

Writing beyond Testing: "The Word as an Instrument of Creation"

G. LYNN NELSON

We might call this "A Tale of Two Instruments." First, there are the "instruments to measure standards" of big-time writing assessment currently sweeping American education, such as AIMS, the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards. And then, somewhere far beyond that, dimly understood and seldom acknowledged, is N. Scott Momaday's "the Word . . . as an instrument of creation" (*House Made of Dawn*). The first is, too often, a small, school-thing having to do with correctness and organization and write-by-number, having to do with the power to pass or fail students' writing, the power to take

away their language. The second has to do with power of another kind, personal power, a power that can transform students' lives even as it enables them to do the first meaningfully. In our rush to establish "instruments to measure standards" in our schools, we may well be robbing our children of the birthright of their language "as an instrument of creation."

Some time ago, I came across an article in the *New York Times* about an outbreak of suicide among teenagers within a small area in North Dakota. The article quoted the suicide note of one of the victims—a fifteen-year-old boy who had killed himself with his father's pistol. One sentence in that note, sadder even than all the rest, leaped out at me: "I'm not in English class, so my spelling doesn't have to be perfect" (*New York Times* 1).

Given the times, I surmised, perhaps unfairly, that this young man's English class was fully focused on preparing him to pass the state writing proficiency test so that he and his teacher and his school and his district would be able to show statistically that they were all doing a fine job of teaching writing. And this young man might well have passed that test, even gloriously. But he killed himself.

My wish for this boy, and for all young people in our schools, is that they might have English

classes that, yes, teach them spelling and punctuation and correctness but also help them toward the personal discovery of the Word as an instrument of creation, a power that lies within all of them, a power that might save them.

For beneath all our trumpeting of Standards and Assessment and the importance of our youth knowing lots of things when they graduate, beneath all this, if we will admit it, is a nagging doubt that even if they pass our tests, they may not survive life itself. For the mere passing of our standardized writing tests will not assuage despair and emptiness and lack of meaning in the lives of our youth. Yet that is where many of them reside. That is where, too often, our commercial, technological, materialistic, entertainment-oriented society has brought them. And that is where the teaching of writing as a subject in school, the teaching of writing to pass a test, will leave them. We who teach writing must offer our students more than the mere passing of a test to hang their hopes upon. We must offer them the power that Momaday points toward, the power of the Word as an instrument of creation. Writing has such power.

Here in Arizona, our state-mandated test is called AIMS: the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards. Look at those words: *Instrument*,

Instrument
of
Creation
Self
discovery.

relationships
etc.

Measure, Standards. They conjure images of writing teachers in lab coats with test tubes and calipers and probes. It's enough to make your sphincters contract and your heart cringe. Any true lover of and teacher of and believer in the power of writing must shudder at those words. For they ring of some mythical and nonexistent scientific certainty about language as the equivalent of math and students as the equivalent of robots—left-brains with legs—just waiting to memorize grammar rules and writing formulae and spew them back on a test.

Recently, speaking to a group of teachers at a local school, I whimsically suggested that I was designing a new t-shirt with the motto, "You Can Pass the AIMS Test and Still Go to Hell." I was surprised when those teachers spontaneously cheered and applauded. At the time, I think neither they nor I knew quite why there was that visceral and uncalculated response to my t-shirt proposal. Reflecting now, I suspect it arose from a deep resentment that all real writing teachers (teachers who *are* writers) have about the way we are expected to teach and test writing. What bothers us most about the high-stakes AIMS-type testing of writing now so in vogue is not that the standards are too high, but that they are too low and too misplaced.

The point of my t-shirt is not that the AIMS test is too difficult, but that our students need and deserve more than *just* to pass a test. These young people deserve writing classes with a vision that sees beyond tests, writing classes that do more than just teach skills and correctness and five-paragraph, write-by-the-numbers essays. In order to survive (physically, psychologically, spiritually) in the world of the twenty-first century, our students deserve and desperately need the power of the Word as an instrument of creation—a power that lies far beyond any instrument to measure standards.

I would be happy to believe in big-time writing tests—if only life and language were so simple, so capable of being boxed and measured and evaluated. But life and language aren't, and so I know as surely as the sun shines in Arizona that there will be students who will pass our state tests and still "go to hell"—who will become gang members or drug addicts or who will someday abuse their children or who will become smart (but ignorant) CEOs of corporations that rape the Earth or who will be rude and egotistical and unkind to their fellow creatures. And there will be other students—gentle students and angry students and defiant students and despairing

students—who will fail the test. And the system will further take away from them their gift of language, their possibility to find voice and choice and peaceful power. We will have reduced for them the power of language to a subject in school, to spelling and correctness, to a mere "measurement of standards."

