CHAPTER 5

TAKING CARE OF STUDENTS AND OURSELVES

This chapter focuses mainly on dealing with pastoral care issues. Although university teachers may be, as Anna Neumann (2009) found, primarily focused on their subjects, many also care passionately about their students' development, health and welfare. Whether through reading student work, listening to them in small classes, or seeing them individually during office hours, teachers often face students who are coping with a range of personal challenges including abortion, coming out, family deaths or depression. Dealing with students on a personal level presents ethical as well as emotional challenges, evoking guilt, shame, love and hope.

REFERENCES

Neumann, A. (2009). *Professing to learn: Creating tenured lives and careers in the American research university*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

CHAPTER 5

KARL ELDER

The Art of Teaching

Hands behind your back,
bend forward at the waist and
pick up the apple.

The Art of Teaching II

Hands bound and apple
held tightly in your mouth, now you
are all ears. Listen.

Commentary. These companion pieces above are part of a chapbook, *Some Three Dozen Miniatures from Karl Elder's Rubber Band Bound Batches of Random Locutions*, that was published in an issue of *Lakeland*, Lakeland College's house magazine.

SUZANNE ROBERTS

Try Teaching at the Community College

A student says in an essay he wants to bury bullets in his parents,
that he wants to *kill, kill, kill* – that is a direct quotation – some hotel maid
to see the blood splatter on white walls. I am not joking. But,
neither is he. He says he feels much better. Now. Don't worry,
it's in the past. Why didn't he use the past perfect? No answer,
but he assures me that he understands the difference – past and *deep* past:
Felt, have felt, had felt. Here on the page: *feels, feels, feels.*

The best student from literature class visits your office,
tells you she's pregnant. Again. *But here's the thing*, she says.
It belongs to my ex and I've started dating someone else
who I think is The One. I don't want to fuck it up. Of course,
she says the word *fuck*. Why wouldn't she?
You hand her a Kleenex. She wants you to tell her
what to do and you want to too. You want to tell her
about the one and only you yourself have discarded.
And the artist who bit your pretty red heart in two.
But remember your job. It's not to give advice. Later,
when she's no longer pregnant – the almost now once was –
she says she's mad at you for teaching Sylvia Plath,
that can't bear to read it. You couldn't have understood,
understand. Some lessons are stillborn.

Another student writes all over his body – or so I am told,
I have seen only the arms – words in thick black marker,
'What Is Broken? … Man' and 'Excuse Me, I am Talking.'
The scrawl is blocky third-grade, his own hand.
He suffered a brain injury serving in Iraq. That is my guess.
I've become a master at the guess. You will too.
If you saw how good looking he was – is – it would split
the cage of your chest in two. If you saw the way the other students
make fun of him as he walks the hallways, indelible notes on his body,
in his body, you would know the world is – was – has already been
more than half over. Can you digest your own beating heart?

CHAPTER 5

CAROLE GLASSER LANGILLE

To the Young Poet

You became a street kid
breaking into your own heart
as if it were a locked house, the owner asleep
or on vacation. Shining your flashlight,
not to steal but to find out
if it were safe to enter, nights too cold
to wander streets.

You scaled walls barbed with wire,
somehow managing to balance on top
before you crossed over.
Tagging tunnels moments before
the train roared in.
Risk was a bridge you crossed because
it got you places.

'He was like a dragon breaking down walls,'
it is said of certain Chinese poets.
No dragon, you hid your fire
and entered rooms quietly,
crowded or empty, looking for what was
concealed behind doors.
Young poet rappelling, without any harness,

the daring descent. You knew more
than I knew and I was your teacher.

Commentary. This poem was written about one of my students I had several years ago in a creative writing class. He was very talented as well as modest and his suggestions greatly improved the dynamics of the class. After talking with him in one of our meetings I felt that he'd suffered trauma, because he would tell me things he did that were very dangerous. Why did he take such risks? Every semester I learn from my students. Many of them are tremendously talented. Every once in a while I have a remarkable student and I know, if the gods are just, he will receive recognition. Of course, the gods aren't always just. This poem was written to honour a remarkable student.

