacher in British Columbia, Canada, says, “To truly be great, [we] need to be like the moon—dependable and wholly present.”

After my readings I often get asked whether I miss teaching. My stock answer is, “Never before seven in the morning,” which is usually good for a laugh or two. Then I often launch into some version of what I wrote earlier in this introduction, describing how I feel as though I never stopped teaching, that I just traded in one classroom for another kind. “You can take the teacher out of the poem, but not the poetry out of the teacher,” I say.
Sharing these sentiments usually satisfies the person who asked the question. But sometimes, when something has broken me open a little (like reading the poems in this book and the stories written by the teachers who chose them) I answer this same question with a deeper honesty. Do I miss teaching? Yes. Every single day.

**Taylor Mali** is a spoken-word poet and a vocal advocate of teachers and the nobility of teaching, having himself spent nine years in the classroom teaching everything from English and history to math and SAT preparation. He is one of the most well-known poets to have emerged from the poetry slam movement and has performed and lectured for teachers all over the world. His twelve-year-long Quest for One Thousand Teachers, completed in April 2012, helped create one thousand new teachers through “poetry, persuasion, and perseverance.” He is the author most recently of *What Teachers Make: In Praise of the Greatest Job in the World* as well as two books of poetry, *The Last Time as We Are* and *What Learning Leaves*. 
Other books

Teaching with Fire
Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, Editors

Leading from Within
Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, Editors

The Quest for Mastery: Positive Youth Development
Through Out-of-School Programs
Sam M. Intrator and Don Siegel

The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal
Parker J. Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, and Megan Scribner

Living the Questions
Sam M. Intrator

Tuned In and Fired Up
Sam M. Intrator

Stories of the Courage to Teach
Sam M. Intrator

The Courage to Teach Guide for Reflection and Renewal
Parker J. Palmer and Megan Scribner
In this, my fifth year of teaching, I’ve already been shuffled around to various teaching positions—urban, rural, private, and public. I’ve striven for excellence in my profession, but I’ve also been laid off, had my salary cut, and been told that I’ve entered a career without promise. But like many of my fellow teachers who face similar situations, I just keep standing up—for myself, for my students, and for the integrity of my profession.

“The Real Work” brings with it a simple, ringing truth that echoes my experience: hardship inspires innovation, honesty, and a desire to persevere enough to fight through. It is when we reach a dead end that multitudes of previously unseen paths open up to meet us. Thinking back on my own teaching paths, I realize that I am my career’s cartographer, drafting a map rich with color and experience.

The poem also makes me think of my students, many of whom shoulder unthinkable burdens, yet still manage to employ their mind and spirit in the journey of learning. Students show bravery every time they put their own voice to a page despite the uncertainty that can come from all directions, without and within.

So much of teaching is doing the work of standing back up—knowing with profound certainty that our “baffled minds” are meant to do this “real work” of journeying together, to teach our students and ourselves that the struggles we overcome help strengthen the voice of our song.

—Amy Harter

High School English and Theater Arts Teacher
Port Washington, Wisconsin
The Real Work

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have begun our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

—Wendell Berry