

## POETRY MAKES SOMETHING HAPPEN

Poetry makes something happen, indeed. It makes you happen. It makes your living happen, whether or not you deal with it. A poet is by definition a teacher also. If I never teach another class, every poem I create is an attempt at a piece of truth formed from the images of my experience, and share[d] with as many others as can or will hear me. This is something poetry shares with other hard work. Making real poems is teaching, digging good ditches is teaching, survival is teaching. The only human state I know of that is not teaching is sleep, and that is a property which sleep shares with death.

I cannot separate my life and my poetry. I write my living, and I live my work. I am a Black Woman Poet Lesbian Mother Lover Teacher Friend Warrior, and I am shy, strong, fat, generous, loyal, and crotchety, among other things. If I do not bring all of who I am to whatever I do, then I bring nothing of lasting worth, because I have withheld some piece of the essential. If I do not bring all of who I am to you here, speaking of what I feel, of what I know, then I do you all an injustice. Whatever you find here of use you will take away with you, whatever you cannot use you will leave behind.

My poetry is not separate from my living, nor is yours. The only way we can teach another person to create poetry is to teach that person how to feel herself or himself. The experience of poetry is intimate, and it is crucial. For that reason, of course, it is often resented or resisted. The pursuit of one's own poetry is basically a subversive activity, because the pursuit of one's feelings colors one's total existence, and we are paid well for refusing to feel ourselves. It is hard to feel anger and fury and frustration and grief. It is so much easier to remain emotionally aloof or to

indulge in the quick emotional jerk-off that passes as sentiment so often. It is hard to accept the tragedy of children shot in the streets of Soweto as our tragedy. We are paid very well to refuse to feel. We are paid in poisonous creature comforts, we are paid in false securities, in the spurious belief that tenure might mean survival, that the knock at midnight will always be on somebody else's door. As we sit here now, Black children and university students are being imprisoned and tortured and killed on the streets and in the prisons of South Africa. We are not separate from that horror. It has happened before in New York, it has happened in Chicago, it has happened in Jackson, Mississippi, it has happened in Ohio, and it will happen again. How many of us feel these tragedies as our own? Yet we are intimately and vitally involved with them. How many of us recognize that they will continue to re-occur until we act, until we use our power, whoever and wherever we are, against these horrors? There is no separate survival.

The teaching of poetry then is teaching the recognition of feeling, is the teaching of survival. It is neither easy nor casual, but it is necessary and fruitful. The role of the poet as teacher is to encourage the intimacy of scrutiny. As we learn to bear that intimacy, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their power over us. We will probably always be afraid, because we have been socialized to fear; [fear] of being revealed, of being ridiculed, of being different, of being hurt. But as our poetry becomes stronger, being afraid becomes less important, the way being tired becomes less important. And we are used to working when we are tired.

Poetry is not a luxury. For the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon those changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dreams birth concepts, as feeling births ideas, as knowledge births or precedes understanding.

When we view our living in the european mode, only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for the

white fathers told us it was our ideas alone which were precious. But as we become more and more in touch with our own ancient and original non-european view of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden and deep sources of our power from whence true knowledge and therefore lasting action come. It is the fusion of these two approaches which is the keystone to our survival as a race, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry.

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives, honestly felt. For our feelings are the sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of our ideas. Right now I could mention at least ten ideas I might have once found intolerable or frightening except as they came after dreams or poems. For poetry is not only dream and vision, it is the skeleton architect of our lives.

The white fathers have told us: I think, therefore I am. But the Black mother within each of us, the poet within each of us, whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter the implementation of that freedom. Agostinho Neto knew this, the poet who led his people of Angola to freedom.

But sometimes we drug ourselves with the dream of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will make us free. But there are no new ideas and forgotten ones, new combinations and recognitions within ourselves, together with the renewed courage to try them out, to dare to live as those dreams which some of our ideas disparage. And in the forefront of our move toward change, there is only our poetry to hint at possibility made real. There are no new ideas, only new ways of making them felt, of making them real. For within these structures which we live beneath, defined by profit, by flat linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. They were meant to be kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes. Our feelings were meant to kneel to thought as women were meant to kneel to men. But women have survived, and our feelings have survived. As poetry. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We

have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They lie in our dreams, they lie in our poems, and it is our dreams and our poems that point the way to our freedom.

You have come here tonight to share my feelings on the poet as teacher. I present to you myself. I present to you each of your selves. Learn to love the power of your feelings, and to use that power for your good.