

Poetry Marries Head and Heart

By Suz Lipman

Even though April has been designated National Poetry Month by the Academy of American Poets, we are fortunate in Mill Valley, and in Marin, to enjoy luminous poetry all year long, thanks to a 35-year-old program called California Poets in the Schools (CPITS). CPITS is offered in the Mill Valley School District through funding from Kiddo! Two long-time poets and poet-teachers were recently asked to articulate some aspects of the magic that occurs when one reads or writes poetry.

“Poetry helps us marry our heads and our hearts,” said Karen Benke. “It helps us peel back the layers of our lives and look at the ordinary in a way we haven’t before.”

According to Terri Glass, who also serves as the Administrator of CPITS in Marin, “Poetry touches upon the sacred use of language that is the doorway to people expressing themselves. It helps us articulate unconscious images through formal structure and language.”

Both poet-teachers commented on the need to hear a poem read out loud and experience it in one’s body. “A poem is not complete until it is spoken out loud, even if you read it to yourself,” Glass said. “You have to hear the sound of poetry against the drum of your ear. Poetry was oral before it was written.”

She added, “Poetry taps into the left and right brains as well as the whole body. The rhythms we use when writing respond to our breath and to our heartbeat.” Benke agreed. “When you hear a poem, your heart space opens up. The reader or listener sees an image and something about his or her life expands. Even people who don’t know what a poem means might respond to the sound and savor the words. Often, students who love a poem will burst out in applause, or they’ll sigh. You have to trust yourself and your bodily response to a poem.”

What if one is short on inspiration when writing a poem? According to Benke, “Your poems come from the ordinary details of your life. Poetry is fooling around, it’s playing with words. If you’re having fun, you’re making poetry. You have to trust yourself. You are the authority of your life.”

Benke does have a few tricks to bring out reluctant writers. She often appears in the classroom with a velvet pouch full of word tickets that she created herself. “If a writer grabs a fistful of word tickets, he or she will find a poem,” she said. “A student will often say, ‘It’s not my poem’ and I’ll tell them, ‘You arranged the words.’”

Glass said that she is constantly amazed when a student who is scared to write or read poetry writes a fully formed poem in 20 minutes and reads it to applause from fellow students. “It’s the best feeling about teaching.” She added, “Parents will say to me, ‘I

didn't know that was inside my child.' The children are writing from a more deep and profound place than they knew existed. Poetry helps tap into that."

"Poetry is misunderstood in our culture," Glass said. "Some people think it is abstract, inaccessible, and hard to relate to. Yet often after a catastrophe or a celebration people turn toward poetry to make sense of the senseless, to understand it in a new way. It defies analysis. Poetry touches us in a way that goes underneath our lives. A poem brings a whole landscape up."

Glass continued, "We have lost contact with the sacred use of language and the sacred in the world around us. We live in a technological, information-laden society and we are starved for something that feeds the soul in another way." She quoted from David Whyte's poem "Loaves and Fishes": "People are hungry, and one good word is bread for a thousand."

A gallery show, "Celebrating the Arts in our Schools", will feature children's poetry and other artwork from the Mill Valley Schools, and photographs of student-artists by Laura Epstein-Norris in the 142 Throckmorton Theatre throughout May, with an opening May 1 from 5-7 p.m.

Students from around the county will read their poems at a CPITS reading at Book Passage in Corte Madera Friday, April 27 at 6:30.

Perhaps nothing expresses the art of poetry like poems themselves:

Poetry

Poetry is wings of the future.
It's an emerald book,
waiting to be read.
Poetry is the yellow of sunset—
a secret disaster, a mass of papers.
It is Mercury floating around Mars—
a bridge crossing over a river,
a dragonfly over the pond.

Sophie Boczek, Third Grade, Park School

What Poetry Is

Poetry is the silver silence
of imagination
put down on paper.
It's the mist of the moon,
shady and soft.
Sometimes poetry is the clouds

of the past, coming back
to haunt us like ghosts.
Words with lavender wings
alighting on a page
like butterflies is poetry.
It can be wild and daring,
like the future of zesty dancing.
It can be dark and quiet,
like the shyness of damp moss.
Standing on a misty jagged peak
blowing away the dandelions of
my imagination is poetry.

Emma Talkoff, Fifth Grade, Edna Maguire School

Karen Benke is a poet, poetry teacher, and writing guide. Writing prompts can be found on her web site, www.karenbenke.com. Terri Glass is a writer, poetry teacher, and the administrator of CPITS Marin. Her web site, www.thefoxpath.net, contains articles and poems.

“Arts in Mind” is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education. Suz Lipman is a writer and a parent in the Mill Valley School District.