

# Poetry as a Contemplative Pedagogical Practice

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*This reflection argues for the integration of poetry into our teaching as part of a contemplative orientation to pedagogy. I discuss poetry both as a way of awakening a relationship with truth that lies at the periphery of our awareness and as a form of language that disarms us and opens the way to a robust form of vulnerability and courage. The poem "Living Together" by David Whyte is explored to illustrate the ways poetry invites us to think about teaching as a unique type of apprenticeship, as a call to maturity and love, and as a unique form of ripening. What unites these themes is a clear, committed, and whole-hearted call to engagement and participation with our pedagogy.*

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Good poetry and good teaching are both forms of engagement that invite us to move elegantly between noticing the peculiarities of a given topic or moment in time and the recognition of broader universal truths. Both throw as much light on the subtle nuances of something immanent and intimate as they do on broader transcendent themes. The fullness of these types of encounters can be life-altering. It is difficult to forget a revelatory poetic or pedagogical moment; you are changed in these delicate apertures of encounter, and over time they leave marks on us, like the kind of "proud flesh" that Jane Hirshfield (1988) speaks of—flesh that grows back across our wounds with a great vehemence, "more strong than the simple, untested surface before." The aim of this reflection is to consider the ways that poetry is useful for inviting educators to re-imagine the human condition with a kind of soulful spaciousness (see Palmer, 1998, 2000; Whyte, 2002). It is a reflection that invites educators towards a richer engagement with poetry in our teaching in ways

that segue with the ongoing radical re-orientation that contemplative traditions bring to the world of pedagogy (see Palmer et al., 2010).

I am a professor of language and discourse working within a non-traditional, Humanistic-oriented Psychology program. As such, my students are uniquely oriented towards personal growth, transformation, depth (and depth psychologies), and alternative approaches to what it means to be human. They are spacious, open, and hungry for authentic dialogue and an abiding commitment to process (over content). Some aim to pursue work in counseling or clinical settings, while others aspire to academic work. Because of this, I am fortunate to have the implicit invitation from them to find ways to appreciate the intimate and relational ways that poetic vocabularies open worlds to us as part of our learning. I use poetry to invite my students to consider the larger questions for which the intellectual language they inherit is often inadequate (see Whyte, 2010). Our intellectual language is often not large enough for the territories we want to explore and inhabit. Poetry offers us a language that is expansive, generous, and deep. My scaffolding of my student's growth has focused on the ways that a contemplative perspective to poetry can ignite a more soulful relationship to pedagogy. How does poetry help us to be more fully present and engaged? The purpose of this reflection is to explore this question in my own work with students. I draw on David Whyte's (2016) poem "Living Together" to show how poetry asks us to see teaching as a form of apprenticeship, as a call to maturity and love, and as an invitation to ripening.

### **Syncing Poetry and Pedagogy**

I'd like to first explain how I conceptualize poetry and its relationship to teaching. I approach poetry in two ways. First, I think of poetry as the contemplative practice of overhearing another or oneself explain or describe something with an acute level of precision, clarity, and/or resonance that is unforgettable. Poetry is thus an opening to some measure of novel truth or wisdom that one did not know they needed to hear, but when they hear it, there is an alchemical shift and an inability to unhear it or go back to the perspective they had before. It is like an encounter with beauty. You cannot undo the effect. You are stuck with it, and if you

are open enough, and ready enough for how the encounter with poetic resonance invites you to shift your perspective, it will transform you.

Secondly, and as an extension of the first perspective, I approach poetry as a kind of language that disarms you whether you want it to or not. This suggests that most of time we are well armored against various forms of revelation as well as incarnation. Poetry is a language that unlocks or circumvents the armor somehow and apprehends you. You suddenly find yourself confronted 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.

This excerpt speaks of being apprehended in the spaciousness of our aloneness by the revelation that our lives are best lived at the frontier edge of a kind of expansive invitation to fullness and freedom. But what is equally present is the invitation to "give up all other worlds" which do not bring you to life. Most of us are well armored against such a calling, sanguine though it may be. But once you hear this clarion call, if you are lucky you are apprehended and the gears of your participation in worlds to which you do not belong begin to grind more reluctantly and the inertia of your false identities will finally slow.

