

Poetry in the Academy: A Language of Possibility

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Abstract

As a poet, researcher, and teacher in the academy, I have pursued my vocation with an abiding commitment to both creative and critical discourse. I inquire into my autobiographical experiences as a poet, researcher, and teacher in the institutional contexts of a Faculty of Education by creating a performance of poetry that seeks to honour imagination, heart, and intellect. My goal is to offer a hopeful testimony to the value of giving curricular and pedagogical attention to the significance of critical creativity in education. In the performance I weave poetry, personal recollections, reflections, and quotations from writers who have inspired me. In this article, I present a performative text that is both poetic and full of poetry. I invite readers to receive this article like a long poem, full of resonances and gaps, fragments and sparks. I engage in testimony, in witness, in presenting prose and poetry that are enthused with an educator's delight in the creative playfulness of words.

Keywords: poetry, creativity, language, words, curriculum, pedagogy, writing

Résumé

En tant que poète, chercheur et enseignant au collège, j'ai poursuivi ma vocation avec un engagement indéfectible tant au discours créatif qu'au discours critique. Je puise dans mes expériences autobiographiques en tant que poète, chercheur et enseignant dans les contextes institutionnels d'une Faculté d'éducation en créant une performance de poésie visant à honorer l'imagination, le cœur et l'intellect. Mon but est de livrer un témoignage encourageant sur l'intérêt de porter une attention curriculaire et pédagogique à la portée de la créativité critique en éducation. Durant la performance, j'entrelace poésie, souvenirs personnels, réflexions et citations d'écrivains m'ayant inspiré. Dans cet article, je présente un texte performatif à la fois poétique et rempli de poésie. J'invite les lecteurs à accueillir cet article comme un long poème, débordant de résonances et d'écarts, de fragments et d'étincelles. Je m'implique dans un témoignage, en tant que témoin, en présentant la prose et la poésie enthousiasmées par le plaisir que procure l'espièglerie créative des jeux de mots à l'éducateur.

Mots-clés : poésie, créativité, langage, mots, curriculum, pédagogie, écriture

Art...is only a way of living.

–Rilke (1954)

Poets write in the line of prophecy, and their work teaches us how to live.

–Parini (2008)

Creativity is on the side of health—it isn't the thing that drives us mad; it is the capacity in us that tries to save us from madness.

–Winterson (2011)

Chance is fundamental to the workings of the creative mind.

–Hirshfield (1997)

A while ago, I picked up my granddaughter Madeleine at school. She is in Grade 3. She had recently constructed a diorama, and she was carrying it home (or I was carrying it—that's what Papas are for). Madeleine asked, "Papa, when you were in school, did you make dioramas?" I responded, "No, sweetheart, I didn't make dioramas."

With a look of sad concern, she then asked, "Papa, did you make art?"

"No, sweetheart."

"What about music?"

"No, no music."

As we continued walking to the car, Madeleine asked with a hint of incredulity, "Papa, what did you do in school?" That is a good question, a question I need to ask frequently.

Yesterday, I was watching an episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants* on Netflix with my granddaughter Mirabelle, who is five. After a while, she lay down on the living room floor, and noted that the ceiling was shaped like a person. She invited me to lie on the floor with her. Then, she pointed out the image of a person, with a head and arms. Mirabelle sees designs and patterns and connections with a child's keen imagination. She reminds me to attend creatively to all creation.

I would love to discuss creativity like Robert Kelly (2016; Kelly & Leggo, 2008), who is a visual artist and professor at the University of Calgary. He is internationally well-known for his research and writing in creative design. Or, I would love to discuss creativity like Jane Piirto (2014), whose numerous books investigate the psychology and

practice of creativity. Or, I would love to discuss creativity like David Bohm (2004), the esteemed physicist, who understands the connections between science and creativity.

