

Poetry as a Way of Creating a Soulful Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article explores how as an educator, I regularly bring poetry to my students and invite them into deeper, more soulful forms of engagement in our work together. I offer a contemplative perspective on poetry that treats poetry as a form of language that awakens, disarms, and apprehends us as part of a process of personal growth and relational sensitivity. I discuss using poetry to create a more soulful, self-aware, and generous pedagogy. I work with three poems to illustrate themes related to confronting unknown liminal spaces of development, practicing deep kindness, and attunement to non-attachment and permeability.

Keywords: poetry, language, pedagogy, poetic imagination

In his book, *The Wounded Researcher* (2007), Romanyshyn refers to the researcher as a 'failed poet'. That observation has always haunted me. It speaks to me of the barrenness that sometimes constitutes academic life. At times academic life lacks humanity and soulfulness, rendering it a kind of 'failed poetry'. One of my deepest callings as an educator is to try to correct this failure. My calling is to awaken the poetic in my teaching and my companionship with my students. It is to find a language that renders the human condition in its precious possibility and promise by throwing light on the poignant oddities, messiness, and contradictoriness of the human experience. Poetry is the place where this happens for me, making it one of my most cherished pedagogical resources.

For the last decade, poetry has invited me to re-imagine the human condition with a soulful spaciousness. Before discovering poetry, I felt like I was living somewhere between being an imposter and a craftsman working with the wrong tools. I found myself repeatedly standing in a gap between the known world of measurables and the unknown world of intangibles, trying to bear the weight of a necessary reconciliation. There were, of course, many times when I failed to do this, times when I missed the opportunity to

integrate the empirical realm of measurables with the wider ephemeral realm of possibility (see Palmer, 1998, 2000; Whyte 2002). But as I discovered certain poets and the gift of their poetry, I began to discover a method of reconciliation. I slowly found the language and the courage and clarity to bring a poetic spaciousness to my students and to be a passageway where they could reconcile truth and mystery. I found the right tools and my voice. My aim here is to tell that story about how I have found ways of encountering my students and our work through the rich lens of poetry. And it is, at the broadest level, a story about discovering deeper ways of knowing that lie at the heart of the ongoing radical reorientation that contemplative traditions bring to the world of pedagogy (see Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010).

My journey began a couple of decades ago as a discourse analyst trained to work in a forensic, up close, and detailed way with language. Language was central to me, but mostly at an arm's-length as an object of empirical scrutiny. When I began teaching an advanced teaching practicum course for burgeoning graduate student instructors, my relationship with language changed. I understood that part of preparing future teachers involved course management and

organization. Still, an even greater part of it involved helping them tap into the artistic, soulful, and self-reflective aspects of being present and teaching from a kind of whole-heartedness. I knew that tapping into those more subterranean reservoirs required the right language. I thus began to handpick poetry and bring it in each class to my students to tease and coax these more primal layers to the surface level of articulation and integration. I would bring a poem to each class, read it at the beginning, and then share my insights and invite them into a larger conversation about its themes and how they illuminate the course topic for the day. We would weave and sync the poem back into the course material, creating a conversation. The poems became emblematic signatures of a process of thinking about what it means to become a teacher.

What flourished then in those spaces was a shared love of language in the more intimate and relational sense, in the way it lives in our bodies and how rich poetic vocabularies open worlds to us. I have since been consistently drawn to poetry and have called on poetry in a variety of my courses to offer up a unique way of inhabiting new worlds. I use poetry to invite my students to consider the more significant questions for which the intellectual language they inherit is sometimes inadequate. For example, in my discipline of Psychology, the common factors and variables to approach human phenomena is inherently reductionistic. Even the language in the more praxis-oriented domains of Psychology (like clinical or counseling) can feel overly preoccupied with the surface (actions/behaviors). In short, the language that often accompanied the psychological content we espoused felt too small and too impoverished (see Whyte, 2010). We felt it was not large enough for the territories we wanted to explore and inhabit in our classroom process. And so, we turned to poetry. Poetry offered us a language that was expansive, generous, deep, and capable of calling forth the type of soulful teaching identities we longed to bring to our students.