But we can do so much better than that. If we teachers and administrators do not let the threat of ASSESSMENT (of students and, in turn, of us) dictate the limits of our teaching of writing, we can create classrooms and curricula that celebrate our students' writing and give them a place to tell their stories and turn their fear and anger and confusion into art, a place to give them hope in the form of their inborn gift of language as an instrument of creation.

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But if you are a classroom teacher, and you and your principal and your district are faced with all this Standards and Assessment business, you may well be thinking, "Oh, sure, I'm going to tell my principal and school board and legislators that I'm not going to make their tests my curriculum, that instead my classroom will be focused on the Word as an instrument of creation. And they are going to say, 'What the hell is that? Show us.'" Yes, there's the rub. For what we are talking about here cannot be reduced to a behavioral objective, to an item on a standardized test, to a graph on PowerPoint before the legislature or the school board meeting. So it would certainly be easier just to forget it.

But I can't forget that boy in North Dakota, nor the eyes of the Native American students in my classroom, strangers in their own land; nor the children in my wife's elementary classroom down the

street, children of the poor and disenfranchised, children most likely to fail our tests. Any more than you can forget your students and their daily struggles to survive and make meaning in this world. So, we writing teachers must become Warriors for the Word. We must not allow the test-makers and legislators to reduce words and our work to numbers in the newspapers. For we are not here talking about something reducible to a subject in school—even though that is what it looks like and that is where it is. We are talking about things like voice and personal empowerment and spiritual growth—things that modern technological society takes away from our students, from all of us. Ultimately, we are talking about the difference between a poem or a song or a story and the killings at Columbine High School, or blowing up the Federal Building in Oklahoma, or the latest drive-by shooting. Despite its seeming intangibility, the Word as an instrument of creation is very real. It is what Linda Hogan is talking about when she writes, “We want a language of that different yield. A yield rich as the harvests of earth, a yield that returns us to our own sacredness, to a self-love and respect that will carry out to others” (60).

The discovery of the Word as an instrument of creation is what William Stafford describes in his poem, “When I Met My Muse”:

Her voice belled forth, and the sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch, and knew that nails up there took a new grip on whatever they touched. “I am your own way of looking at things,” she said. “When you allow me to live with you, every glance at the world around you will be a sort of salvation.” And I took her hand. (222)

The Word as an instrument of creation is what Paulo Freire is talking about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, when he says, “Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.” He goes on to say, “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it” (69).

The Word as an instrument of creation is what transformed Helen Keller’s life in that moment

when the living water was flowing onto one of her hands while Anne Sullivan was spelling w-a-t-e-r onto the other:

Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten . . . and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! (36)

The Word as an instrument of creation is Pablo Neruda’s description of his discovery of the power of poetry:

. . . something knocked in my soul,
fever or forgotten wings,
and I made my own way,
deciphering
that fire
and I wrote the first faint line. . . (33)

The Word as an instrument of creation is the last inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto, awaiting the same inevitable fate as those who had preceded them into the extermination camps of World War II Germany, writing poems and messages on scraps of paper and hiding them in the crevices of the ghetto walls.

The Word as an instrument of creation is Dimitri Kolesnikov writing in the darkness of the broken hull of the Russian submarine *Kursk* at the bottom of the sea, writing minutes before his inevitable death, writing a note to the wife he would never see again, but writing.

Closer to our classrooms and closer to the lives of our students, the Word as an instrument of creation is what Jimmy Santiago Baca discovered, not through a state-mandated test, but in prison. Of his inevitable path to that prison, he says:

I soon realized that, to many, I was just a *mestizo* boy destined for a life of hard work in the fields or mines, nothing more. But that was a judgment I couldn’t accept. Knowing no other way to refuse, I found myself falling into the dark worlds where the winos and ex-cons live, a gypsy child in the urban wasteland, hanging under neon lights and hopeless street corners. I began to drink and take drugs. (517)

Excerpt from “Poetry” from *Isla Negra* by Pablo Neruda, translated by Alistair Reid. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

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The power of transformation
improves knowledge
affective
reason
informed
Choice

The crucial phrase here is “Knowing no other way . . .” At this point, he is trapped; he can see no choices; he is living re-actively:

I was becoming what society told me I was—prone to drugs and alcohol, unable to control my own life, needing a master to order my affairs, unworthy of opportunity and justice—a senseless beast of labor. . . . I had become the coauthor, with society, of my own oppression. (517–18)

Powerless, bereft of his own stories, and so the “coauthor” of his own oppression, he is sent to prison. But there, eventually, he discovers writing, and everything changes:

. . . out of suffering, I found a reprieve from my chaos, found language. . . . I discovered a reason for living, for breathing, and I could love myself again, trust again what my heart dreamed and find the strength to pursue those dreams. (518)

He found the ability to write his stories and so to act rather than to react, to live creatively. He found the creative power of his own words—a power he should not have had to go to prison to find.

