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Connecting

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Connecting

Authors

Helen Walker, Bob Randolph, Leigh Ann Chow, Andrea Saylor, Jill Moyer Sunday, Kattie Hogan, Matt Ittig, and John Patrick Cleary

CONNECTING

Gratitude

Helen Walker

Gratitude arises from surprise. Our rotations of students sit in those square desks, so present, so under our noses, so solid and visceral. Are we awake to the surprise they might bring to our consciousness—the surprise that wakes us up to that full-on sense of gratitude that causes poets to put words together in what John Keats calls prayerful ways (“All poems are a form of prayer”)?

This year’s writers in “Connecting” narrate stories of gratitude. David Steindl-Rast’s begins his discussion of gratitude, explaining that

. . . our eyes are opened to that surprise character of the world around us the moment we wake up from taking things for granted. Rainbows have a way of waking us up. We might not even understand what it was that startled us when we saw that rainbow, but our spontaneous response is surprise. It is also the beginning of gratefulness. . . Things and events that trigger surprise are merely catalysts. I started with rainbows because they do the trick for most of us. But we have to find our own, each one of us. No matter how often that cardinal comes for the cracked corn scattered on a rock for the birds in winter, it is a flash of surprise. I expect him. I’ve come to even know his favorite feeding times. I can hear him chirping long before he comes in sight. But when that red streak shoots down on the rock like lightning on Elijah’s altar, I know what e.e. cummings means: ‘The eyes of my eyes are opened.’ (9-11)

For teachers, our catalysts should be our students certainly. We do expect them; we can hear them when they are still out in the hall. Our question becomes how often are the eyes of our eyes opened by their presence?

e.e. cummings’ opened eyes are “eyes of hope.” Steindl-Rast tells us why: “Grateful eyes *expect* the surprise of finding beauty in *all* things. And they do find it. Hope, as passion for the possible, gives us a realistic alertness for practical possibilities. It gives us a youthfulness.” (142-3).

In reading and re-reading our authors Randolph, Chow, Saylor, Sunday, Cleary, Hogan and Ittig’s pieces, I am strengthened by the presence of youthfulness, hope, surprise—and, yes, gratitude. My eyes feel more open. These authors help me grasp what Steindl-Rast means when he tells us, “Once we wake up in this way, we can strive to stay awake. Then we can allow ourselves to become more and more awakened. Waking up is a process” (11). But it traces back to gratitude.



Works Cited

Steindl-Rast, David. *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990.

Poetry Teacher's Prayer

Bob Randolph

I pray for the school and the bells of fire
I call my students, with their eyes open all night
as they talk in their dorm rooms about football,
who's hot, and how to pass Biology. Lord,
show them snow in hell, cold rain in Heaven,
endless plains aglow with spare parts of research,
like a hymn falling on their bones through their skin;
give them a season blooming with e.e. cummings,
and not just Spring, but a low winter Hamlet sky
like a protagonist bent on revenge; cut them with Eliot,
and heal them with Eliot; help them complain
after reading Virginia Woolf and sing cheek to jowl
like a steel wool choir after Ginsberg;
give them all hardwood floors made for pillows
and papa san chairs; and glue them out of loneliness,
but into good pay after their degrees. Teach them to pray;
let their cell phones misarrange the clouds just once,
so they realize what's enough. When they climb old age
and expect one deep color introverted as dirt,
open their hearts like delphiniums. Let every library
be hungry for them to abide like sparrows on a quiet street corner.
Lord, when their stumbling distances eternity,
please rate them with a rubric that's all mercy,
if that be Your will. Lure them with beauty;
lead them to openness mirroring Your forgiveness,
because at the edge of their lives (and thank You)
the office door of the Holy Ghost stays open 24/7,
that they might find the stars. Keep them alive and corporeal,
slowly curving straight to you. Let the light through their windows
fall on counters and desktops full of presence
and their poems and marriages long remain.

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What Teachers Carry

Leigh Ann Chow

You can tell a lot about a teacher by what she schleps into school with her. Not to compare teaching to jungle combat (although the two sometimes seem to have something in common), but just as Tim O'Brien characterizes his soldiers by the contents of their rucksacks, so too can you make a pretty good guess at a teacher's content area by

the weight of her bag.