I would love to discuss creativity from the perspectives of Jungian psychoanalysis, or cutting-edge neuroscience, or Buddhist philosophy, or inventive algorithms and coding, but those are not my areas of expertise. Instead, I am a poet, and I have been a poet a long time. I can discuss creativity from the perspective of a practising poet who investigates pragmatics (the study of language use) in order to ponder possibilities for making. The word “poem” is etymologically related to *poiesis*, to make. All my writing is a kind of making; much of my writing is about the processes of making. So, this article is about creativity from the perspective of a poet who seeks to teach and live poetically and creatively.

As a poet, researcher, and teacher in the academy, I have pursued my vocation with an abiding commitment to both creative discourse and critical discourse. Richard Miller (2005) promotes “institutional autobiography,” and while he readily acknowledges that “institutional autobiography” is an oxymoronic phrase, he is eager to “highlight a brand of intellectual inquiry that is centrally concerned” (p. 26) with how our personal lives are integrally connected to “the lives of the institutions that surround us all” (p. 25). So, in this article, I inquire into my autobiographical experiences as a poet, researcher, and teacher in the institutional contexts of a Faculty of Education by creating a performance of poetry that seeks to honour imagination, heart, and intellect. My goal is to offer a hopeful testimony to the value of giving curricular and pedagogical attention to the significance of critical creativity in education. In the performance, I weave poetry, personal anecdotes and recollections, quotations from writers who have informed and inspired me, and reflections about (my) institutional autobiography.

Like bell hooks (2003), I “rely on the sharing of personal narratives to remind folks that we are all struggling to raise our consciousness and figure out the best action to take” (p. 107). I have written extensively about narrative inquiry and life writing (Cohen et al., 2012; Leggo, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2010; Sameshima & Leggo, 2010; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009; Meyer & Leggo, 2009; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Kelly & Leggo, 2008). In the kind of lifewriting I pursue and promote, I focus on the discourse of narrative inquiry by attending to how we tell stories, and how the decisions we make about telling stories shape and inform our understanding of lived and living experiences.

So, this article is not constructed like a traditional academic article with an extensive literature review, a statement of a research question, a clear explanation of the research methodology, and a linear and logical structure. Rather, this article meanders and wanders, ruminates and cogitates, interrogates and invites. In this article I seek to honour the *re* in research by searching again and again. I frequently write in poetry because poetry is a way of knowing and attending, being and becoming. Poetry can transform our hearts, imaginations, intellects, and conversations. I promote a curriculum of poetry and poetic inquiry as efficacious ways for learning to live poetically in the world. In this article, I present a performative text that is both poetic and full of poetry. I invite readers to receive this article like a long poem, full of resonances and gaps, fragments and sparks. I engage in testimony, in witness, in presenting prose and poetry that are enthused by an educator's delight in the creative playfulness of words. I agree with hooks (2003) that "the struggle to transform education" is a struggle "to find a new language of spirit" (p. 183). For me, that new language is expressed in poetry. I am reminded of James Hillman's (1999) wisdom that "the aesthetic imagination is the primary mode of knowing the cosmos, and aesthetic language the most fitting way to formulate the world" (p. 184). I am always seeking to sing in language that is aesthetic.

In *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, William Deresiewicz (2014) presents a trenchant critique of American university education. He writes:

The system manufactures students who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they're doing but with no idea why they're doing it. (p. 3)

I thoroughly enjoyed this polemical book that sings with a journalist's prophetic energy. Deresiewicz was a professor of English at Yale University for a decade before he resigned in order to devote himself to writing. We need books like *Excellent Sheep* to shake us up. Though the book is staunchly American, I see many connections to Canadian higher education. Academics need to be more critical of themselves. Deresiewicz notes that "the purpose of life becomes the accumulation of gold stars" (p. 16) that leads to "the constant sense of competition" (p. 16) and everybody doing "the same thing because everybody's doing the same thing" (p. 21). As a consequence, Deresiewicz wisely observes that "the

result is a violent aversion to risk” (p. 22). Deresiewicz promotes thinking “outside of disciplinary boundaries” (p. 169), thinking carefully about ourselves as we each invent our lives in creative efforts “to remain fully human” (p. 79). He promotes vigorous questioning about the aims of education:

Anyone who tells you that the sole purpose of education is the acquisition of negotiable skills is attempting to reduce you to a productive employee at work, a gullible consumer in the market, and a docile subject of the state. (p. 79)

I have written extensively about the aims of education, and especially about how poetry can inform creative and critical ways of framing and promoting those aims. As a poet and educator, I think the primary aim of education is to investigate, practise, and promote love. I agree with hooks (2003) who writes:

Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created. Teachers need not fear that practicing love in the classroom will lead to favoritism. Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter. (p. 137)

I am committed to understanding “the heart of the matter” as learning to live with love, even in the midst of intransigent injustice, fear, and hatred. I have written extensively about the need for love in education (Sameshima & Leggo, 2013; Leggo, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2009, 2011a, 2011b), and much more needs to be written. I live with Paulo Freire’s (1997) conviction that “a new reading of my world requires a new language—that of possibility, open to hope” (p. 77). Poetry offers a new language of possibility and hope. Still, I don’t want to write a motivational speech or a self-help manual. I don’t want to sound like the dozens of loud people on TV who pitch promises for fancy grills, weight loss, successful investments, makeovers, and kitchen gadgets. The new language we need in education is the language of love, which is always committed to possibility and hope. This kind of language is always radical.

It is demanding, even dangerous, to speak truth. The word *danger* has its etymological roots in Old French and signifies *the absolute power of an overlord*. Much courage is required to speak truth. In my poetry, I am eager to speak with prophetic imagination; I am convinced that poets need to speak both creatively and critically. According to

Jean-Luc Nancy (2006), “poetry is at ease with the difficult, the absolutely difficult” (p. 4). Poetry is a mode of discourse that is never formulaic or safe. I have, for a long time, been committed to exploring the intersections between creative practice and critical pedagogy, and creative pedagogy and critical practice. Since the 1980s, I have participated in an unfolding modern aesthetic that Gregory Ulmer (1985) claims entails “the collapse of the distinction (opposition or hierarchy) between critical-theoretical reflection and creative practice” (p. 225). Nancy (2006) understands that “poetry refuses to be confined to a single mode of discourse” (p. 5), and this is why I promote poetry. In poetry I am never formulaic or conventional. I do not attempt to tell a story in poetry, or argue a thesis, or seek to persuade. I might do all those things, but those commitments or desires are not the reason for writing and sharing poetry. In poetry, I investigate possibilities for writing in diverse ways. I regard poetry as a capacious genre of writing that reminds me constantly that language is always evolving. Mary Oliver (1994) writes:

Language is rich, and malleable. It is a living, vibrant material, and every part of a poem works in conjunction with every other part—the content, the pace, the diction, the rhythm, the tone—as well as the very sliding, floating, thumping, rapping sounds of it. (p. 34)

In much of my poetry I investigate how poetry works. Like Oliver understands, “every poem contains within itself an essential difference from ordinary language, no matter how similar to conversational language it may seem at first to be. Call it formality, compression, originality, imagination” (p. 16). In my poetry, I am always seeking to understand the discursive dynamics that animate poetry, poetic thinking, and poetic purpose.

We cannot grasp the world nor put it into an order. We can only experience it.

—Domanski (2002)

How Does Poetry Work?

a
with a smile
like an obit photo
 light from a star
we can almost remember

b
is theory ethereal?

c
Mrs. White's pink skin,
one button missing

d
how much
of myself
do I want
to commit
to print?

e
I heard the cherry blossoms
fall

f
what does it mean to say,
I told it like it was?

g
a red triangle
full of warning
I wouldn't couldn't heed

h
am I living with drama
or trauma?

i
I am
 who
I am

j
what is a generic self?

k
on the edge of the forest
on a bluff over the ocean
 a lone gannet
sweeps the sunlight
like a rapier thrust or
vampiric bite of the sky

l
who am I? where am I?

m
the time has come
to write
The End

n
how does poetry work?