Two central questions guide this present inquiry. First, how might we as teachers bring a contemplative perspective to poetry and thus ignite a more soulful relationship to pedagogy? And second, what are a few ways that poetry specifically asks us to change as teachers? How does poetry help us to be more fully present and engaged? In the first part of this article, I offer a nuanced perspective on how we might conceptualize poetry and its relationship to the art of

teaching soulfully (Palmer, 1998). In the latter half of this article, I selectively use three of my favorite poems to illustrate how I use poetry to think about becoming more expansive citizens of our work as teachers and allies to one another. I use *Postscript*, by Seamus Heaney (1997), to illustrate how we are summoned time and again to live at the frontier spaces of our development. I use *Kindness*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (1994), to discuss the place of deep kindness and empathic identification in our work. And I use *French Horn*, by Jane Hirshfield (2013), to offer a clear window into our relationship with those inevitable seductions and disturbances that come with our unavoidable attachment to (and collision with) time.

A Contemplative Perspective on Poetry

There are two ways I approach poetry with respect to pedagogy. First, I think of poetry as the contemplative practice of overhearing another or yourself say something with a crystalline precision that you didn't know you knew. Still, when you hear it, it has an unavoidable resonance. This is akin to the way Irish blessings work. Although I am not Irish, I sincerely appreciate an Irish blessing. An Irish form of blessing is not just wishing something good for someone but wishing something for them that they did not know they needed, but when they hear it, they recognize that place in them that it touches, and the need for it is then powerfully felt. In the same way, poetry is a way of blessing someone with some measure of novel truth or wisdom that they did not know they needed to hear, but when they listen to it, there is an alchemical shift and an inability to go back to the perspective they had before. It is like an encounter with beauty. You cannot unhear or unsee it. You are (thankfully) stuck with it, and if you are open enough, and ready enough for how the poetry invites you to shift your perspective, it will transform you.

As an illustration of this, when I recently moved into a new home, I remember feeling consumed with the usual sea of exhausting details related to moving and setting up a new house. One morning, while unpacking, I found an old poem, 'The House of Belonging' (1997) by David Whyte. I had read the poem many times prior, but that morning it would confront me with something I vaguely knew but which lived at the margins of my awareness. And coincidentally, it was a poem David Whyte had written when he had just moved

into a new home. When I read the end of the poem, it changed everything for me. At the end, he says:

This is the bright home

in which I live,

this is where

I ask

my friends

to come,

this is where I want

to love all the things

it has taken me so long

to learn to love.

(excerpt from 'The House of Belonging' by David Whyte, 1997)

When I read that, it was an intimate revelation. Someone else could have said that idea a hundred other ways, and it would have slipped by me. The peculiar language of Whyte's poetic alliterative voice—the condensed, precise, elegiac way it falls as lines of poetry that made it sing. "This is where I want to finally learn to love all the things it has taken me so long to learn to love." At that moment, I saw my new home, then, not as a tsunami of details or the unbearable weight of unwanted responsibilities, but as a safe place, an invitation not just to a new house but a new home—a clearing space to start again, a place where I could learn to love afresh all those areas of my life that I had been unable to integrate and welcome fully.

Secondly, I approach poetry as a kind of language that disarms you whether you want it to or not. This suggests that most of the time, we are well armored against various forms of revelation and incarnation. We are psychologically protected against the revelation of truth because the truth is always at some level exposed. And we are equally protected against the flowering incarnation of letting truth live in us as

a daily practice because taking up beauty in our bodies also involves tricky integration and intention. Poetry is a language that unlocks these processes and circumvents our guardedness, and apprehends us if we are open enough. There are moments in my teaching where, after I have spent time closely with a poem, I find myself confronted with and incapable of fortifying yourself from the truth. In David Whyte's poem 'Sweet Darkness' (1997), he offers the following benediction that is apropos to this idea:

You must learn one thing.

The world was made to be free in.