Taken together, these two perspectives see poetry as a form of existential disarmament, and thus an invitation to a kind of robust vulnera-

bility (Whyte, 2002). The capacity and courage to follow the path of disarmed vulnerability is a disposition that we can cultivate in our teaching (Palmer, 1998, 2000; Whyte, 2010). Poetry is a practice that allows for that. Teachers must make the invitation to their students to the kind of genuine and disarmed conversations that cultivate a robust vulnerability that allows us to teach from the center of our gifts, not our strategies. I am convinced that good teaching is the cultivation of our best gifts, not our best strategies for getting by, which changes the entire conversation for what “best practices” truly mean.

Using poetry in our teaching is about finding those gifted spaces where we are truly alive and defenseless and open to ourselves and others, where we are prepared to be apprehended by truths that live at the margins of awareness. The 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. 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 beautiful questions is that beautiful questions elicit answers in their likeness. You call forth something beautiful by asking beautiful questions. Those are types of questions live in the peculiar language of poetry. And those are the types of answers opened through poetic inquiries.

### **A Call to Deeper Poetic Engagement in our Teaching**

As a step towards more concretely illustrating how poetic forms of language can enliven and transform our teaching, I would like to work closely with David Whyte’s (2016, p. 48) poem “Living Together.” David Whyte is spiritually eclectic poet from Yorkshire of Irish and English descent. He explores the ever-expanding relationship between people and their interior and exterior worlds (what he calls “frontiers”). His poetry reflects his extensive travels, including work as a guide in the Galapagos as well as retreats to into the Himalaya, India, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. His poetry is useful in my own teaching because of its timeless focus on the vagaries of change, the vicissitudes of human longings,

our great need to belong to something larger than ourselves, and the importance of grounding this in our vocation.

Although I bring many poems to my students, “Living Together” is a uniquely special poem of Whyte’s that I use regularly in my teaching. It focuses on one of Whyte’s key themes, apprenticeship, which I believe is apropos for teaching. In his essay on “naming,” Whyte says

the act of loving itself, always becomes a path of humble *apprenticeship*, not only in following its difficult way and discovering its different forms of humility and beautiful abasement but strangely, through its fierce introduction to all its many astonishing and different forms, where we are asked continually and against our will, to give in so many different ways, without knowing exactly, or in what way, when or how, the mysterious gift will be returned. (2015, p. 148)

Apprenticeship is thus less about developing a craft skill than it is about fine tuning one’s inner capacity to love one’s work, and the processes of engagement entailed, as openly and vulnerably as possible. It is an invitation to love without naming things too soon.

I have spent many hours with my students on this poem, and during that time I have taken notes on our discussions. What follows is essentially a compendium of themes that arise time and again in our conversations. My students and I then use these themes to guide the crafting of our pedagogical vision statements. “Living Together” illuminates at least three key themes that are central in teaching well. First, it asks us to think about teaching as a unique type of apprenticeship. Second, it asks us to think about teaching as a call to maturity and love. And thirdly, it offers us a view of teaching as a form of ripening. What ties all three of these themes together is, I think, a certain mark of courage which I think of as the clear and committed heart-felt engagement and participation with life. Below is the poem, followed by an articulation of these three themes.

## Living Together <sup>1</sup>

We are like children in the master's violin shop  
 not yet allowed to touch the tiny planes or the rare wood  
 but given brooms to sweep the farthest corners  
 of the room, to gather shavings, mop spilled resins  
 and watch with apprehension the tender curves  
 emerging from apprenticed hands. The master  
 rarely shows himself but whenever he does he demonstrates  
 a concentrated ease so different from the willful accumulation  
 of experience we have come to expect,  
 a stripping away, a direct appreciation of all the elements  
 we are bound, one day, to find beneath our hands.  
 He stands in our minds so clearly now, his confident back  
 caught in the light from pale clerestory windows  
 and we note the way the slight tremor of his palms  
 disappears the moment they encounter wood.

In this light we hunger for maturity, see it not as stasis  
 but a form of love. We want the stillness and confidence  
 of age, the space between self and all the objects of the world  
 honoured and defined, the possibility that everything  
 left alone can ripen of its own accord,  
 all passionate transformations arranged only  
 through innocent meetings, one to another,  
 the way we see resin allowed to seep into the wood  
 in the wood's own secret time. We intuit our natures  
 becoming resonant with one another according  
 to the grain of the way we are made. Nothing forced  
 or wanted until it ripens in our own expectant hands.  
 But for now, in the busy room, we stand in the child's  
 first shy witness of one another, and see ourselves again,  
 gladly and always, falling in love with our future.

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<sup>1</sup> Whyte, D. (2016). Living Together. In *The sea in you* (p. 48). Many Rivers Press.

