

FISHING FOR WORDS

HOW POETRY AND METAPHOR MAKE US LITERATE

By Greg Beiles with contributions from Lesley Cohen

The Jewish month of *Cheshvan* is called *Mar Cheshvan*, which means “bitter *Cheshvan*,” for it is the only month of the Jewish calendar in which no religious or historical festivals take place. To take the edge off bitter *Cheshvan*, which coincides with an often dreary Canadian November, The Toronto Heschel School creates its own annual celebration – a Poetry Festival. The Festival has become both an academic and soulful treasure that delights the entire school community.

Coming six weeks into the school year, the Poetry Festival marks the culmination of the first unit of English Language Arts study for all students from Grades 1 to 8. With heightened concern these days over early literacy, a back-to-basics approach to reading and writing, and making sure that everyone can spell, one might wonder why our school chooses to dedicate the first full unit of the year to the study of poetry.

Good writing is deeply rooted in how children think, feel, and experience the world.

Many language arts programs consider poetry to be a bit of a frill – something to touch on later in the school year, once students have nailed down their particular grade level’s basic requirements for writing. Our poetry curriculum is based on the premise that good writing of any sort is, in fact, deeply rooted in how children think, feel, and experience the world. We concur with educational philosopher and psychologist Professor Kieran Egan who teaches that poetry lies at the root of human thinking and therefore deserves a formative place in the curriculum.

Egan rejects the Piagetian notion that young children think concretely and are capable of the more sophisticated forms of thinking usually associated with poetry only later in their maturation. Egan asserts, “The central fact of our minds is their poetic nature.”

Egan cites researchers such as Howard Gardener and Ellen Winner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education to explain further:

Human children are equipped with some specific intellectual capacities that reach their peak in our early years... For example our ability to generate appropriate metaphors reaches its peak by age five, and declines thereafter.¹

According to Egan, the linguistic practices that are inherent in poetry are not advanced cognitive developments, but are, in fact, “the true basics of education.” Many elements of poetry, such as forming images from words, understanding abstract notions and appreciating the moods and emotions that different cadences and rhythms can convey, are fundamental to the way the human mind works and makes sense of the world.

Egan’s point becomes clear when we recognize that the technique of metaphor, which is usually only valued as a language skill, is at play whenever children are able to understand one thing in terms of another. When a child imagines that a leaf is a bird flitting down to the ground, or an airplane soaring up in the sky, they are engaging in sophisticated metaphorical thinking. It is this same cognitive leap through metaphor that allows a child to accept the figure “4” as equivalent to four three-dimensional objects on a table.

Ted Hughes is another thinker who recognizes that the techniques of expression involved in poetry closely mirrors the way the minds of children actually work. His book *Poetry in the Making* is one of the finest on teaching poetry. Hughes writes that reading and writing poetry amounts to “learning to think.”

The thinking that we learn in poetry is a kind of thinking that we often ignore: it is the contemplative activity that helps us express our most elusive perceptions and thoughts. Hughes describes how, as a school boy, he felt “plagued” by his inability to express his thoughts in words:

I became very interested in those thoughts of mine I could never catch. Sometimes they were hardly what you could call a

Award-winning poet Adam Sol participating in the Poetry Festival, November 2012

thought – they were a dim sort of feeling about something. They did not fit into any particular subject – history or arithmetic or anything of that sort.²

Hughes writes that inchoate thoughts and feelings that belong to the world of “memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence and natural common sense” are not mere embellishments to life, but in fact constitute “the world of final reality...which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heart beat.”³ The “thinking” that poetry teaches is the process by which we reach this inner life.

Hughes likens poetic thinking to fishing. If we do not learn this way of thinking, “then our minds lie in us like fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.”⁴ Hughes draws further on the metaphor of fishing to evoke the practices of patience, close observation and “concentration on a small point” that we use when we read and write poetry.

And yet poetry is not only about reaching inside ourselves, it is also a way to communicate and share our thoughts and emotions with others. Just as science constitutes a method for investigating and sharing knowledge about natural phenomena, so poetry provides a method for exploring and sharing inner personal experiences.

“...then our minds lie in us like fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.” -Ted Hughes

Metaphor – the ability to see one thing in terms of another – allows us to express unique experiences, and yet understand one another. For Robbie Burns, love is a “red, red, rose,” Leonard Cohen calls it “a broken Halleluya” and, for e.e. cummings, “nothing, not even the rain has such small hands.” Each poet describes love using a different metaphor; and yet through our common understandings of roses, broken praises, rain, and hands, we can share in these poets’ individual experiences of love.

Metaphor’s remarkable quality to preserve a unique experience and yet render it sharable, is what Natalie Goldberg, author of

Writing Down the Bones, means when she writes, “We are all connected. Metaphor knows this and therefore is religious.”⁵ This “religious” quality of metaphor is the premise behind a Grade 5 unit of study that we call “Metaphor and God.” Since metaphor helps us relate to feelings and thoughts which are inaccessible through regular language, “God talk” is one place where the power of metaphor comes to the fore. In this unit students explore the many metaphors for God found in the Bible and the Siddur (prayer book). These include “healer,” “source of life,” “maker of peace,” and “parent.” By regarding these terms as “metaphors,” students see how we can articulate our diverse experiences of God without pinning God down through a singular definition. They also appreciate that while each of us accesses experiences of God differently, as a community we all acknowledge the same One God.

Through its ability to articulate unique personal experiences, within the framework of shared understandings, poetry builds communities of young learners founded on respect for individuality and empathy for one another. It is this kind of community, nurtured by the “small hands” of poetry that we celebrate during our Poetry Festival. And so, in *Mar Cheshvan* – the bitter month – we hear a very sweet song.

¹ Kieran Egan, “The Arts as the Basics of Education,” *Childhood Education*, Vol. 73, No. 6 (1997), p. 8.

² Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 55.

³ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

⁵ Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, new ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), p. 45.

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