Give up all other worlds

except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet

confinement of your aloneness

to learn

anything or anyone

that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

(excerpt from 'Sweet Darkness' by David Whyte, 1997)

I recall reading this poem to my students on a cold February morning in 2007 with tears in my eyes. My life was at a turning point, and I felt the unbearable weight of having outgrown a love that was dear to me. I had felt alone for some time and could now see how this aloneness and confinement was a gift and that I was standing on the precipice of freedom. This excerpt speaks of being apprehended in a spacious aloneness by the revelation that our lives are best lived at the edge of fullness and freedom. But what was equally present to me was the invitation to "give up all other worlds" which do not bring me to life. I was well defended against such a calling, sanguine though it may be. But once I heard myself reciting these lines and this clarion call, I was apprehended by its truth, and my longstanding participation in worlds to which I no longer

belonged began to close, and my now false identity began to retreat. I felt free. I recall sharing this poem and these reflections with my students and how it was an invitation to them to give up worlds that were too small for them and step into more extensive territories.

In the next section, the first poem I will work with is Seamus Heaney's (1997) 'Postscript', which is a poem about finding yourself in a place, literally on the side of a mountain, where you are utterly defenseless and where you must shape yourself to accommodate that reality. Poems like 'Postscript' offer a language that confronts us and loosens our grasp of what we think we are up to. 'Postscript' is a poem that continually walks me back to my own doorway of vulnerability, to the place where I am defenseless and where the language I have inherited is best left as a sacrifice. When I allow poetry to open me to this kind of vulnerability, I become oriented differently. I can finally begin to see myself and others for what we all are. To borrow the final lines from Ellen Bass' (2012) poem 'If You Knew', I can see that we are all "soaked in honey, stung and swollen, reckless, pinned against time."

As a form of existential disarmament, poetry is an invitation to a kind of robust vulnerability (Whyte, 2002). It is interesting to think of vulnerability, then, not as a weakness to avoid or mitigate but as a practice or disposition for understanding what's about to happen and what, of the myriad of things that press upon you, is essential. And nowhere is this truer than in my teaching or companionship with others, in those living and delicately interpersonal moments. As a disposition, the capacity and courage to follow the path of vulnerability is something you can cultivate (Palmer, 1998, 2000; Whyte, 2010). Poetry is a practice for doing precisely that. As teachers, we have an opportunity to make the invitation to our students to real conversations that can cultivate a robust vulnerability that can carry us into the world of learning and knowing with our best gifts, not our strategies. I feel that good teaching is the cultivation of our best gifts, not our best strategies for getting by, which changes the conversation about what 'best practices' truly mean.

I use poetry in my teaching to find those gifted spaces where I am truly alive and open to myself and others, where I am prepared to be apprehended by truths that live at the margins of awareness. The brilliant Irish poet John

O'Donohue's (2008) central project was about trying to shape a more beautiful mind, and he took that to be a real discipline. We know that a beautiful mind is shaped by beautiful questions—that is, authentic, raw, hard, and deeply honest questions. Rilke talked about 'living the questions, about 'loving the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue (Rilke, 1993)'. What is astonishing about shaping a beautiful mind by asking beautifully real and raw questions is that beautiful questions elicit answers in their likeness. You call forth something that is living, raw, and real by asking beautiful questions. Those are the types of questions that live in the peculiar language of poetry. And those are the types of answers opened when we give ourselves to a poem. For me, they are unlike any other type of answer I might conjure up, and they have become my most cherished pedagogical resources.

How Poetry Changes us as Teachers

Though there are an infinite number of ways poetry enlivens and reshapes our pedagogy, for the sake of space, I will discuss three significant ways that poetry has widened the scope of my pedagogy. I will use three poems to illustrate each of these themes.

1. Living at the frontier ('Postscript' by Seamus Heaney)

This first poem is Postscript (1997) by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. The poem is essentially an invitation into a way of being, or way of encountering, in which you become a more expansive participant in your work and your personhood.

