

Introduction

A History of How These Letters on Poetry Came into Existence – from the U.S. Senate and Bernie Sanders, to the University of Vermont, to today

Washington was for me a new place. I began work on Capitol Hill and found it was an exciting place and a strange one, too.

Bernie Sanders and I had been friends for forty years. Almost every week, we would go for a walk on the weekend. We still do. When Bernie, the eight-term Representative from Vermont, the longest serving independent in the history of the United States Congress, announced he would run for the Senate seat vacated when Senator Jim Jeffords retired, I asked him if I could join his Washington staff if he were elected. He said yes.

After the election, which he won in a relative landslide, we talked again. He wondered what role I might play in his new office and asked what I could do. I reminded him that majority leader Harry Reid had just put him on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. I could do his education work. “After all, I have been a teacher all my life.”

I had taught literature, first as a graduate assistant at Duke University, then for a year at ‘historically black’ Benedict College in South Carolina, then for close to forty years at the University of Vermont. To my mind, teaching in college was not that different from teaching in middle school or even kindergarten. Yes, professors are not kindergarten teachers, but what works best is clear: attention to students and caring for students. Whether they are six years old or twenty, they *know* when their teachers like teaching them and are open to them. They know when they aren’t. I truly respect teaching, but as for education policy: it is not exactly advanced physics, even though I hasten to add that learning how to teach successfully can sometimes seem as complex as quantum mechanics. Teaching well is a complicated matter but it is always based in, well, love. If it isn’t, it doesn’t work.

When I joined the other staff members for HELP Committee meetings on education, we had three major bills before us: reauthorizing Head Start, revising the existing Higher Education legislation, revisiting and re-doing NCLB (No Child Left Behind). In discussing both policy and procedure, I frequently found myself in unfamiliar Capitol Hill territory.

I was a neophyte in the meeting rooms of the Senate. I didn't know how the legislative process worked or what committee procedures were. But my colleagues were always ready to help me.

So my novice status in crafting legislation was not a problem. I was greatly admiring of my Democratic staff colleagues, Michael and Mildred and Catherine, Will and Rob and Seth: black and white, Hispanic and Anglo, gay and straight. But I quickly found that only Steve (who worked for Obama) and Beth (the Republican staff leader) had ever been teachers. The rest, what they knew of teaching and students and learning they knew from . . . well, from reading about education policy. They didn't think of themselves as bookish, but they were. Direct experience of how learning goes on? Well, not much there.

It was a new and strange world. Ted Kennedy's committee staff – Kennedy chaired the HELP Committee – played things close to the vest. They were in charge. They controlled what we met about. They conferred with interest groups, they made deals. They doled out information sparingly. The one person who was open and kind on their staff quickly left the committee. When I wanted to know what was really going on, I had to ask Beth or Lindsay, who worked for the Republican ranking member, which is what the senior member of the minority party on a committee is called. The ranking member hires the minority staff.

What was strangest of all was that in weekly and twice-weekly and sometimes daily meetings of the Democratic staff, and this was true as well when the full staff met, we far too frequently discussed things that made no sense at all to me, with my background in teaching. Read enough reports, talk to enough 'stakeholders,' consider enough policy experts, and you could be out there in la-la-land, discussing rational-sounding policies which had no relation to how children learn. It drove me close to frantic. Here we were, good and dedicated people, plotting out legislation that had no serious connection to the real world of teachers and classrooms and students and reasonable expectations for learning.

It was also a world of BlackBerries. I was issued one of the little black gadgets as soon as I reached the Senate. I vividly recall my first day when the Senate was in session. I was making my way through the halls to my first HELP Committee staff meeting when the BlackBerry affixed to my belt buzzed. I checked it and found that the meeting had been cancelled.

In my first committee staff meeting later that day my colleagues kept looking at their BlackBerries and typing out replies – while serious discussion was

going on. It was, to me, maddening. (Though I soon enough learned to do that myself. Not a lesson I am glad to have learned.)

Why am I lurching into BlackBerries?