## 1. Teaching as Apprenticeship

This is a poem about apprenticeship, though not apprenticeship as it is typically thought of as a way of teaching somebody to perform a set of skills better or more variably or more efficient over time as part of a job. Whyte is thinking of apprenticeship as a kind of maturation of the heart, a tender watching and witnessing of another with apprehension and deep curiosity. It is a witnessing not of the “willful accumulation of experiential knowledge we have come to expect,” but rather what he calls a “stripping away” and a kind of deep “appreciation” of a concentrated ease that allows the slight tremor of our hands (that is, our fears, insecurities, and disabilities) to disappear the moment our palms touch wood—that is, the moment we lose ourselves and our sense of self-consciousness and engage fully and unselfconsciously in our work. It is then that the ordinary tremor disappears and we find ourselves caught up in the flow of doing the very thing we love, the very thing we feel we are called to do here in this world. This is a poem about apprenticing each other to this kind of engagement, an engagement marked by deep noticing and whole-heartedness.

This poem sees apprenticeship as an openness to being molded, as we are all compost for worlds we cannot yet imagine. I think of the line from Mary Oliver’s (1986) poem “Wild Geese” where she calls us to “let the soft animal of our body love what it loves.” It is an invitation not to hedonism, but rather a letting free of our heart to pursue love in its elemental fullness. I think “Living Together” offers a similar clarion call and is monumentally important for teachers, especially given our current educational system. Our current educational system is often a narrowing of the richness of our student’s personalities. Our students are rewarded within a very narrow world of intellectual naming. They learn to name things in particular ways and not others as part of the academic training of preferred vocabularies. This becomes a strategy for knowing the world which often becomes an identity for living in the world. This is a far cry from the identity of the children here in the violin shop in Whyte’s poem. To realize how constrained we are is a huge first step of growth and a gift. In thinking about how students grow, Emerson (1983) said, *“People wish to be settled; but only as far as they are unsettled is*

*there any hope for them.*" Only insofar as our intellectual heritage is not simply about inheriting constrained and settled vocabularies of naming and is instead about remaining open and unsettled and curious do we have any hope.

This poem invites us to take seriously the controlled folly of how our educational system conceptualizes learning and apprenticeship. True learning and real apprenticeship are not about naming things too closely but are just the opposite. Poetic language is a more precise language for understanding the phenomenology of existence; science continually attempts to eliminate the subjective experience and creates ritualized procedures for maintaining the illusion that you have eliminated the subjective. Conversely, good poetry tries to include both what you are witnessing and the one witnessing and to create a conversation where both are transformed. This elemental collision is close to the edge of what is happening in postmodern physics, where we can see how elements and electrons behave differently depending on whether you are looking at them or not—a kind of radical interrelationship and radical interdependency between the objects of our gaze and those who are gazing.

When we are in an apprentice state of awareness, we are on the hunt for impending revelation where something is about to happen, including, most powerfully, and as part of our own identity work, our own disappearance. Like the way the slight tremor of the master's hands disappear when they encounter love, when we learn through apprenticeship our old identities, the ones that have learned to know through narrow naming, also disappear. And so apprenticeship is a way of thinking about education as the lighting of a fire or a longing that has a dangerous edge, one that cuts and wounds us while setting us free and beckons us exactly because of the human need to awaken the foundational instinct that we are here essentially to risk ourselves in the world, that we are a form of invitation to others and to otherness, that we are meant to hazard ourselves for the right kind of learning.



## 2. Teaching as a Call to Maturity and Love

This poem also invites us to think about teaching as an act of maturity or love. In the light of unguarded apprenticeship, Whyte says we “hunger for maturity, see it not as stasis, but a form of love.” And not a static or fixed or arrived-at-state of maturation, but as an ever evolving and expanding and disappearing flow of love and loving. That’s a radical idea. The great Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (2014) has a beautiful line about love—“To love without knowing how to love wounds the person we love.” I think the same is true for teaching. To teach without knowing how to teach or what is worth teaching or where our best teaching derives, potentially wounds the people we teach. And again, learning to teach well is about a set of skills. Whyte’s poem is a cautionary tale against that. Teaching is about bringing your best gifts. It is about love and having the maturation to bring that love openly.

Whyte says,

We can never know in the beginning, in giving ourselves to a person, to a work, to a marriage or to a cause, exactly what kind of love we are involved with. The act of loving itself, always becomes a path of humble apprenticeship, not only in following its difficult way and discovering its different forms of humility and beautiful abasement but strangely, through its fierce introduction to all its many astonishing and different forms, where we are asked continually and against our will, to give in so many different ways, without knowing exactly, or in what way, when or how, the mysterious gift will be returned. (2015, p. 148)

This quote is a beautiful statement about what it is like to love as a teacher or a parent or partner. It sees love as a path of humble apprenticeship, one that involves a good deal of humility and, by extension, of humiliation as well because loving this way requires a lot of honesty in admitting where we are powerless to control the way the path of apprenticeship will unfold.