Postscript

And some time make the time to drive out west

Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,

In September or October, when the wind

And the light are working off each other

So that the ocean on one side is wild

With foam and glitter, and inland among stones

The surface of a slate-gray lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

Postscript, the poem's title comes off somewhat deceptive as an afterthought. It's a postscript, reminding us that some experiences arise serendipitously that cannot be dictated, calculated, or predicted in advance; they can only be spoken about after the fact as a kind of postscript. The poem is a memory of a windy Saturday afternoon when Heaney drove with his wife Marie and two dear friends along the south coast of Galway bay along the Flaggy Shore in western Ireland, a drive up the jagged coastline where the road hugs the side of a granite mountain on one side, and on the other side the steep cliffs that open out to the expansive Atlantic ocean. In the poem, Heaney thinks of the road as this frontier space between what is known (the earth) and what is unknown (the vast ocean), and of stepping out into that frontier space, right into the teeth of it, into a space to which you are completely defenseless.

The poem works in two parts. This first sentence is long and extraordinarily full, detailing the wild elemental quality of this natural liminal space. Heaney is painting a scene that is ripe and assaulting in its presence, magnificent in its fullness, grandeur, vitality, and power. Here, at the northernmost point of the county, Claire is the flaggy shore. The edge, quite literally. A place that is in its most fiercely prime condition, where the wind and light are working off one another in exactly the way they should at exactly the right time of year. As well, the land and sea are juxtaposed

perfectly against one another—the known world on one side and the unknown beckoning world on the other, and then, this third space, perhaps the most important space, the one that calls for a kind of inhabitation, the space between them, this point of collision, or encounter that we will see later in the poem becomes focalized as a passageway or hurry in the observer. And then this second part of the poem shifts to a more cautionary tone as he says, “useless to think you'll park and capture it more thoroughly.” In other words, you must stop and be immersed. You cannot take it apart or dissect it or capture it from a safe distance—a sobering reminder of the futility of our familiar perceptual languages and, more generally, of our desire to remain hunkered in our safe well-known identities.

A few central themes concerning my pedagogy resonate for me in this poem. First, there is the absolute necessity of putting myself at the forward frontier of my teaching rather than teaching from a safe place where I am comfortable or authoritative. There will always be an instinct in my teaching presence to hunt for that burgeoning identity or voice that lives at the periphery of my knowledge and maturity, at that collision point between what I know and what is unknown. There is a call in this poem to go beyond myself to this edge where “you are neither here nor there.” There is a space that I will encounter in my teaching where two equally powerful things reside that are fully not me, and that will not inhabit me. The first is what I think I want and desire, what I imagine is me, or what I imagine I am up to, and what I want from my students and my teaching. All of that is ‘other’ and may not come to pass as we want it to. What I often want from my students and what they bring are often two separate things. And, conversely, what the world (my students) wants and demands of me, however, they want to mold and press me or, to borrow from Mary Oliver's (1986) poem ‘The Journey’, how I will feel from them “the old tug at your ankles” and the cry to “mend my life,” and how that too will not come to pass as I expect it to. Rather, something wholly different will emerge, radically relational, born out of the unique combustion of the interaction between what I imagine I am and what the world demands me to be.

Second, when we approach this poem psychologically, we realize that our present identity that finds itself time again at this encounter threshold may have been formed to keep the frontier at bay. Our present identities as teachers are likely prepared, often quite well, to resist altogether opening fully,

or they are prepared to completely misconstrue the situation. For me, there are moments in my teaching wherein, looking back, I knew a transformative encounter was right there for the taking if I could have stepped into it. Still, I didn't, and instead, I could see that I had either romanticized the encounter, or I compartmentalized it or wrapped it up in intellectual language, or just hurried past it. These are all forms of resistance to keeping the fullness of the experience at a distance with familiar strategies. Not only am I often reluctant to stand at any liminal space of growth, but sometimes I may think I am at an edge of growth when really it is the edge of one of my many dissimulations. It is the edge of my pretense and not who I truly am, and when I linger in this space, I grow my imposters, not my best self. One of the grand illusions is that I can somehow construct a life of teaching in which I am immune to this revelation, where I stay in the car at the edge of the cliff and still somehow convince myself that I have experienced the beauty and fullness of the granite and the ocean. And when I realize I cannot, and when I finally get it, I can begin to pry the car door open and disappear and become that hurry through which known and strange things pass.

