Hearing the Call

It is a serious matter to ask, Why do I teach? We don't come to teaching to punch the clock or count the dollars. Most of us come to teaching to answer a summons or bidding that commands us to do this work. We are drawn to teaching by our passion for our students and love of our subjects—and by our belief that connecting students to potent ideas will yield great things. We are drawn by a sense that we can make a difference in a child's life, in our world, and that engaging in such meaningful work will be cause for great personal fulfillment.

For this section, teachers shared poems and stories that remind them of their motives for becoming and continuing as teachers. Some remember with tenderness the mentors who evoked their passion to pursue this profession. Others describe how first encounters with teaching excited in them an insatiable desire to make this work their life. Others recognized that the summons to teach was not a choice but the best way to use their gifts.

Eight years ago, when I was considering giving up my job as a social worker, I tried to imagine what being a teacher would be like. I remember telling my wife, Sharon (a high school teacher), that I couldn't see myself working with small children in the classroom. Luckily, somewhere along the line, that changed.

Now I am a first-grade teacher. I sit in little chairs. I spend my days with children reading, writing, drawing, and playing guitar. I walk down hallways filled with children's art. I love my job. I can't imagine a better life.

Teaching first grade gives me many opportunities to share my love of poetry and music. First graders are natural poets and musicians. Reading and writing poetry together creates a solid bridge between my students and me. Music is a joyful common ground that equalizes as it unites.

I play guitar and sing with my students almost every day. My guitar is often my teaching partner. I turn to it when I need inspiration, comfort, and companionship. It helps me to focus, to clarify ideas, and to sort through emotions. It helps me to make music with my life, to polish the rough times into jewels, and it gives me strength to face the challenges I encounter in classroom life, "howlin like a guitar player."

—John J. Sweeney
First-Grade Teacher
Pennsylvania

Make Music with Your Life

Make music with your life
a
    jagged
silver tune
cuts every deepday madness
Into jewels that you wear

Carry 16 bars of old blues
wit/you
everywhere you go
walk thru azure sadness
howlin
Like a guitar player

—*Bob O'Meally*

I first read "To be of use" at my mother's kitchen table a few weeks before starting my first teaching job. It made me feel proud and excited to be entering the teaching profession, and seemed a fitting send-off.

I had signed up for Teach for America and was set to move across the country to Oakland, California. I knew I was in for a challenge—I was going to teach with next to no training in a strange city—but I did not know how profound that challenge would be.

In September I found myself teaching math in a converted truancy center to sixty kids who had fallen (or been dropped) through the too-large cracks of the school district. The students were out of control, the staff inexperienced, and the administration unconcerned. I was miserable and my nervous determination turned to anxious doubt. How could I begin to teach?

The decision to leave my job, my first class of students, and my new identity as a teacher was one of the hardest I've had to make. I had come to "be of use" and instead found myself grossly underprepared in a situation that seemed hopeless.

A year later, this poem still serves as a guide as I prepare and search for work that is sustainable, work that feeds and keeps me afloat, even while I am submerged in it.

—Katya Levitan-Reiner

High School Math Substitute Teacher
California

To be of use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward.
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in the common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

—Marge Piercy

Heather will not be in class today. The news was delivered with a whispered urgency. *She's been hospitalized, but tell no one. We're meeting at lunch.*

By the time we gathered, the word *suicide* was everywhere in the air, and not for the first time. Our work with these teens felt forever on the boundary of ecstasy and agony. We knew fury and suffering, the songs of despair, shards of hope sought always through a confusion. More than once I'd been awakened by an alarming phone call, gotten out of bed weak with the dawn.

This was not an attempt, we were told, but a gesture, a cry for help. The talk seemed both necessary and false. The calming clichés failed to soothe and the unmistakable subtext—walling the school off from fearful legal entanglements—was grating. Heather was never mentioned, referred to now only as the situation. The bleak system took center stage, the living, still-breathing girl kicked to the curb.

Later an older colleague, a literature teacher who was tiny and frail but with a makeup part fire, part steel, gave me a copy of "The Poet's Obligation." "This is for you," she said. "It describes your pathway and mine, and why you must stay with it."

—William Ayers

College Professor
Illinois

The Poet's Obligation

To whoever is not listening to the sea
this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up
in house, office, factory or woman,
or street or mine or harsh prison cell:
to that person I come, and, without
speaking or looking,
I arrive and open the door of the prison,
and a vibration starts up, vague and insistent,
a great roar of thunder sets in motion
the rumble of the planet and the foam,
the groaning rivers of the ocean rise,
the star vibrates swiftly in its corona,
and the sea beats, dies, and goes on beating.
So, drawn on by my destiny,
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep
the sea's lamenting in my consciousness
I must feel the crash of the hard water
and gather it up in a perpetual cup
so that, wherever those in prison may be,
wherever they suffer the autumn's castigation,
I may be present with an errant wave,
I move in and out of windows,
and hearing me, eyes may lift themselves
saying "How can I reach the sea?"
And I shall broadcast, saying nothing,
the starry echoes of the wave,
a breaking up of foam and of quicksand,
a rustling of salt withdrawing,
the grey cry of sea-birds on the coast.
So, through me, freedom and the sea
Will call in answer to the shrouded heart.