Whyte notes that

honesty is grounded in humility and indeed in humiliation, and in admitting exactly where we are powerless. Honesty is not found in revealing the truth, but in understanding how deeply afraid of it we are. To become honest is in effect to become fully and robustly incarnated into powerlessness. Honesty allows us to live with not knowing. Honesty is not protection; honesty is not a weapon to keep loss and heartbreak at bay, honesty is the outer diagnostic of our ability to come to ground in reality, the hardest attainable ground of all, the place where we actually dwell, the living, breathing frontier where we are given no choice between gain or loss. (2015, pp. 118-119)

And so again we find in this poem a way of wrapping together the idea of apprenticeship as a way of remaining continually open and seeing that aperture, that radical openness, as synonymous with maturity or love, both requiring courage and honesty. Maturity is the vanguard for love, and maturity allows for the ability to live fully and equally in multiple contexts; it invites us to see the process of education as a mature way of risking ourselves for larger horizons, for a powerfully generous outward incarnation of our inward need to love well, and not for intellectual gains that inevitably make us smaller.

### **3. Ripening**

This poem has also as one of its key elements the idea of ripening, which highlights the impact that time and timing has on how and when we learn. The poem says “we want the possibility that everything left alone can ripen of its own accord...the way we see resin allowed to seep into the wood in the wood’s own secret time...nothing forced or wanted until it ripens in our own expectant hands.” I am reminded a famous quote that has been falsely attributed to various Buddhist teachers that reads “*When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. When the student is truly ready, the teacher will disappear.*” Though the true source of this

quote is unknown, it nevertheless rings true and is apropos to the idea of ripening. It speaks to the appearance of help and companionship when we are ready for it to ripen in our own expectant hands, and as well, its eventual disappearance when we no longer need it.

In the present context, I think this most obviously speaks to the ripening of the student's own capacity and desire to grow and mature. However, I think ripening works in the other direction as well. The teacher's own gifts and own capacity and desire to see their teaching as a form of love also ripens in its own secret time. I noted earlier that teaching is the harvesting of one's gifts, not strategies. I think we begin as teachers with inherited strategies that we think will work well in the classroom, but over time we see that loving what we do and ensuring its longevity and joy means finding ways to teach from our gifts, from those ways we are whole-hearted, which allows our teaching to become less effortful and more seamless and natural, though not necessarily easier. As our teaching ripens, we are using not just what we know, but who we truly are, and so there is a natural arc and a feeling of fullness and authenticity.

Jane Hirshfield (1994) has a beautiful poem called "Ripeness" that perfectly echoes this idea. It reads:

Ripeness is  
 what falls away with ease.  
 Not only the heavy apple,  
 the pear,  
 but also the dried brown strands  
 of autumn iris from their core.

To let your body  
 love this world  
 that gave itself to your care  
 in all of its ripeness,  
 with ease,

and will take itself from you  
 in equal ripeness and ease,  
 is also harvest.  
 And however sharply  
 you are tested —  
 this sorrow, that great love —  
 it too will leave on that clean knife.

Hirshfield wonderfully captures the elemental quality of ripeness. “Ripeness is what falls away with ease.” As teachers, we strive to create sacred spaces where this kind of natural ripening can occur against a safe but sharp clean edge. In David Whyte’s (2012) poem “Winter Apple” he further elaborates as he speaks of an apple ripening and says: “Wait longer than you would, go against yourself, find the pale nobility of quiet that ripening demands” and then when you finally do bite into the ripe apple you taste “not only the summer sunlight of a postponed perfection, but the sweet, inward stillness of the wait itself.”

### **Final Thoughts**

The aim of this reflection is to argue for an integration of poetry into our teaching as part of a contemplative orientation to pedagogy. I discussed poetry both as a way of awakening a relationship with truth that lies at the periphery of our awareness and as a form of language that disarms you and opens the way to a robust form of vulnerability and courage. I then specifically explored David Whyte’s poem “Living Together” as an illustration of the way poetry invites us to think about teaching as a unique type of apprenticeship, as a call to maturity and love, and as a unique form of ripening. What unites these themes is a clear, committed, and whole-hearted call to engagement and participation with our pedagogy.

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