Third, most central is the idea of becoming a 'hurry' through which two equally powerful forms of otherness, two equally sharp and sharp forces, press in on us. There is this Buddhist element to the poem, this disappearance of the self or transformation of one's solid identity and a re-appearance in an ephemeral hurry or passageway. When I first began teaching, I would always focus on the classroom as this open and wild, and creative teaching space, but I did not think of myself in the same way. I never saw my identity as that open and wild frontier where the true work would occur, where the most powerful and subtle transformations would occur. Wei Wu Wei and Terrance Gray (2014) pose the question about why so many of us are unhappy. And their answer, to paraphrase, is that because 98.9% of everything we are and everything we say and do is mostly for oneself, and there isn't one. In other words, there isn't a self that will survive meeting another. There isn't a self that will survive a true encounter with profound alterity. The classroom is not the primary or fundamental clearing space where growth and transformation occur. I am.

So, how do we get there? As teachers, how do we become a hurry? In our everyday teaching, these liminal spaces do not

arrive as powerfully and Biblically as in the poem. Speaking for myself, I know that I will not feel as if I am high on the flaggy shore on most days. But the moments will still come, and they come often. I am learning to recognize these moments because their signature will always involve precious, intimate encounters when I find myself curiously caught off-guard and attentive to something I cannot name, to something I sense I know but do not know what to call. That is the unknown inviting me to rise and transcend the ground I am on. And then, to stay right there, be patient, and let that uncomfortable space inhabit your students and me. In David Wagoner's (1976) poem 'Lost' he instructs us to "standstill". He says:

Stand still. The trees ahead of you and the bushes beside you

are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,

and you must treat it as a powerful stranger,

must ask permission to know it and be known.

(excerpt from 'Lost' by David Wagoner, 1976)

My task is to find the courage and curiosity to greet the unknown as that "powerful stranger," quote Wagoner, and then have patience to persist in that curiosity, where the persistence is effortless and unmoored. I strive to allow myself to become the hurry, the inhabiting nexus where the wind moves through and carves me clean. To do that requires many things, but the first lesson, the most fundamental step, is to place myself up high on the flaggy shore, surrender my well-worn perceptual strategies, and greet all that is unknown about myself and my classroom companions.

2. Kindness as empathic identification ('Kindness' by Naomi Shihab Nye)

This second poem is Kindness (1994) by the poet Naomi Shihab Nye. The poem is essentially an invitation into radical wholeheartedness and deep empathy that becomes the passageway to genuine companionship with others.

Kindness

as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow
as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness
that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day
to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the
Indian in a white poncho lies dead
by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night
with plans and the simple breath
that kept him alive.
Before you know kindness

This poem is remarkable in its uncompromising honesty and its unique perspective on what kindness is and where it comes from. It does not sentimentalize kindness. Kindness is not being nice, generous, altruistic, benevolent, or even sympathetic. Here, kindness involves an open, empathic resonance, a willingness to connect and listen truly, and once the experience of the other opens the delicate aperture of your vulnerability, of your own story, you cannot just walk away. Like good poetry, these are moments that leave us defenseless, where the only response is forward and into the presence of something larger, or in the case of this poem, stepping into the place within where unguarded

kindness lives are the only possible response, the only thing that, as the poem says, “makes sense anymore.”

In this poem, kindness is the instinctive and empathic identification with the vulnerabilities of the other. It involves bearing another’s vulnerabilities. And at a broader level, it is the instinctive and empathic identification of the vulnerabilities of being human. It involves radical and pervasive open-heartedness. It knows the size of the cloth, as the poem says. This kind of radical wholeheartedness is the passageway to companionship. The gift of the poem is that it tells me where my best dispositions, like kindness, come from and what lies behind them as their prerequisites. My wounds, losses, and sorrows are the birthplace and birthmarks of kindness. The poem says before I can know what kindness is, I must know sorrow and loss, I must lose things, ‘feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth’. What I counted and carefully saved, all this must go so I can know; before I learn the tender gravity of kindness, I must travel where the Indian lies dead; before I know kindness as the deepest thing inside, I must know sorrow as the other deepest thing, and I must speak to it until my voice catches the thread of all sorrows and I know the size of the cloth. Then, as the poem says, only kindness makes sense anymore. This ordering of revelation is key to the poem. Shihab Nye is unambiguously clear.