o
in January my dry skin
is like the paint
on a dory longing
for spring

p
at 61
I still felt
like I felt
at 16

q
there was nothing
 there

r
I am
 am I?

s
just be
 or
be just?

t
I phone
 you
with
 my
iPhone

u
a poem is thunder
calling out reminders

v
I work words
words work me

w
where do poems come from?

x
you can line up the words
in a poem
but they won't stay in place

y
silence sings
with echoes
echolocation, elocution
past present future

z
the air is
dust and words

In her memoir *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, the poet Diane di Prima (2001) remembers what it was like to be a poet in the 1940s and 1950s: “Choosing to be an artist: writer, dancer, painter, musician, actor, photographer, sculptor...was choosing as completely as possible for those times the life of the renunciant” (p. 101). And she understood her calling—“the holiest life that was offered in our world: artist” (p. 103).

Then, “seeing the liquid structure language is, like liquid crystal, the depth and possibility of that” (p. 77), di Prima devoted herself to “the business of making poems” (p. 202), and began to hear “the first of many voices that would speak” through her, now

that she “no longer sought to control the poem” (p. 222). Di Prima understands clearly that “what you don’t control is the spirit, the voices, coming through you” (p. 224). This is what I seek in my poetry and in my living as a poet in the academy. I never seek to domesticate poetry, to close it down, to explain it. I want to remain open to poetry, open to the possibilities. So, much of my poetry is shaped out of flotsam that I gather like a blue jay, collecting scraps to build a nest.

Learning to trust the possible and to accept what arises, to welcome surprise and the ways of the Trickster, not to censor too quickly—all are lessons necessary for a writer.
—Hirshfield (1997)

Snippets

*

I need to hold fast
to the past
a circle without
beginning
or ending

*

I am cognizant
I am a cog only

*

even while
I look for
interpretation
I do not trust
the interpreters

*

seasons season
everything with
the savoury taste

of familiar spices
from the backyard

*

some days are simply
stranger than others

*

I grow old
and moments linger
like plastic

*

what is the difference
between hope and home?

*

Nan said, she don't know nothing anymore

what do any of us know?

*

we dream
with our hearts
we hear
rhythms of hope

*

poetry is
deciding what to leave
out

Of course, poetry is also deciding what to put in. According to Jonathan Culler (1997), one of the four tropes, or “basic rhetorical structures by which we make sense of experience” (p. 73), is irony. Culler explains that “irony juxtaposes appearance and reality; what happens is the opposite of what is expected” (p. 73). Like Ted Aoki (2005), I am “drawn into the fold of a discursive imaginary that can entertain ‘both this and that,’ ‘neither this nor that’—a space of paradox, ambiguity and ambivalence” (p. 317). When irony is invited into our discursive practices, we find “the tensioned space of both ‘and/not-and’ is a space of conjoining and disrupting, indeed a generative space of possibilities, a space wherein in tensioned ambiguity newness emerges” (p. 318). And out of these

in between spaces, we hear “the voice of play in the midst of things—a playful singing in the midst of life” (p. 282). Poetry thrives on irony, on juxtaposition, incongruity, and discordance. Gregory Orr (2002) understands that irony is “that mode in which the head mocks the heart and bares its intellectual teeth at what it sees as a hostile world” (p. 128). Poetry teaches us to trust and distrust at the same time in a Trickster-inspired hermeneutic that takes nothing for granted, that revels in an agnostic’s devotion to questions and new possibilities.