—Pablo Neruda

I read "I pastori" aloud at my grandmother's funeral. It seemed a fitting tribute to Nonna, my Italian grandmother. My earliest connection to poetry was at her knee. Oh, how I loved being bounced up and down on Nonna's lap while she recited Italian nursery rhymes and poems and beckoned me playfully to join her in recitation. But even more than that, "I pastori" honors my grandmother's immigrant history. It is a poem about journeys, sustenance, relationships, renewal, and tradition, and it is set in Abruzzi, my Nonna's birthplace. Reading this poem aloud in celebration of Nonna's life gave me great comfort. It also inspired me to carry on in my grandmother's memory.

My grandmother was proud, she was strong, and she was courageous. She valued education. She taught herself to read English and delighted in the academic accomplishments of her grandchildren. She encouraged me when I told her I wanted to be a teacher; she told me there was no finer or nobler profession.

"I pastori," taped to the wall by my desk, serves as my staff. It grounds me and supports me in my work with student teachers and teachers: *September, let us go. It is time to migrate.* Teaching is a journey, and not unlike the one experienced by the shepherds in d'Annunzio's poem, it can be challenging and arduous; but ultimately, teaching is a journey of hope, promise, and fulfillment. Grazie, Nonna.

—Susan Etheredge

College Professor
Massachusetts

I pastori (The Shepherds)

September, let us go. It is time to migrate.
Now in the land of the Abruzzi my shepherds
leave the pens and go towards the sea:
they go down to the wild Adriatic
which is green like the mountain pastures.

They have drunk deep at alpine springs,
so that the taste of native water
may remain in exile hearts as a comfort,
to charm their thirst for long upon the way.
They have renewed their staffs of hazel.

And they go along the ancient drove-path to the plain,
as if by a grassy, silent river,
upon the traces of the early fathers.
O voice of him who first
knows the trembling of the sea!

Now on the shore at its side marches
the flock. The air is without motion.
The sun so gilds the living wool
that it hardly differs from the sand.
Sea-washing, trampling, sweet sounds.

Ah why am I not with my shepherds?

—*Gabriele D'Annunzio*

During my adolescence, words began to resonate with a different kind of energy for me. I remember hearing the words, "Judy, Mama died." These words penetrated my soul like a devastating tornado, uprooting everything in its path, twisting uncontrollably in whatever direction it wanted to with no regard for humanity.

When the interment was final, my mother's body was committed to the ground. Seeing the deep hole that seemed so dark and cold, I felt confused and lonely. The following week, I returned to my junior high school. It became my new refuge. While sitting and daydreaming in my seventh-grade English class, I reluctantly picked up my assigned reading text and began flipping through the pages, starting from the back, to the front. This is where I first met Emily Dickinson. I heard her voice as I read the words from her poem "The Chariot." She allowed me to conceptualize the beauty that came with death. It was at this precise moment that I fully understood that it wasn't my mother's fault that she had to die, but it was death himself who had come and taken her without permission.

From that day forward, I made up my mind that I wouldn't be angry; instead I would do something to make my mother proud of me even though I knew she would no longer be in my life physically.

I became a schoolteacher.

—Judy R. Smith
Special Education Teacher
Pennsylvania

The Chariot

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –

—Emily Dickinson

Teaching chose me. I wanted to be a lawyer, but my brother decided to become a doctor—and in 1950, free tuition at Buffalo State worked best with the family budget. A few weeks into college I knew I was born to teach. I taught in California, I taught in Omaha, and I taught in rural Nebraska. Long summer vacations were perfect for a mother of five children, two of whom I taught in my twenty-one years in the classroom.

Children came to me as second graders, as fourth graders, as fifth and sixth graders. A thousand or more hours later they moved up and onward. I retired (how quickly the time goes) ten years ago. I am asked how many of the children I remember. I remember all of them.

My mother died a few years ago, at the age of ninety-three. At her request the priest read Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" at her funeral. As I listened to the words, I remembered Bill, who was murdered in Texas the year after I taught him in sixth grade; Brian, who died in a car accident just after high school graduation; and Catherine, who struggled with a brain tumor in second grade.

As teachers we feel the children in our classrooms become part of our lives. We witness them growing, learning, and becoming. Sometimes we witness and experience their tragedies as well. Somehow Tennyson's words make those losses easier to bear.

—Marj Vandenack

Retired Elementary School Teacher
Nebraska

Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

I know about hanging on to threads. Twenty-three years ago I was on the verge of becoming a teacher when my husband's grandmother's farm came up for sale. I dropped out of graduate school to help purchase the land. Since then I have been a teacher to my three children and an active volunteer in their schools. I have taught oboe, led the Cub Scouts, and hayed the fields. Through it all, my desire to teach has never diminished.

As an undergraduate studying at the University of Washington under Nelson Bentley, the themes from poetry of staying true to one's dreams were a good match to my personal philosophy. William Stafford's poem speaks directly to this.

