

Entering History Through Poetry



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By Linda Christensen

During the Vietnam War, I was in high school in Eureka, Calif. In history, I studied World War II. In English, we dutifully read from a dull anthology until the afternoon Mike Brazee liberated us by throwing the whole lot of them out the second floor window. Why didn't my teachers bring the war to class? As an English teacher, I marvel at the possibilities. We could have read Henry David Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" or examined the lyrics of protest songs. We could have debated the wisdom of the draft. When world events shake our students' lives, don't we have an obligation to bring the world into our classrooms?

In teaching students about the potential war with Iraq, they need facts, statistics, video clips, history. They need to tackle big ideas: Why is the U.S. government pushing so desperately for war? What is the cost of war? Bush's State of the Union proposal calls for huge increases in military spending, and his relentless push for war against Iraq coincided with the failure of Oregon's Ballot Measure 28 causing the loss of 24 teaching days in Portland Public Schools. Shouldn't students discuss the priorities behind these decisions? Shouldn't they talk about how the richest country in the world chooses to abandon public schools and health care for weapons and war?

Students also need stories and poetry to understand our connections to people an ocean away, who too often have been rendered by the evening news into effigy-burning zealots. In his article "What War Looks Like," Howard Zinn remarked, "It is left to the poets and novelists to take us by the shoulders and shake us and ask us to look and listen." In that spirit, I offer several poetry lessons.

100 POETS AGAINST THE WAR

Opening a topic as volatile as war by getting students to talk about their fears and questions can help teachers understand the extent of student knowledge as well as their positions. Many students don't have much background information about the situation in Iraq. They have collected sound bites about national security and the evils of Saddam, and, in my experience, a head-on examination of those beliefs can cause entrenchment rather than openness to new facts.

As I taught these poems in Kathy Anderson's sophomore English class at Roosevelt High School, I became aware that I didn't leave much room for students who support the war. Two students did write and share poems that could be interpreted as endorsing Bush's push to war. I mention this because I don't like to strong-arm students into adopting my point of view. Students should feel comfortable entering a classroom conversation; otherwise, we're not wrestling with issues; we're pinning them down and force-feeding them.

JR Carpenter's poem "A verse to war" provides an opening for discussion.

A VERSE TO WAR

I am afraid (of what will happen of the rhetoric of the silence of not knowing). I am

afraid I don't know what to contribute. I am afraid (of destruction of waiting of doing nothing of adding fuel to the flames). I am afraid I don't have any answers. I am afraid (of trivializing of propagandizing of margins of error). I am afraid it is but a meager thing to add a verse adverse to war.

- J R Carpenter

Carpenter's poem comes from the chapbook *100 Poets Against the War*, available free online at www.nthposition.com. This e-book was written and released in the week between January 20 and January 27 via Internet to coincide with the release of Hans Blix's weapons inspection report. As editor of the anthology, Todd Swift wrote:

It is widely expected that this report will either act as a trigger for war, or begin the process whereby the United States of America in fact disregards the will of the U.N., and makes a unilateral (give or take a few cronies) preemptive strike upon Iraq. There is a tendency in some quarters to believe that poetry (in the ironic words of Auden) "makes nothing happen." *100 Poets Against the War* is proof that well-written (political) poetry does happen, and matters: It reveals powerfully (and poignantly) how many people oppose imperialist wars of aggression, or want peace, rather than full spectrum domination.

Carpenter uses the repeating line "I am afraid," then lists her fears. I asked students to look at the structure of the poem — the repeating line followed by a list. Then we generated potential lines and students wrote poems using this structure. Abigail, a sophomore in Anderson's class, wrote about her brother: "I am afraid/of my brother leaving/to serve this country./I am afraid/I will never get the chance/to hug him again.../I am afraid of war." Ashley, Abigail's classmate, invented her own line and tied the war to the budget cuts: "I do not know/of war/of suffering/of fear./I do not know how my life will be altered.../I do not know/of destruction/of cold-blooded murder.../I do not know my future/of dreams unbroken/of non-potential/ of miseducation...."

TACKLING BIG QUESTIONS

Who is responsible for war? Is it just the soldier who pulls the trigger? Is it the President? Anti-war activists claim that by paying our taxes we condone war. In my classroom, we examined the roles of allies, targets, and bystanders (see "Acting for Justice" at: www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/15_02/Act152.shtml).

I wanted students to see that silence or lack of action is in fact action. William Stafford, a legendary poet from Oregon, was a conscientious objector during World War II. His poem, "Entering History," asks questions that tie our taxes to the bullets and the bombs used in war. This would be a great poem to pair with Henry David Thoreau's "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" or Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's play "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail." While students in the sophomore class struggled with the meaning of the first two stanzas, they unanimously agreed that the questions of the last stanza made us all responsible for war whether we pulled the trigger or "put the fire to the town/where the screaming began."

ENTERING HISTORY

Remember the line in the sand? You were there, on the telly, part of the military. You didn't want to give it but they took your money for those lethal tanks and the bombs.

Minorities, they don't have a country even if they vote: "Thanks, anyway," the majority says, and you are left there staring at the sand and the line they draw, calling it a challenge, calling it "ours."

Where was your money when the tanks grumbled past: Which bombs did you buy for the death rain that fell? Which year's taxes put that fire to the town where the screaming began?

- William Stafford

Michael, another student in Anderson's class, clearly understood the connection between our actions and war when he wrote, "Where were we when wars were engaging in other parts of the world? Maybe we were pumping gas into our cars or sleeping with no worries."

ARE THERE CHILDREN?

After Bill Bigelow and I taught a unit on the Vietnam War in our Literature and U.S. History class, I talked with students about why poetry should be used in history. Mira said, "Poetry made history come to life. When we wrote after *Hearts and Minds*, I was there. I was a soldier. I identified with what was going on. I felt their feelings. I got more involved. This wasn't just history. This was life. Poetry helped me examine why the war happened because I got inside the people who witnessed it." The poems became prompts to explore the lives of people involved in the war. Why was it necessary for soldiers to dehumanize the enemy? What happened to the veterans after they returned home? How did these men and women learn to live normal lives again after their experiences?

Robert Priest's poem "Are there children" (100 Poets Against the War) takes us by the shoulders and shakes us in a way Howard Zinn would approve. He doesn't hide the blood. He doesn't let us stand back and look at targets. In Mira's words, he makes the war come to life.

Priest's use of questions and images, like Stafford's, pulls the poem forward and he makes us see the innocent victims of war. "Are there children somewhere/waiting for wounds/eager for the hiss of napalm/in their flesh/the mutilating thump of shrapnel ..." I pointed out the mechanics of Priest's use of questions, followed by a list of images. Students underlined the images that made them see or hear war. For this exercise I asked students to write a poem that uses questions to make the reader "see" something about war, the budget cuts, their lives.

Poems are not a substitute for information. Students need to investigate why this war is happening. Poetry is not social analysis. Students' poems won't help them figure out the role of oil in this war. It won't help them figure out why Iraq and not North Korea. However, the poetry will help students understand the human consequences of those decisions. And by humanizing the war, students may care enough to join our investigation into its causes.

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