This poem has literally changed the way I see my work in the classroom. It reminds me that it is the careful and open-hearted witnessing of another’s sorrow and the catalyzing empathy that emerges as a result that allows me to experience true kindness. The existentially enabling conditions for kindness matter, and they are thus worthy of unearthing and integrating. The poem reminds me about what happens when I give myself a level of empathy that calls kindness to the surface and how I am at my best when I summon the courage to live from the center of those changes rather than shutting them down and burying them. If I endeavor to teach well, and if true and real kindness is to be present in my companionship to my students, there is some work I need to do in my teaching. I need to find the source from which my kindness arises. The wound—that vulnerable and ineffable well-spring that is the birthplace of true kindness.

Because I’m a psychologist, I would like to discuss why we bury our deep kindness as teachers and companions to

others. There is a short, but wonderfully insightful book that answers this question quite well. It’s called *On Kindness* (2010) by Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor. The authors note that kindness preoccupies us, yet most of us are unable to live a life guided by it. Why? Much of what they say has to do with basic human resistance to vulnerability. They argue that kindness requires a certain level of emotional porousness and susceptibility to others. In our present culture, we have come to see this as a dangerous crack in the armor of the independent self. Kindness, they argue, often comes at too high a cost. The kind of open-heartedness required to reach true kindness is an aperture through which the world can enter us and us the world. This opening becomes calcified by our impulse for retreating behind our armored professional personalities. Kindness is thus the saboteur of the life of accomplishment, intellectual prowess, productivity, and control of oneself and others. Phillips and Taylor argue that real kindness does not require selflessness. Rather, real kindness changes us as we give it and is a way of knowing people beyond our understanding of them. When I can empathically attune to the experience of my students, I can know them in a way that is deeper than anything I could say or describe them.

So how do we get there? How do we as teachers unearth and tap into the undercurrent of robust vulnerability and self-awareness that brings our best kindness to the surface? I think Mary Oliver has at least part of the answer in her much-beloved poem ‘Wild Geese’. She says:

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

(excerpt from ‘Wild Geese’ by Mary Oliver, 1986)

It is tempting to think that those who can marshal deep and persistent kindness have a general goodness about them. Mary Oliver says you do not have to be good. You do not

have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, through suffering, repenting. You do not have to prostrate yourself to your failings and suffering. You do not have to feel sorry or ashamed for your mistakes. That will not open you to anything. She says you only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. You only have to set the deepest part of yourself free and leave it untethered to enter into a shared communion, where you tell me about your despair, and I tell you about mine. It is that simple. Let the soft animal of your body unravel and step into a genuine conversation. Kindness will show itself.

As a teacher and companion, I have learned that kindness is not a prerequisite that I bring to my students; it is not something I can pre-package and prepare to share. Kindness is what I find once I am there, knee-deep in the thick of it. I find kindness by stepping in and rubbing up against life at the edges of an honest and open and curious encounter, seeing myself in another, and allowing the soft shell of my animal (my vulnerabilities) to nest into my students' landscape to find refuge there. Then, kindness appears and becomes catalytic and calls to me, like the wild geese that Mary Oliver speaks of, harsh and exciting, over and over, announcing our place in the family of things. Kindness is our passport to belonging.

3. Seductions and disturbances ('French Horn' by Jane Hirshfield)

The third poem is French Horn (2013) by Jane Hirshfield. The poem is essentially an invitation to release and to become lighter, but not as a means of then refilling that space with what Hirshfield calls other 'seductions', but rather as a process of preserving a permanent kind of clearing space where we are free to know ourselves and the world in a way that makes peace with the inevitable press of time.

French Horn

For a few days only,

the plum tree outside the window

shoulders perfection.