Because they were antecedents of today's smart phones. I discovered that in addition to keeping me up to date on my email, these small black machines could access the web. Email on Blackberry was rapid, the reason why there were used ubiquitously, while the web was slower and cumbersome, but . . . well, let me explain.

One day, in a particularly obtuse discussion that seemed to me very far from the realities of how we learn, I recalled a line by Wordsworth. I pulled my BlackBerry from its leather sheath to check on the accuracy of my memory. Marvel of the web, the whole poem came up. In small letters of course, and hard to read without continuously scrolling. Still.

I joined the discussion.

"I have a poem by Wordsworth you should hear." Perhaps this was the first time anyone ever brought a poem into a committee staff meeting? Ever? I think it might have been.

But, naïve and determined both, I continued. "Here it is. Wordsworth tells us something about learning that I believe is more important than all this discussion of testing. The poem is called 'The Tables Turned,' and it is the second of two poems about how we learn. The first is called 'Expostulation and Reply.' Here is 'The Tables Turned.'"

I read the poem. Everyone paid attention, though it would be too much to say that the poem mattered. The room turned back to testing as the means of determining how education is working and slid seamlessly past what Wordsworth has to tell us.

The Tables Turned

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless—
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.

“Quit your books.” Turn away from books? From tests? Not something the staff of the education committee thought made any sense in an America where too many schools were ‘failing’ to provide an adequate education to their students. “Wisdom” in a bird song? ‘Get real,’ my colleagues might have replied, ‘school is about making sure students can do arithmetic. As for wisdom, it is not measurable. Some kinds of knowledge are measurable. We’ll stick with those.’

“Let Nature be your teacher....?” ‘What are we doing about students with disabilities, about English language learners?’ (It was beyond their comprehension that either category of students might learn from living in the world, without the intermediaries of adequately prepared teachers to instruct them and standardized tests to collect data on how much mechanically measurable progress was taking place. “Spontaneous wisdom.” Incomprehensible. “One impulse from a vernal wood” teaching more “than all the sages can”? What policy white paper would ever endorse that model of learning for at-risk learners?)

Most tellingly, the poem suggests that rational examination, our “meddling intellect” can fail to guide us in the proper direction. Could my colleagues comprehend that dissecting our nation’s educational problems in the manner in which we were proceeding required us to break a process of learning down into discrete (not process-dependent) elements, that consciousness might well be more than a series of measurable moments? I very much doubt that my excellent, wonderful colleagues (whom I really did like and respect a lot) could even grasp Wordsworth’s remarkable observation that dissection requires a corpse and not a living entity.

Do I sound angry and embittered? On some level, I was, even though as I just noted I truly liked my Democratic staff colleagues. But in two years of discussion of education and how it worked, no one, no one, ever mentioned the word ‘joy.’ No one every noted the relation between deep emotions – love, joy, surprise – and the capacity to learn. No one ever talked about the effect of testing on students who take the tests, their frequent feelings of failure and inadequacy, and the effect those feelings had on their ongoing capacity to learn. (Well, to be truthful, I mentioned those things, but no one ever listened. As in, ever.)

After two years, and some successes – more money for HeadStart, a determined and ultimately successful effort to assure that when testing is done it measure growth and not just capacity-at-the moment – I moved on from handling education issues to become Senator Sanders’ Chief of Staff.

In my new role I went to weekly meetings of the Democratic Chiefs of Staff, all 59 of us. (Even though Bernie was an independent, he caucused with the Democrats.) Every Friday we would gather at 11 o’clock in a crowded conference room on the fifth floor of the Senate Hart Building. A rectangular table was formed by pushing together four smaller rectangular tables together. Half the participants sat at the table, half in four rows of chairs that looked as if they might be for observers. Anyone of course could speak, and many did.

The White House sent its Senate liaisons, and the chief Senate liaison, the Deputy Assistant to the President for Legislative Affairs, gave us briefings on what the President would be doing during the upcoming week. Senator Harry Reid's chief of staff briefed us weekly on what was going on at the leadership level. In my first year, the chief of staff was taciturn and reclusive; afterwards, a new chief of staff was remarkably forthright about the complex negotiations the majority leader regularly had with the minority leader, the devious Senator Mitch McConnell.