Critical acceptance of my inconclusion necessarily immerses me in permanent search.
What makes me hopeful is not so much the certainty of the find, but my movement in
search. It is not possible to search without hope, not even in solitude.
–Freire (1997)

Wondering Aloud

I wonder why I wonder
so little any more
I wonder why I wander
so little any more

am I resigned
to an assignation
I never designed?

perhaps I have
settled for
the gold standard
a measured yard
like a grave plot
deep narrow long
enough to hold
the corpse that cannot
sing out in
new stories

do not stand
 on the shoulders of giants
stand on the earth where they stood
 know they are still present
even if there is no soul, no spirit,
no afterlife, no eternity, let's not forget how
the light we admire in the star-crossed night
is likely the light of a dead star disaster
 finally reached us
the wisdom of a poet long gone
inspiration still breathes in us
 stop thinking
 in linear ways only

let our scholarship sing in new voices
call out with enthusiasm
for the possibilities
of language literacy knowing

when will we cease whining
when will we start communing
even planing on the slipstream
of our words and rhythms

too much moaning and mourning on a Monday morning

I do not want apologetics, defense, argument, persuasion
 I want to declare and declaim
 I want to exclaim and proclaim

poetry is unapologetic, prophetic, peripatetic, passionate
full of the heart's wide experience of emotion
like a spectrum holds all the possibilities
 even impossibility and impassibility

I am no lawyer politician realtor
philosopher ad man pundit
 I am a poet

we have little chance
of explaining ourselves
to most of our colleagues

being a poet in the academy
is like dancing bare buff

exposed to the world
composed in words
strange and strained

let's celebrate our wonderfully creative work
no apologies! what do we fear?
pursue our desires
let the fears live with(in) us
we live too much out of fear, in fear

I do not want to be a citer
I want to be an ex-citer
an in-citer, an incinerator

I want to be incense, incensed,
dispensed, indispensable

I don't want to be a citation
I don't want a citation (a ticket).
I want to be an agitation
an agitator in a wringer washer

I do not want to pretend that I know what a poem means, especially not a poem I have written. I want to move past meaning in a kind of meandering that might still teach me where I am going, or might be going, or might have been going, or might never have been going. My fascination is always with the shapes in the ceiling that can only be seen with a child's eyes while lying on the floor.

A while ago I was invited by Sarah Truman, a doctoral student at the University of Toronto, to participate in her innovative research in the arts. She invited a network of artists and poets and dancers to engage in creative activities as well as creative interactions with one another. Sarah's research reminds me of the kind of innovative, edgy, contemporary research that we need in the arts and education. As a part of my engagement with Sarah's research, I wrote a narrative poem about the joys and challenges of creative research that surprises and startles, deconstructs and defamiliarizes.

I advance error by error, with erring steps, by the force of error. It's suffering, but
it's joy.

–Cixous (1998)

Eternal Return

(for Sarah, April, Logan, & Celeste)

Sarah invited me
to entangle
with a few scraps
of words
by Nietzsche.

I wrote a poem
because a poem
always seems
an apt way to respond
to any text.

Sarah then asked
April and me to entangle,
and April invited me
to a grassy meadow behind
the Museum of Anthropology.

I invited Logan
to join me as a witness
because Logan lives
with a wild spirit
and I want to.

Like a poem's long breath
I knew Logan could hold
whatever happened
in the meadow
behind the Museum.

April invited Celeste
as her witness, and
we met in the meadow
on a September day
with the promise of rain.

I have known Celeste
a long time, and I love her
for being a celestial spirit
who celebrates the erotics
of the every day.

After introductions,
April invited us all
to walk in the meadow,
attend to breath,
and return with a gift.

I found a stone,
like Mirabelle often stops
amidst countless stones,
and selects one
she names special.

Rain began and stopped,
and April invited me
to move in the meadow,
to return, to know again
the womb.

As we moved
with our eyes closed,
Logan and Celeste
made sure we didn't
fall off the edge.

While there is no record
of what happened
next except in memory
I am still filled with
angst anger hurt horror.

I twirled lurched hunched squat
in the meadow
and a wound opened
up in my memory
like a wide hole that won't heal.

My body remembered
what I didn't know it knew
(family stories secrets scandals)

but when I opened my eyes
the meadow was the same.

Logan, Celeste, and April were the same,
and I was the same, too, except
I had died in the meadow
behind the Museum
with its stored memories.

Each day is now
a new birth where
the past is the same
but distinctly different, seen
through holes of difference.