No matter the plums will be small,

eaten only by squirrels and jays.

I feast on the one thing, they on another,

the shoaling bees on a third.

What in this unpleated world isn't someone's seduction?

The boy playing his intricate horn in Mahler's Fifth,

in the gaps between playing,

turns it and turns it, dismantles a section,

shakes from it the condensation

of human passage. He is perhaps twenty.

Later he takes his four bows, his face deepening red,

while a girl holds a viola's spruce wood and maple

in one half-opened hand and looks at him hard.

Let others clap.

These two, their ears still ringing, hear nothing.

Not the shouts of bravo, bravo,

not the tympanic clamor inside their bodies.

As the plum's blossoms do not hear the bee

nor taste themselves turned into storable honey

by that sumptuous disturbance.

This poem comes from Hirshfield's book, *Come Thief* (2013), which is essentially about love and attachment and how we ought not to conflate the two, and the poignancy of human life lived in a particular kind of way, with a particular kind of relationship to time. The "thief" she refers to could be many things, but for the poem *French Horn*, the thief is time. Time brings us the fullness of everything we will experience, and with equal force, takes it all away. The central invitation of this poem is that it asks me how I will respond to that. The

more I read Hirshfield's work, the more I can see that she is trying to find ways to say yes to this process, yes to what she calls "that sumptuous disturbance". She is trying to say yes to whatever comes, the pain and the ecstasy, yes to what comes and goes, including everything we will ever love or hate, and finally, yes to ourselves.

Hirshfield sees our lives like paths. Many things come down those paths—thieves, lovers, enemies and friends- yet the path never chooses; the path is inherently open. The path says yes to all. This poem has been a gift. It asks me time and again to be on such a path and learn to welcome it all, observe without judgment, and allow things to happen without attachment. The subject of this poem is the present moment, and our present and precious consciousness towards living and participating in a life filled with so many 'sumptuous disturbances'. The poem, French Horn, makes sense only against the backdrop of these larger themes in her work. Like the book, this poem isn't particularly difficult, but it is profound and deep and significant in the scope of what it asks of us.

We have a poem here about plum trees and French horns. The fruit of the plum tree, the tiny plum tree pebbles, ripen and fall almost immediately, a sign of transience. They represent time vanishing from under our feet. Whatever perfection or fullness it gives you also vanishes. The plums sour or are taken by animals. Hirshfield calls these moments of vanishing "sumptuous disturbances," and reminds me that we all spend our lifetime struggling into the right relationship with these disturbances. The first key line of the poem comes soon when she asks us: "what in this unpleated world isn't someone's seduction?" This line is heavy and exacting. It asks me—what is it that I feast on? I recognize that I am drawn fully and impossibly to one thing or another, seduced by something in this world, something that is also inevitably tethered to time because of its relation to mortality. Our seductions ripen for a short window of time, then fall, and vanish. Harvest is short and sweet.

She then speaks of the boy playing the French horn and the girl playing the viola. Their beautiful music has just ripened for the audience, the harvest of their training and labor now filling the hearts of the onlookers with appreciation. But Hirshfield says, "let others clap". Let others praise and be drawn in by the seduction of this beautiful music. The boy and the girl, they hear nothing. Why? Why don't they hear

anything? This is a massive question. The poem reminds me, like she is perhaps reminding these two young musicians, that the joys in life are brief and tricky and that it may be foolish to become attached to the applause; I know all too well that attachment is the beginning of suffering, and so I can see how this poem attempts to capture me and hold me right in that precious moment, that nexus, before attachment takes hold. The whole of the poem is about intercepting us right in that space between the openness of gratitude and the attachments of seduction.

There are huge lessons here for those of us who give ourselves daily in our teaching. Lessons about our relationship to the fruits of our labors and love. We indeed pour ourselves into our work, but we give ourselves not for the other's applause or validation. Still, rather we offer up what we do as part of the natural arc of living and participating and letting go. This idea echoes back to the line from Seamus Heaney's Postscript, where he reminds us to become the kind of hurry through which known and strange things pass. At its core, this poem is about permeability. This idea becomes more apparent when you read the poem alongside the other poems in *Come Thief*. For myself, it is not simply about the inevitability of the vanishing perfection of the plum tree, but also about my willingness to let that happen, about my willingness to become permeable to everything and everyone and my own life as well. The book's last poem is called 'The Supple Deer' and it vividly brings that point home. The opening lines read:

The quiet opening

between fence strands

perhaps eighteen inches.

