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Writers Who Could Be Teachers

by Robert Pinsky

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In April, I went to a poetry slam with the First Lady. That is, the two previous Poet Laureates, Rita Dove and Robert Hass, and I accompanied Hillary Rodham Clinton to an event at the J. Hayden Johnson Junior High School in southeast Washington.

The most impressive thing about this occasion was the performance of the seventh- and ninth-grade student poets. As one who has attended perhaps more poetry readings than any human being should have to, I can testify that the writing and delivery were extremely good. These students wrote not in Standard English and not in Black English, but each in an inventive, individual and pungent version of English, grammatically right and eloquent. The range of subjects was great: I remember a comic poem of extravagant boasting, a poem pitying a homeless derelict, a poem of metaphysical reach about space exploration, a love poem, a poem kidding self-pity, an homage to Duke Ellington.

The oral delivery, especially considering that the First Lady and the three Laureates were there, not to mention reporters, photographers and television cameras, was relaxed and forceful. The children seemed protected from nerves or intimidation by two factors: they were young, not yet as embarrassment-prone as older adolescents, and they knew that they had applied themselves to do something well.

Almost as impressive as the student poets was how the First Lady handled the occasion. She swiftly made contact with the teachers, with the principal and with Kenny Carroll, director of D.C. Writerscorps, the program that arranged the poetry slam. (Writerscorps, a project of the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C., has received support from Americorps, the national service program advocated by President Clinton.) Mrs. Clinton spoke with the student poets, and despite the artificiality of the situation, there was actual conversation between some bright children and an adult who, they could sense, genuinely respected what they had done and cared for them.

Although our presence there was contrived, the children and their ability were quite real, and the poetry event was not staged for us; it had been scheduled long before the White House called. Very clearly, the students had been taught with respect and skill by their classroom teachers and by the special poetry instructors, Nancy Schwalb and D. J. Renegade. This occasion defied stereotypes about city schools, the kind we call, in code, "inner-city schools."

What was going on in that classroom, and how might it be bottled for export? I don't have all the answers, but it did occur to me that the 15 or 20 students who read that day, and the others who held up Olympics-style scoring cards, as judges, had been taught by a couple of poets.

In my professional world, it is commonplace to complain about the "proliferation" of graduate writing programs and to deride the large numbers of poets and fiction writers who come from those programs with "useless" degrees and hopeless expectations of literary glory.

I have for a while suspected that this derision has a class bias: poetry, which used to be practiced mainly by a leisured elite, has become another part of the American range of middle-class opportunities. I know more bad things about the creative writing industry than most people, but I also know that it brings the art I love to many Americans who crave it.

What if those allegedly superfluous graduates of Master of Fine Arts programs were able to teach children like those in Johnson Junior High? Right now, because of the professional education lobby, the writing graduates cannot easily get work in a public school system. The writing program at Boston University, where I teach, accepts 12 students in poetry each year and 12 in fiction, from a pool of 300 applicants. When they graduate, a number of them go to teach at elite private schools, but relatively few can teach in the public school system without more schooling, in the form of education courses.

Can it be that bureaucracy is depriving public school students of the chance to learn from these gifted writers, who go on to work at St. Paul's or Exeter? American schools in the past have benefited from various social phenomena -- for instance, the limited opportunities once offered to talented women and the sense of mission created by religious feelings and vocations. Both of these historical circumstances provided a pool of talented teachers.

The alert, competent students I met in the city of Washington that day left me with no doubt that education in art is practical -- in fact, a vital necessity. The eagerness and skill of those youngsters also made me wonder if we need more graduates of creative writing programs -- of programs in all the arts -- and more imaginative ways to use their ardor and their talent.

GRAPHIC: Drawing (Catherine Lazure)

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