I have lived the privileged life of a professor for more than 27 years. I cannot imagine a more privileged life outside royalty or living off the royalties of a pop song. As a young man, I wanted to be a professor, and it has been the kind of life vocation I hoped for. I am a happy professor, but that does not stop me from critically examining the ways that professors often fail to enjoy their privileges.

The problem with our leaders now is not just bureaucratic cowardice; it is also a lack of ability to think outside of disciplinary boundaries.
–Deresiewicz (2014)

Scholars at a Conference

chins in palms
propping up heads
too big for necks
floppy with
atrophied muscles

heads bent down
to read smartphones

hidden under desks
smile when others smile

bums squat and wide
sweating
in polyurethane chairs,

my belly stuffed
like a pork sausage
hands held like waiting
for the bell's dismissal

four brave colleagues
walk out, enough
distracted life, a life
that holds no attention

even after 25 years
I am still a stranger
trying to fit in where
I don't can't won't

Why do I have such difficulty with words like ethical, obligation, and control? Our hang-ups are the part of our stories that we seldom tell, seldom admit; they are the hindrances and handicaps that prevent our success. Or, at least, that is the way we have constructed the story. What if the hang-ups are our humanity, at least as integral to who we are and are becoming, as any gifts and talents we might celebrate with the world? Perhaps the classroom needs to be a place where human beings hang out with their hang-ups. Good education research, practice, and theorizing will always discomfort us with insights that charge us (in legal, electrical, business, and military senses). That is a significant reason why I invite my students to pursue creative projects. I tell my students that we are living stories, always, all ways, caught up in swirling stories. That is why I write essays like this essay, full of poetry and ruminations and citations. I hope to stir pedagogic imaginations and convictions.

Poetry must be taken into account in everything we do and everything we think we must do, in our arguments, our thinking, our prose, and our “art” in general.

–Nancy (2006)

Artful Dodger

there are no wholes
without holes

quest question
erotic neurotic
hoping hopping
rootless ruthless
ethics aesthetics
creativity criticality
aesthetics anaesthetics
message messiness
joke juxtaposition
mystery mastery
poetics politics
fiscal physical
prism prison

living with flux
listening to ducks
ducking the flux
laughing with ducks

dance a jig even if
you don't know how
dance in the middle
of the flowing furling
flashing flaring flux

waves

clash
dash
gash
lash
mash

rash
smash
wash

on shore
in playful fury

wherever the waves
began, the shore
is a period
at least a semicolon
or comma

in the inexorable eternal

our story ripples
with waves like swells
and spells of sound light
water heart attuned
to the moon's lunacy

if you are going to be witty
sarcastic ironic satirical
humorous funny comical
be prepared (with a Boy Scout ethic)
to be misunderstood misinterpreted
misrepresented (and not missed at all)

are we all outside the circle?
do any of us feel like we belong?

enduring loss
enduring love

why do scholars mumble and rumble
and stumble?

why do scholars sit in basement rooms
and torture one another?

bog cog dog fog gog
hog jog log mog nog
pog quog rog sog tog
vog wog xog yog zog?

why do scholars hide behind pulpits
and computer screens and impotent PowerPoint?

why do scholars amble in their preambles?

why do scholars brag drag flag lag
nag rag sag tag wag zig-zag?

always multi-tasking
running hither and thither

surreptitiously checking and texting
on iPhones and smart phones
the only phones scholars want

instead of compressed depressed
distressed repressed suppressed
professors we need vibrant
vivid vivacious voluptuous
visionary vital scholars?

instead of dogmatic orthodox homogenized
scholarship I want to go to the wild places
the places where wild things dwell
where wild books linger where precarious
poise is the poet's (sur)prize

where is everywhere?
where is anywhere?
where is where?
where is ever?
where is here?
where is there?

there are no wholes
without holes

In his wonderfully wise book *Writing at the End of the World*, Richard E. Miller (2005) asks, "Why go on teaching when everything seems to be falling apart? Why read when the world is overrun with books? Why write when there's no hope of ever gaining an audience?" (p. x). Miller hopes to invite conversations about the value of writing and reading and literacy in the 21st century. He notes that "schools currently provide extensive training in the fact that worlds end; what is missing is training in how to bring better

worlds into being” (p. x). Miller promotes a pragmatic pedagogy that provides “students with the opportunity to speak, read, and write in a wider range of discursive contexts” than is typically available in the culture of schooling (pp. 140–141).