Math and science teachers often leave the building with nothing but their keys and maybe a thermos. Some of my colleagues on the other side of the hall even ride motorcycles to work. Meanwhile, my English department friends and I practically need a dolly to haul the piles of paper back and forth. Not to say that math and science teachers don't work as hard or are any less dedicated. They just have less paper to deal with.

And paper can be exhausting.

Yes, yes. I have tried online grading in numerous forms and functions. But just as I have tried reading books electronically, something about grading papers in pixels rather than in ink seems wrong to me. That's why we call them *papers*.

Despite the paper issue, I continue to assign writing. Last week, in fact, I collected papers from each of my five classes—95 students in all. I realize that I am extremely fortunate to have fewer than 100 total possible papers to grade. Smaller sections of Advanced Placement and lower-level English classes spare me from the ridiculous numbers of mid-level students taught by my colleagues, some of whom have 125 or 130 students total.

I keep assigning writing because they need to write. How can they possibly become better writers if they don't practice writing? And how can they practice writing unless they are required to do so in the context of a graded assignment? Writing is how we make our thoughts visible on paper. The very process of writing often helps students to reach deeper understandings about the content they are attempting to learn. Students should be writing every day in every class—in math and science, not just in English. But I digress.

As easy as it is to complain about the sheer volume of work, I try never to take for granted the privilege of being the first reader of my students' stories. These young adults (most of them, at least) pour out their hearts in their essays. I have learned more about my students from their writing than any grade report, IEP, or disciplinary referral could ever tell me. Some of what I have learned has left me speechless. Poverty, pregnancy, illness, death, abuse, self-harm. The human condition writ large.

English teachers enter into an unspoken pact with their students when they assign and collect a piece of writing, particularly a personal narrative. This pact can only be broken, in the worst of cases, by the burden of learning something that must be reported to protect the student's health or welfare. Putting these intensely personal things down in the context of an English class writing assignment may seem strange, but often students share these secrets in writing because they have no other way to cry for help. Sometimes it is the student equivalent of dialing 911. English teachers are the call center operator on the other end of the line, the first point of contact. I try never to forget the awesome responsibility that comes along with this role.

There is a reason why so many students develop deep relationships of trust with their English teachers: because as writers, we bare our souls. Especially in the years of young adulthood when we are struggling to figure out who we are, and what it all means. The emotional turmoil of the late-teen years can be so overwhelming; it is easy for us to forget the enormity of what, from an adult perspective, is so clearly temporary drama. And as a teacher who has endured the trauma of losing a former student to suicide, I am painfully aware of the consequences of suppressing these overwhelming emotions. Some students who would never reach out to anyone in person are willing to do so in writing. And we

can only hope and pray that they do.

So to return to O'Brien's metaphor, what teachers carry is far more than just the weight of the essays their students hand in. Even though I may not be able to leave the building without an auxiliary bag to transport all the papers I have to grade, I would never trade my job as an English teacher for any other. I have the honor and the privilege of being the first reader of some of the truest, most meaningful prose ever written. As a supporter of writing as a survival mechanism, I will welcome what they carry to me at the beginning of each class period and treat it with the care and respect it deserves.



A Brief History of Holy Writing

Andrea Saylor

Moses let god write for him. With feet stripped bare, he learned the necessity of vulnerability, and waited to receive words from a face he could not see. He got them on stone, immutable, stronger than human craft. When he carried them down the mountain, he moved more carefully to make up for their weight, looking before he stepped. Like holding a baby, he suddenly felt responsible for something infinitely valuable, so he moved more carefully. It was almost too much to carry.

David wrote everything he felt. He knew the same god Moses knew, but more intimately. He asked questions like children who have not yet learned what they are not allowed to ask: "my god, my god, why have you forsaken me?" He danced like children who have not yet learned cynicism. Everywhere and in all things, he talked to God. It was the journey, inside and out.

Paul wrote in jail. Perhaps he was barefoot like Moses, not because he walked on holy ground but because of the poverty of the incarcerated. But his letters sound fully clothed, triumphant. Somehow his lawless time, when he must have felt the constant threat of torture or death or starvation or loneliness or monotony, turned into sentence after sentence about grace. He wrote about love in a transient life. It was seeing an invisible hope.

But Mary
wrote with her whole body.
She felt the weight
of the mystery more than anyone;
she sang:
"It just comes.
He grows and changes
everything.
Slowly,
the weight bends me
until I encircle the unknown.

