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Breaking through the Abstract

by Peter E. Murphy

In my earliest days as a poet, I piloted earth-moving equipment around construction sites in New York City. Later, while trekking through Europe, I operated a jackhammer in Wales, working twelve hour shifts, seven days a week. Despite the bone-rattling difficulty of scraping away the earth's crust and driving steel bits into its concrete bones, I learned, through writing poetry, a far more difficult excavation: breaking through the abstract to uncover language that names the unnamable and describes the indescribable.

When I teach poetry writing, I am not satisfied when my students learn to express their thoughts and feelings. I want them to cleave open the underside of what appears first, the easy and obvious. I want them to discover at the nub of consciousness, the inner world where imagination, intelligence, language, and metaphor converge. I want them to dig out poems that have never before been uttered. While some of my students do not scratch beneath the skin of simple declaration, many do uncover and develop their singular voices to make interesting, unique poems. Here are some way I help them to discover their uncommon voices and make poems that are compelling and beautiful.

1. Read Contemporary Poetry. Most people do not realize the breadth of poetry because they do not read much of it. When they think of poetry at all, they think only of love or nature poems. Frankly, what the world needs now is not another nature poem unless it can startle its reader into a new understanding of love's resplendent and complicated landscapes. And the best nature poems use natural images to describe the complicated wilderness of human nature. In order to write well, one must read well and often. Students resist this saying that they do not want to be influenced by what they read.

That, I tell them, is the point, to be influenced so much that they write poems that are completely original. I have made my classroom poetry-friendly by building a small library of poetry books and anthologies. I urge my students to borrow these books and read them

2. Take Permission. The imagination cannot function when constrained. Modern poets have written on every subject from prayer to vomit. Students will learn from their reading that no subject is too proper or too foul for poetry. Consider these poems: "Homage to my Hips" by Lucille Clifton, "Underwear" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Ode to My Socks" by Pablo Neruda, "The Fury of Cocks" by Anne Sexton, Beginning poets must explore the mundane as well as the awesome, all the famine and bounty of human misery and joy. they must give themselves permission to tell the truth about the tangible stuff of their lives, and when they do, their poems will take on the distinctive quality of a mature writer.

I frequently give myself writing tasks to spur my own muse. I assign myself to write about

what I most love or most fear at any given moment, or what I most fear writing about. Other times, I will praise the absurd experiences of the commonplace. I also give myself permission to write badly, because if I don't, I will never write well. Where are the boundaries? They are not in the subject matter or attitude of the poem; they are in the discipline and restraint of metaphor and in making the music of the poem.

3. Avoid the Abstract. Poetry uses the language of the physical world to reveal the mysteries of the intangible one. Like photo sensitive paper, a poem becomes vibrant when illuminated by the radiance of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. Beginning poets tend to use abstract nouns to describe emotions, which are abstract by definition. This, like a double negative, cancels itself out making zero impact on the reader. The tools of poetry are words, and there are almost a million of them in English. Encourage your students to use concrete nouns and strong action verbs to stimulate the senses. Action verbs hammer sound and sense into the reader's psyche; linking verbs barely give it a back rub.

4. Learn to Revise. When you instruct your students to revise, you are teaching them the most important part of writing. Revision does not mean correcting spelling errors and fixing subject-verb agreement and tense problems. In its most literal sense, revision means to "re-see" the poem and its inspiring moment. The difference between a first draft and a deeply revised one is the difference between a snapshot and a motion picture.
One technique for revision is to compress. I tell my students, "Make believe that you must pay your reader a dollar a word to read your prose. You want to save money so you will try say as much as possible in as few words as necessary." Once they buy this, I say, "Make believe that you must pay your reader five dollars a word to read your poetry. Coleridge said that poetry is the best words in the best order. You want to squeeze your poems so tightly that only the 'best words' remain."
True revision causes a poem to become multi-faceted. Beginning writers oppose this, arguing that they were inspired to write it that way. I respond with Robert Lowell's comment that "Revision is inspiration!" I have my students staple each new draft on top of the previous one building a poem sheet by sheet, draft by draft, until, as Valery wrote, the poem "is never finished, only abandoned," Because it frequently takes a year or longer for the poem to mature, poets need to develop patience.

5. Write Poetry Yourself. Can you imagine an art teacher who has never painted a canvas, a drama coach who has never performed on stage, or a violin instructor who has never held a bow?

Of course not! Just as therapists must undergo the process of therapy to serve their patients, so must teachers read and write poetry to elicit original and meaningful poems from their students.

Just as teachers who practice an art produce students who are excellent artists, teachers who write poetry produce students who are excellent poets.
When the compression of speech ignites into metaphor, it startles first the writer, then the reader into a rare alertness that only poetry can enkindle. it broadens narrow attitudes,

loosens frozen emotions, and gives grip to experiences that fall off too easily as one bounces around this residence on Earth. But first, we must break through the abstract. Then we can use the durable terms of the physical world to turn the hard soil of the human spirit.

Ars Poetica
by Peter E. Murphy

The thin wires that brace the rods in place
are not that tough, soft really, when you twist
them around the bars of ribbed steel. And they quiver
when you pour over them the slurp of Redi-mix.
In Cardiff, I burned a winter plugging holes
through concrete. My jackhammer bit heated,
then sliced the steel, knocked loose gray chunks, snapped
the slender wires like bones in a finger.
In buildings now, I sense the concealed framework
as hard centuries of aggregate unbind
slowly within molecules of cement.
All this making and unmaking implodes
quietly, spewing light and heat as it breaks
back through the abstract.

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