Still closer to our public school writing classrooms, and still giving substance and reality to the Word as an instrument of creation, let me tell you a bit about what happened last summer. I am director of the Greater Phoenix Area Writing Project, a part of the National Writing Project. Each summer, we bring together twenty to thirty teachers, K–16, for a five-week summer institute focused on writing and sharing ideas for teaching writing. Four years ago, we also started a summer writing project for teenagers—the Young Adult Writing Project (YAWP)—that runs for three weeks concurrent with the teachers’ institute. We started this program primarily to help the teenagers—but also to demonstrate what happens when a writing classroom is focused not upon testing but upon the Word as an instrument of creation.

Now we may never use those words (“instrument of creation”) at all in YAWP, but that is what we are after. And that, to one degree or another, is what always happens. And here, briefly, is how it happens:

1. We ask the students, always, to write from their hearts, from their experience, from their feelings.
2. We ask them to use writing to look at their lives; we give them writing tasks (“assignments,” if you will) that ask them to tell a story about a time *when*—a time when they

lost something, a time when they learned something, a time when they were hurt, a time when they experienced a small joy, etc.

3. We ask them to “write before they write”—i.e., to write freely in their journals about this topic, to discover what is there in their personal histories, in their psyches, in their lives.
4. We ask them, then, to move an emerging “story” out of their journals and into public writing, to bring a piece to share with their writing group for response and feedback.
5. In light of the help they get from their writing group, we ask them to revise and edit and work and rework the piece.
6. Ultimately, they bring their finished piece to the “Feather Circle,” a gathering where we read our pieces aloud and share copies.
7. Then, we write thank-you notes to each other for gifts given in these “publishings.”
8. At the end of the three weeks, we publish a collection of their best pieces, and we have a potluck and reading for family and friends.

Add to the above two other important elements—that we teachers also “take” the class (i.e., we do all the things we ask the students to do), and that there are no tests—and you have, in essence, our writing program.

With that as our “curriculum,” last summer twenty teenagers came to write with us, teenagers who could just as well have “gone to hell”—to the mall or to gang bangs or to the TV soaps or to alcohol or to drugs or to chat rooms on the Internet. But they chose, instead, to come here to explore the power of writing. And these kids amazed us and taught us with their writing and their being, as most young people will, if given a chance to tell their stories beyond some reductionist view of language as a “subject” in the curriculum. The students were as young as twelve and as old as nineteen. They were male and female. They were African American and Hispanic and Jewish and Anglo and who knows what else. Within a true writing community, those distinctions were celebrated and those distinctions did not matter.

Because they were writing about their lives and their struggles (stories we are generally taught to hide, from ourselves and from each other), in a mere three weeks, these teenagers’ writing became strong and, beyond that, they became a community. Through their writing, they became a “gang,” in the

best sense of that word. Together, they and their writing changed and grew. Their final publication and reading was, in a sense, a drive-by-sharing—for these writers turned their pain and confusion and anger not into violence, but into the Word as an instrument of creation, into art and powerful literacy. (And isn't that what the test advocates say they want?)

These kids crafted sentences of such insight and power that they amazed and stunned us as we listened to them read on that last day. In a poem called "I Am," Kari wrote:

I am a broken mirror / a shattered rainbow lying in
the sweet dust of age / taking an image from every
moment and every one who passes by. / . . . I am
only a thought / created from my mind and looking
through my eyes / with the fragile fabric of dreams
veiling my face from the world.

And at the end of his piece about the home of his early childhood, J.R. wrote:

Though the people that I love, who made this
house a special and hallowed place, have left it for
another, it will always remain the most sustaining
place in my life. No matter how life changes for
good or bad, I keep in mind that my thoughts and
memories revolve in circles. I know that eventually
I will take myself back, back to that one story affair
on Bonnet Way, in the heart of suburbia. Back to
my Home.

And Lisa wrote to us about her grandmother
"who saw her mother ripped from her embrace, /
pushed with the blow of an iron rod / into a sea of
black and white striped uniforms, / ordered to un-
dress and take a shower / in the gas chambers of
Auschwitz."

I would not trade a syllable of such writing—
and all that comes with it—for a perfect score on the
state writing test. As one of the summer teachers ob-

served about the changes in the students and their writing, "You could see it and feel it in the things these kids said, in their eyes, in their writing. It is, in a sense, magical." Yes. And tests know nothing of such magic.

To one degree or another, I believe, such magic can happen in any writing class—if our vision and our curriculum are not limited to testing. Truly powerful writing comes from being nurtured, not from being tested. The teaching of writing cries out for a different approach—deeper and more communal and more loving than any "instrument to measure standards." So I urge all of you writing teachers out there, against the odds, to keep the faith. Though the forces of commerce and politics and misunderstanding may be against you, the forces of human language and human need are with you. Keep on. The children need you.

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