

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 103
Issue 3 *Spring 2015*

Article 9

April 2015

Educating by Poetry: In a Too-Literal World, Metaphor Makes Magical Connections

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Recommended Citation

Blevins, Adrian (2015) "Educating by Poetry: In a Too-Literal World, Metaphor Makes Magical Connections," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 103 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol103/iss3/9>

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By Adrian Blevins

I often rouse students in my poetry classes through hypothetical exams. Sometimes the subject of the exam is quite narrow: Is this image of something “falling light as a thistlebloom” effective in Heather’s gritty Manhattan poem? Or the question is vast, universal: What is the purpose of poetry? Why are we sitting here doing this? Shouldn’t we cease our literary indulgences right this instant and find some hungry kids to feed?

The purpose of the exam that I don’t give and don’t grade is just a way to generate discussion, of course, but the fact that it is imaginary could not be more important. I say out loud and in public that I teach students how to get in touch with their own sensibilities so they can use these sensibilities—by which I mean just their awareness of their own obsessions and current preferences and leanings—to generate original poems. This is true. I also say that the purpose of an arts education overall is to learn how to describe what you see in the museum

hanging there “like an ache on the wall”—to go beyond the blasphemy of I don’t like it to something more figurative and associative like it is like unto tiny rabbits biting their own tails in the grass.

The movement or jump or leap—yes, the leap—from a basic description of any work of art to the comparison of it to other things in the world is what I am really interested in teaching, since education by poetry, as Robert Frost says in his famous essay on the subject, is “education by metaphor,” that amazing little trick of the mind and tongue that enacts correspondences between one object or idea or sensation or feeling and another. Metaphor is central to all learning because it develops, as Colby’s own Ira Sadoff says, “a sense of relation in students, a capacity to see the connection among things.”

So: I could write you a little story of insight in which Heather, my student, learns by way of her poem that she really loves her Uncle Jack, imbicilic thingamabob though he may be. Or I could regale you with a hundred stories of students who have decided, thanks to some deep-felt thing they shook loose by writing a poem, to work for the benefit of others.

Such poems do get written, and students do learn about themselves by writing them. But, as therapeutic as writing poetry might be, self inspection is not the purpose of studying poetry. Instead, the main purpose of poetry inside the classroom and out is to make a space for one to learn to live inside and with and among and via metaphor. Education by poetry is a process by which students can learn with work they write themselves (and so have a genuine investment in) that thinking itself is thinking in metaphors, which can be understood—for another way to put it—as little puffs of like unto energy that tie the world of the spirit, as Frost would say, to the world of matter, so that the world of the spirit (or what we commonly call the soul) can be perceived and maybe even learned from and acted on.

In other words, of course the abovementioned hypothetical painting in the museum is not static, not dead or flat, but like unto tiny horses breathing in anticipation in a little box of yellow lines. Or like unto my child’s heart running to the creek that day in June when I grasped for the first time that the longing to take in and to understand—to try to know: to constantly ask—must be the very purpose of my life.



“As therapeutic as writing poetry might be, self inspection is not the purpose of studying poetry. Instead, the main purpose of poetry inside the classroom and out is to make a space for one to learn to live inside and with and among and via metaphor.”

—Adrian Blevins

Like unto a little brain of flames.

Like unto the whole body
emerged in the big library
of the universe!

And so learning is joy, the students,
leaning in, do not hypothetically ask.
A surrender but also an opening?
A way of not only thinking, but
of being?

Yes, Frost and I and all the poets say.
It is.

Adrian Blevins is associate professor of English (creative writing). Her most recent book of poems is Live from the Homesick Jamboree (Wesleyan University Press, 2009).