Once again among these new colleagues I easily found wonderful people who would guide me through the new world I was entering, that of running and managing a Senate staff. Here too, just as with the HELP staff, I found people I respected and liked. (As a partisan kind of fellow, with few Republican friends in Vermont, I found to my surprise, that among the chiefs – as we called ourselves – there were Republicans who proved themselves not only kind and honest, but who became close friends as well. For all the talk about division in Washington, and it is for the most part true that the partisan divide is stark and all too often insurmountable, among many staff on Capitol Hill there is a community of individual people who respect and like one another. Very odd, but comforting nonetheless. I had found that true on the HELP Committee, and now I found it equally and perhaps more true among senior staff.)

Yet among the Democratic chiefs who were my new colleagues I once again found that our weekly discussions were often remarkably distant from what I would call 'the real world.' Almost everything the chiefs discussed was about what *they* considered 'the real world,' but it was all 'inside the Beltway,' all about procedures and staffing and proposed media campaigns and Senate politics. That America was beset by economic hard times, that internecine political battles obscured truly major problems that we as a nation were not facing up to – the reality of life in America for working families or the elderly or children, the erosion of the physical and social infrastructure that had helped make us a great and prosperous nation, the short-sightedness that looked to political advantage rather than healing and building our wounded citizenry, the seemingly irreversible warming of the planet – none of this mattered in our discussions.

Often we had guests for the second half of our meetings, and we heard from famous pollsters and famous political consultants and famous journalists. We never invited anyone who was an expert in ethics and values or in understanding the problems of global warming or the new reality of continual war. (The idea of inviting a poet or any kind of imaginative artist was, well, inconceivable.) We

never talked, except for half an hour at one yearly retreat, about the personal dimension of our lives.

So I turned to poetry again.

In part, poetry was something I needed to save my own soul. I know that is theological language and hasten to add that I am not a religious person. But there is a danger in Washington, and on Capitol Hill in particular, that in paying very serious attention to what is going on inside the Beltway, in looking at the political all the time, one can become remarkably disconnected from one's larger self. I know, I know, many go home at night to spouses and partners and children and golf foursomes on weekends. But the life of feeling, of feeling both one's self and the shape of the existence of others, that life is pretty much pushed aside in the goings-on of Capitol Hill. And since so much of politics is what politicians pride themselves as going on 24-7, even the existence of family and friends on the 'outside' is perhaps not sufficient.

I had been reading poems since I arrived in Washington, often by poets I had never come to terms with, poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin and Giacomo Leopardi, and often by poets with whom I was deeply familiar such as Wallace Stevens and Pablo Neruda. For several years I read these poets on the Metro on my way to work. In the evening I was too tired to read anything on the Metro but the newspaper. Eventually, I became too tired even in the morning, and read the sports section of the *Washington Post*. (Not a bad newspaper, as I discovered, but its sports section was all Redskins all the time, 365 days a year. Parochial. In the extreme.)

Let me go back to my first years when I staffed the Senator on the education committee. Stung by my unfamiliarity with what was actually going on in the American schools I and my colleagues were so blithely working on 'improving,' I decided it made sense for me to teach a course on poetry at an inner-city high school.

Senator Sanders was great about that: I told him I wanted to take two hours, twice a week, to teach in a Washington public school so I would have first-hand knowledge of what we were legislating about, and he immediately said yes. The University of Vermont was great: when I asked that the course be given for UVM credits at no cost to the students, reminding them that I would be teaching it gratis, they immediately said, "Sure." And the school itself, Bell Multicultural High School in Columbia Heights, was a marvel of a community, where teachers and students and administrators all cared about one another.

I taught Dickinson and Whitman and Frost, Wordsworth and Williams and Neruda and Bishop. My students, overwhelmingly (actually, entirely) ‘students of color’ came to poems with an openness that far surpassed that of my students at the University of Vermont, although my Vermont students had analytic and compositional talents my high school students did not. When we read poems about death, these remarkable students talked about their siblings and people in their neighborhood who had died and the loss they felt at what we abstractly call ‘mortality.’ Whether the subject was alienation or joy, one’s body or the natural world, they responded with directness about their own experience that was breathtaking to me, accustomed as I am to college-age students who have been socialized to keep much of their experience within, lest the inner life be seen as a sign of . . . well, weakness or vulnerability.