I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for
the marvellous as well as for the murderous.

–Heaney (1995)

What Is a Poem Good For?

Can a poem prevent
avalanches, blizzards, catastrophes, cyclones, earthquakes, epidemics, floods, hurricanes,
landslides, storms, tornadoes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, wildfires

*Perhaps not,
but a poem might help lead the way.*

Can a poem stop
Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Mormons, Buddhists from killing the Other?

Can a poem stop
bullies, thieves, pirates, killers, and war lords?

Can a poem stop
drug wars, gang wars, corporate wars, feudal wars, religious wars?

*Perhaps not,
but a poem might help lead the way.*

Can a poem find
a cure for cancer?

Can a poem stop
slavery, sexual abuse, assassination, kidnapping, mass murder?

Can a poem address
climate change, food crises, fiscal crises, the failure of global governance?

Can a poem meet
the needs of more than 100 million people in the world who live each day with no or limited access to food, water, shelter, health, education?

*Perhaps not,
but a poem might help lead the way.*

Can a poem eradicate
ageism, ableism,
anti-Semitism, classism,
consumerism, corporatism,
dogmatism, egotism,
fundamentalism, heterosexism,
homophobia, hucksterism,
imperialism, inequality,
intolerance, Islamophobia,
materialism, militarism,
racism, religism,
sexism, terrorism
violence, xenophobia

all the ideological markers
of privilege and fear
and stupidity and meanness
that render the world
toxic and noxious?

*Perhaps not,
but a poem might help lead the way.*

What is a poem good for?

A poem reminds us
language is at the heart of everything we do.

A poem reminds us
the alphabet is the most powerful invention we know.

A poem reminds us
we know the world, we compose the world, we change the world with words.

A poem reminds us
spelling and grammar are all about magic and wonder.

A poem reminds us
we are called to call out in creative and critical voices.

A poem reminds us
new stories and new truths are possible.

A poem reminds us
about the power of the heart and passion.

A poem reminds us
to enter into conversation and consternation.

A poem reminds us
to explore the possibilities of rhetoric.

A poem reminds us
to enter mystery, to wander for wonder, to seek the way into the labyrinth, to embrace
paradox and ambiguity.

A poem reminds us
we are all in process, all the time.

A poem reminds us
the etymology of enthusiasm is “possessed by a god.”

A poem reminds us
to attend to the momentousness of the moment, this moment.

A poem reminds us
language is etymologically connected to *lingua*, the tongue.

A poem reminds us
the rhythms of language are in our bodies with our blood.

A poem reminds us
we are all engaged in translation, all lost in translation, all being carried here and there.

A poem reminds us
the world is full of languages and dictionaries calling us to learn ways of knowing and
composing and imagining and communicating.

A poem reminds us,
we hold the literal and literate power for

adventurous, bodacious,
celebratory, definitive,
efficacious, fecund,
gorgeous, humongous,
imaginative, juicy,
kinetic, lyrical,
magnanimous, novel,
orgasmic, prophetic,
queer, rambunctious,
sumptuous, Tiggerific,
ubiquitous, voluptuous,
wanton, xylophonic,
yodelling, zippy

encounters of the alphabetic & grammatical &
syntactical & denotative & connotative & poetic kind

What is a poem good for?

In all my reading and writing and lingering with language, I seek not only a love of literacy, or a literate love of the word, but a lively love of the world. So, like Lorri Neilsen Glenn (2011), I continue to enter “a long, never-ending conversation” in my poetry, and in ways I understand only a little, poetry fills me with hope for each day’s journey. May we continue our searching for new possibilities for living well together, in the academy and in the world beyond the academy.

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