Antlers to hind hooves,

four feet off the ground,

the deer poured through.

No tuft of the coarse white belly hair left behind.

I don't know how a stag turns

into a stream, an arc of water.

(excerpt from 'The Supple Deer' by Jane Hirshfield, 2013)

In these opening lines, she describes a deer who stands four and a half feet tall who can effortlessly leap through the opening between 18-inch fence posts with no tuft of belly hair left behind. A clean and perfect, seemingly impossible passing through, like a stream or arc of water. She then writes:

I have never felt such accurate envy.

Not of the deer:

To be that porous, to have such largeness pass through me.

(excerpt from 'The Supple Deer' by Jane Hirshfield, 2013)

She feels envy, but it is not envy of the deer, but of the fence allowing such largeness to pass through. It is tempting to be envious of the deer, a creature that can shape-shift and strategically maneuver to accommodate its surroundings. After all, we are endlessly instructed by our culture to be dexterous and able to shift who we are to get by in different situations. Yet, for Hirshfield, it is the fence that draws her envy. It is the fence that allows such largeness to pass through. The fence does not grab or hold on or snag, but rather allows equal equanimity, comings, and goings. Again, this echoes the image of the hurry in Seamus Heaney's poem, how we long to be that clearing space where beauty can pass through on an open palm, where love can transpire without the weight of our attachment.

Many things are instructive here for teachers about becoming the right kinds of human beings when it comes to attachment. I have a colleague whose students fall in love with her regularly. And she does so well at reminding them to fall in love with the text, with the material and ideas and process that they are both giving themselves to, of holding light together, and of letting themselves delight in becoming that hurry through which known and strange things pass. In perhaps one of my favorite poems, called "Loves", by Stephen Dunn (2002, p. 106), he says, "when students fall in love with me, I want to tell them that the dream won't last, that there are more pleasures in the text". It is true. There are more pleasures in that which binds us, in how we hold loosely, and in how we celebrate that generative porousness

that finally allows us to make peace with the thief that is time.

Conclusion

This article is essentially an invitation. It is an invitation to integrate poetry into our pedagogy as part of a radical contemplative orientation to more soulful forms of teaching. In the opening section, I discussed two ways of seeing poetry that are helpful in this re-orientation. The first is to see poetry as a way of overhearing or awakening a relationship with truth that lies at the periphery of your conscious awareness. The second perspective sees poetry as a form of language that opens and frees you, whether you want it to or not. It treats poetry as an intimate form of apprehension. These two views run parallel to and inform one another.

In the second section, I suggest how we might grow if we bring these perspectives to poetry to our teaching, and I used three poems to illustrate several ways the scope of our teaching and humanity might expand. I drew from the work of Seamus Heaney to argue that the first and most fundamental step is to place ourselves at the forward frontier space of our own growth as a way of getting beyond ourselves and into an elemental space of collision with the unknown, and of the necessity of becoming a 'hurry'. I used Naomi Shihab Nye's work to discuss a deeper view of kindness, where kindness is the instinctive and empathic identification with the vulnerabilities of being human. Kindness is more than being nice. It involves radical whole-heartedness towards those with whom we share space and break bread. Kindness requires a reckoning with loss. And finally, I drew upon Jane Hirshfield's work to highlight the necessity of preserving a clearing space of non-attachment to the seductions of our profession. Her poem asks us to pour ourselves into our work, not as a means of filling ourselves with externalities, but as part of the natural arc of letting go and maintaining permeability. With each of these forays into poetry, I have tried to spark to life what is possible when we teach from those liminal spaces of courageous encounter, with deep kindness, and the delicate awareness of the precious fragility of time.

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Acknowledgment

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