In a number of ways, then, poems sustained my spirit as I read them and taught them. I came to the realization that maybe they could sustain the spirit of my colleagues as well. Colleagues who were, good people though they might have been, too caught up in the affairs of everyday political and legislative affairs to pay attention to themselves.

[A parenthetical note. Over twenty years ago a colleague and I invited one of the world’s preeminent thinkers, Michel Foucault, to come to the University of Vermont to give a faculty seminar. It was a remarkable intellectual experience, and since Foucault died six months later, before he was able to give us the manuscript he had intended to deliver of what he had talked about, we put together a book comprised of collating all our notes from his lectures. The book, *Technologies of the Self*, is still in print, and has been translated into French, German, Italian, Japanese. The center of Foucault’s inquiry, perhaps not surprising for a man who knew he was dying of AIDS, was *epimelesthai sautou*, ancient Greek for ‘to take care of yourself.’ To me, poetry is one means by which, in our cluttered and too-often-objectified modern world, we can take care of ourselves. Poetry sustains, often in surprising ways, the spirit.]

So, as I said before, I turned to poetry again, not just for myself but to add, I hoped, a needed dimension to my colleague’s lives. But this time I did not turn to poems in order to recite in meetings. Now I would ‘deliver’ poems by email.

I wrote an email to the chiefs, Republic as well as Democratic, explaining what I was about to do: send out emails, each containing a poem and a (hopefully) welcoming essay about how to read the poem, since so many of us think that poetry is an exercise meant to show that the smart kids in the front row of English

classes are smart, and that therefore poems have little to offer the rest of us who never aspired to sit in the front row of an English class. Over the next few weeks I mailed two poems, both of which would probably not be recognized by one in a hundred professors of English. Both were by writers from countries abroad, written in a foreign language but available in good translations.

I chose them because each poem was surprising, remarkable, memorable to me, even though neither would be considered as their author's best work. One was by the modernist Italian Eugenio Montale, one by the relatively contemporary Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert.

I had read Montale for years and taught him several times, but with the exception of his tour-de-force "The Eel – over twenty lines, but just one sentence! – I could never really recall any of his poems with great precision. They were kind of fuzzy in memory. Then a monumental new translation by Jonathan Galassi of Montale's poems had appeared – not better than Arrowsmith's earlier wonderful translations, but equally good, and including many more poems – and I found among his earliest poems one that was truly unforgettable. It was a poem about a simple gesture, the act of turning around, and to me it was so marvelous – and terrifying – that I thought about it all the time. So it was my choice for the first email I would send.

The Herbert poem is a great defense of art, but requires not so much deep reading but great attentiveness to make that defense profound. So I approached the poem line by line, hoping to make sure my readers were attentive.

Over the next five years I sent out, at first relatively regularly, then less often, then more regularly again, poems by a good number of poets. After I had sent out the first two poems, I realized it would be a great mistake to be recondite ('hey, buddy, I'm way smarter and more knowledgeable than you!'), and besides, old chestnuts are often particularly difficult for modern readers to approach. We believe, wrongly, that 'classics' belong in middle school and have little to say to us today.

So I turned to a poem by Wordsworth (I would ultimately send out another of his as well), one by William Carlos Williams, and one by Robert Frost. One by the ever popular Pablo Neruda; another by the ever remarkable Elizabeth Bishop. But for me one of Bishop's poems was not enough. Wanting to share my favorite poem of hers, I sent a second. I veered into less familiar names, the mid-century black poet Robert Hayden and the ultra-contemporary Canadian, Anne Carson. Stretching my readers, and in the case of Carson, most definitely stretching myself.

I love Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the two giants of American poetry. So I sent out a poem by each. Whitman's poem, one of his greatest, drew on the years he spent nursing wounded soldiers in military hospitals in Washington. Dickinson's poem was about summer, and I chose it because summer in Washington is, well, very much present. Although the poem was a New England poem, about the sense one has of summer ending.