Many people can't see what is guiding me. They wonder why I continue to go for a degree even as age creeps up and people around me are changing. But the thread keeps me on track. It is a combination of wanting to emulate excellent teachers I had and wanting to help children be the best people they can be. It is about effecting change in our world in the face of hopelessness.

I am currently student teaching in middle school English classes as I pursue a master's degree through City University in Vancouver, Washington. In this program many of my fellow students are also hanging on to a thread, pursuing the calling to become a teacher. Hopefully we won't ever let go of that thread.

—Lisa Drumheller Sudar

Student Teacher
Washington

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

—*William Stafford*

Walt Whitman's picture makes him appear wise and haughty. He seems to know that I need a specific directive like, "This is what you shall do." Fatherly advice.

I get so easily tangled in the daily details of teaching. Usually it is in frustration or exhaustion that I finally look up at the lines on his weathered face and the lines of the passage and remind myself I cannot remember a stitch of content from my tenth-grade year. Nothing from freshman English or junior history. What I do remember is what a success felt like or when I brushed against self-awareness because of solid and dedicated adults. To "re-examine all you have been told" is really the lesson that matters most to my students and to myself.

I share Whitman's words with my juniors each year, make them cards to stick into their notebooks and carry around with them. Many keep the cards visible the rest of the year. Their reminders. To think that our lives could be described as a "great poem" pushes me out the door each day to write the next line.

—Lori Douglas
High School English Teacher
Washington

From Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul and your very flesh shall be a great poem.

—Walt Whitman

I don't remember the first time I read "Dream Deferred," but it stays with me as a warning to pay attention to the dreams around us, our own and everyone else's. This poem is why I am in the public school business.

When I became a teacher it was not really to teach. I just wanted to help kids stay out of trouble. During a college internship with the Department of Juvenile Justice in New York City, I learned that the juvenile justice system would be a hard place from which to do that. I became a teacher out of fear—fear of what happened to kids who ended up in jail, kids whose dreams were drying up, festering, and even exploding.

It was clear that all my students had dreams. I sought to nurture those dreams—linking them to role models in their lives, in history, and even in fiction so they could see for themselves that their dreams are attainable and so they would be inspired to realize those dreams.

I am still in public education and I am still motivated by this poem. While I have become passionate about teaching and learning for its own sake (not only to keep kids out of trouble), I am, to be honest, still afraid that too many dreams may be deferred. This fear keeps me doing what I do.

—Heather Kirkpatrick

Director of Secondary Education, Aspire Public Schools
California

Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

—Langston Hughes

When I first heard Marian read this prayer, I was struck by the way "I care and I'm willing to serve" resounded with my life. I have always considered it a great blessing that my occupation and my vocation have coincided; that my professional life has been my calling. Over my three decades in public education, I have always found inspiration in my concern for the welfare of children. And though I have worn many hats, I have always considered myself first and foremost a servant-leader.

This poem is particularly inspiring because it reminds us that we often sell ourselves short in terms of the unique contribution we can each make to the world. Wayne Muller helped me understand the difference between talents and gifts when he said that talents are things we can teach others, but gifts are uniquely for us to do. It might be something small like telling someone of our love or something big like starting a program. But our gift to the world is to do that one thing we have been called upon to do. And so, although we might not have the talents of others, that shouldn't stop us from responding to our inner calling and desire to serve.

The balance of the inner and outer life is allowing the caring on the inside to be expressed in the service on the outside. As Marian has said, "Service is the rent you pay for living."

—Linda Lantieri

Director, Project Renewal of Educators for Social Responsibility
New York

I Care and I'm Willing to Serve

Lord, I can't preach like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Jesse Jackson or turn a poetic phrase like Maya Angelou, but I care, and I'm willing to serve, and to use what talents I have to build a world of peace.

I don't have Fred Shuttlesworth's and Harriet Tubman's courage or Andy Young's political skills, but I care, and I'm willing to serve.

I can't sing like Fannie Lou Hamer or organize like Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, or John Dear, but I care, and I'm willing to serve.

I'm not holy like Archbishop Tutu, forgiving like Mandela, or disciplined like Gandhi, but I care and I'm willing to serve and to fight in a nonviolent manner.

I'm not brilliant like Dr. Du Bois or Elizabeth Cady Stanton or as eloquent as Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington, but I care and I'm willing to serve.

I don't have Mother Teresa's saintliness, Dorothy Day's love, or Cesar Chavez's gentle, tough spirit, but I care and I'm willing to serve.

God, it's not as easy as the Sixties to frame an issue and forge a solution, but I care and I'm willing to serve.

My mind and body are not as swift as in youth, and my energy comes in spurts but I care, and I'm willing to serve.

I'm so young nobody will listen, I'm not sure what to say or do, but I care and I'm willing to serve.

I can't see or hear well, speak good English, stutter sometimes, and get real scared, and I really hate risking criticism, but I care and I'm willing to serve.

Use me as Thou wilt to save Thy Children today and tomorrow, and to build a nation and a world to where no child is left behind, and every child is loved and every child is safe.

—Marian Wright Edelman