Consuming and consumed
we make each other.
I learn how to eat, walk, sleep.
All anew.”

Inside a slow birth,
we sing our incarnate mystery.

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For My Students

Jill Moyer Sunday

You should know this.

There's just a moment before I enter the room when I'm almost heady with anticipation. I jump in with both feet, ready to do it all again this morning, this afternoon, tomorrow, next week, another lifetime perhaps--to chase ideas around the room with you, to bat translucent, jewel-toned orbs down from the ceiling, to drink deeply of the poetic helium we discover inside.

When I drive the 50-odd miles to and from work each day, my battered grey Pontiac nearly automatic in rounding the curves of the interstate, I say prayers of gratitude. I move through my children, touching their heads in my mind. I count God's metaphors, the blood-red cardinal sitting on my windowsill; my friends who visit in my office chair--one with a guitar across her lap, another with a poem in his throat, one with a listening heart, and another with some old-fashioned southern comfort; and, most of all, the students who bear their stories like gifts for me to unwrap.

On some days, when I turn the key to start my journey, my heart hurts, abraded by the roughness of worry. By the time I stop the car, I am more at peace, having chanted my rosary of gratitude, rubbing my life's gifts between my fingers as I pray.

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Lines on the Body: Confronting Personal Experiences Through Poetry

Kattie Hogan and Matt Ittig

Students walk into classrooms everyday carrying with them backpacks, books, snacks—materials which will help them remain engaged in learning. They also carry their bodies and all the stories those bodies could tell, if given the chance to speak. Instead they may speak through tattoos, hairstyles, piercings, scars etched on arms. These students often do not find ways to safely voice their feelings and experiences to others.

Desiree entered our classroom with scars crisscrossing her forearm. The marks had faded to a strange shade of white against her pale skin, reminders of past experiences that needed to be told. Through reading and writing we were able to get a better sense of

Desiree's story, and, in turn understand the value of including personal narratives in our classroom practice.

Desiree's scars were hard to ignore but very difficult to broach. She saved us from longer awkwardness by turning toward the text she had in her hand: "I thought of this one just a few minutes ago. I was going to bring in *Alice in Wonderland*, but this seemed better." The pages were the novel *The Diary of an Anorexic Girl* by Morgan Menzie. She said this was the book that had taught her to be anorexic when she started reading it, and it taught her to overcome anorexia when she finished. It was the basis for her "sick diary," a diary she kept to count calories, rail against her mother, and vent her anger.

Literacy, both reading and writing, gave her a way to express and explore the challenging issues she was confronting. A good student, Desiree was bright and funny and social, with no outward appearance (except of course her scars) of a girl who spent time in Pathways, a "girls home," while she struggled to gain control over anorexia, substance abuse, and self-injury. Desiree, like many students, felt pressured to present an outward appearance of stability when chaos was bubbling below the surface.

In a literature course centering on self-definition, Desiree was given space to discuss the challenges of her past. One of the most profound experiences that emerged during those sessions was hearing a collection of poetry she had created which captured her struggles and her desire to find more peaceful ways of being in the world. Desiree's poetry provided a way to voice her feelings.

As we all sat together, listening to Desiree's story in her poetry, we were able to help students confront some of the many challenges that impact their lives. We could broach these delicate, deeply wounding stories. We could help them heal by paying closer attention to the stories adolescents often only express with their bodies, when their need is to give voice to them through their writing and to hear them reflected in others' stories in literature.

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New Teacher

John Patrick Cleary

I learned all the facts,
presented them as new
(My students better understand it!)
held together by a subject
framed (by me) as "true."

Be quiet, sit still—do as you're told!
(I read the manual:
"Come off as a scold")
Troops obeyed their master;
my information sold.

Don't imagine, pay attention
to the paper lines, the ink.

(Solve *my* problem.)
Hold your questions, freeze your mind,
and most of all don't think.

Silence was my remedy
encouraging anxiety
(fear the reigning goal,
legitimizing cowering,
control of mind and soul).
One weary rainy day last week
(I think I had the flu),
I forgot my lecture outline,
allowing student voices,
hesitant reflection,
unraveling questions,
nascent self-correction,
bewilderment (and insight).

My monologue dismantled
(for power, oppression,
irrelevant instruction),
out poured waters
from a listening well,
lively equality
finally flowing...

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