Then back to the recondite, since expanding boundaries is sometimes what makes us feel most alive, that exciting feeling of being connected to our own capacities for growth. I mailed out a homoerotic lyric poem of passion by the early twentieth century Greek poet Constantin Cavafy. Back to Wordsworth – he really is the greatest poet to write in our language in the past several hundred years, I think – and my favorite late twentieth century poem, “Corson's Inlet” by A. R. Ammons.

I left Washington to return to Vermont, and kept the mailings going, with a minor poem – but what a wonder! – by the minor poet A. E. Housman.

I love Zbigniew Herbert, and a poem he had written seemed to me terribly appropriate to our current times, so I returned to him.

I mailed two poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, one of which I had been struggling for two years. Not because the poem was so hard (well, a couple of lines were, for me) but because I couldn't really figure out how to write about it in a way that made sense and wasn't somehow patronizing to my potential readers. The other was her most famous poem, “We Real Cool,” which I had never fully come to terms with even though I had taught it many times, even though it is only eight lines long, and seven of the lines consist three words and one line consists of two. Suddenly, back to teaching once more, I seemed to approach it with a fresh mind, and the poem was clear in a way it never had before. That is a not unfamiliar feeling to anyone who reads and rereads poems over time: sometimes we grow into them.

Another poem, this time by the recently deceased (what a loss!) Seamus Heaney, a stunning poem in a sequence of poems. I felt a little odd pulling out one part of the sequence, but it is a poem which speaks very deeply to me. Its concluding lines tell us more about the social role a poet may choose to play than anything I have ever read.

If I could do Heaney, I figured I could broach Charles Baudelaire, one of the inventors of modern life and modern art, and a poet whom I have struggled with for close to half a century. (Small surprise: I chose a poem that has resided in my imagination for fifty years. Some poems are, truly, unforgettable. Although it took me at least forty years to recognize that despite its shocking strangeness, it was a love poem.) And then on to the mad man of twentieth century poetry, Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Quite a journey, and one I have continued, my ongoing the voyage with my readers.

My mailing list grew, so that it came to include some Senators, staff in the White House, a few Pulitzer Prize winners, and many former students.

While I was in Washington, a wonderful reporter from the *Washington Post*, Manuel Roig-Franzia, wrote a lovely story, "Huck Gutman brings a bit of poetry and verse to U.S. Senate colleagues." The *Boston Globe* published a story about this strange phenomenon, poems circulating on Capitol Hill. The U.V.M. alumni publication had a story about the eccentric passion I had brought to 'official' Washington. I returned to Vermont and to teaching, and so recent students entered my list, too. The list of email recipients grew and grew. It now stands at over 2000.

I kept writing and sending out poems. Several times it was music, as with Beethoven, Schönberg, Ives, Rossini, Bolcomb. I returned to Dickinson and Wordsworth, and to Rilke. There were reasonably contemporary poets, like Maxine Kumin, James Dickey, Philip Larkin, Richard Wilbur, Paul Zimmer, C. K. Williams. I ventured into poets I do not fully understand, like Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam. Wallace Stevens. More Baudelaire, now paired with an older French poet, Joachim Du Bellay. Auden. Stevie Smith. Keats. Shelley, too.

In one of the twentieth century's greatest sonnets, the poem Rainer Maria Rilke faces an archaic, ruined remnant of Greek sculpture. At the end of the poem, and for reasons the preceding lines in some measure prepare us for, Rilke recognizes with shock, "You must change your life." The 'you,' is, of course, Rilke. The hunk of stone speaks to him with a power that challenges all he is and has been. "You must change your life."

Art can do that to us. I know we are much too familiar with intellectual talking heads who sigh, 'Oh, art,' and so confirm us in our unconscious decision to tune out art in general and poems in particular. But that's wrong. Life can contain

both art and pro football, both baroque music and cheeseburgers. Poems, to my mind, *matter*. That is what each of my emails was based on, what lay beneath the discussion of what is going on in a particular poem: *Poems matter*.

I hope that as you read some of the letters I have sent out, you will see why and how poems matter. And I hope, even more, that a few of these poems will end up mattering to you, too.