VIVIAN SHIPLEY

Christine, at Night, I Tired; Early Morning, I …

Late February, words you spoke outside the seminar
created no clear picture like workshop poems threaded
by your mother's suicide. To compare their techniques,
I assigned you Plath and Sexton. Not satisfied, you asked
why Virginia Woolf weighted her pockets with stones,
and I could answer only that it was impossible to say
which one caused her to sink. You quit coming to Southern.
I didn't call a counselor; dead all these months, I did not
know. Gathering your work for a chapbook, I boasted

I would address your death in a preface with a word of life.
Your poems I had boxed were thrown out by painters moving
my office desk. Another vow I didn't honor, my promise
to keep your name alive was hollow, a cored apple. January
sky, coral as the high collared dress you wore, or flashes
of hair, china black, startle me like the voice of a person
I didn't know was in the room. Nobody experiences anything
through words: think Hiroshima; Kyushu's port, Nagasaki.
Atomic bomb and nuclear shadow are the same to a mother

reading about warring white blood cells as she nurses her son.
A mind adjusts to that as pupils do to the dark inside a closet
where you hung among jackets, above shoes. Did you kick
a vacuum aside like woman flinging bras in Filene's Basement,
or were you trying to pray, a mantis with legs slowly lifting?
The scene shifts. Perhaps your wrists had not healed hiding
razor scars, perhaps I had called you aside after class. Night
mushrooms. What do I know about it or your mind, Christine,
thick with layers you could not strip off like burned skin.

Previously published in *Gleanings: Old Poems, New Poems* (Louisiana Literature Press, 2013) and *Perennial*. (Negative Capability Press, 2015)

Commentary. I have taught at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, CT since 1969. Christine is the only student I have ever had who killed herself while she was enrolled in my class. I wrote this poem to come to terms with how I failed to help her by trying to find out why she quit coming to class. I also did not keep my promise to myself to publish her work. This poem records my guilt and also gives voice to Christine's personal struggle.

SUZANNE ROBERTS

Night Class

The class I dread, somebody
always wanting something—
little birds waiting for food,
wide open beaks, mouths agape—
feeding as sacrifice.

One of the older students always
coming at me with worn spidery skin,
the brassy blond ponytail, a Band-Aid
stretched across her nose. Always
coughing, saying *Sorry,* coughing again.

Always asking me to proofread
her résumé, poems, the children's story
she'd written with her shaky hand.
As if you had time, my officemate says.
I agree, but scratch off a few comments.

Tonight, I let class out early.
On my way to my car, I hear
the phlegmy cough rattling
from the bus stop shelter.
I quicken my pace through the dark lot.

At home, I pour a glass of merlot,
sit down to read the homework—
Thank you letters, using specifics,
to show appreciation to the person
who has been the greatest help of all.

Between notes to Mom, the favorite uncle,
a generous boss, I find a letter written
on pink stationary, embossed with gold roses.
The letter is addressed to me, the shaky hand
claims there is nobody else.

SUZANNE ROBERTS

Connection
After Marge Piercy's 'Barbie Doll'

I asked my students
to analyze a poem
by creating art—
a painting, a sculpture,
a shadow box. I said,
make a connection.
One student chose
a poem about
a young girl
who learns to hate
herself, cuts off
her nose and her legs,
offers them up.
My student pasted
a picture of herself
on the page—
pink sweater,
matching hat,
heart necklace,
manicured fingernails,
a beautiful girl—she wrote
across her picture:
You have a great big nose and fat legs.
This poem reminds me of me

CHAPTER 5

TERRY MARTIN

Office Hours

Fall Quarter

Julie, who will be student teaching next quarter, comes by to talk to me. The form from the Placement Office asks her to list her permanent address, and she's unsure what to do. Her parents are homeless, have been living on the street somewhere in Seattle, she doesn't know where. She worries about them, wonders if she'll ever be able to find them, and, if she does, what then? 'But for now, what should I write on the form?' she asks.

Winter Quarter

Marie calls to tell me she probably won't be able to make it to methods class today. She sounds shaken. When I ask her if she's all right, she says, 'No, I'm really not'—tells me that in the middle of the night a man smashed her second story window, broke into her apartment, and raped her. She has been sitting alone in her living room ever since, staring at the wall, shivering. She hasn't told anyone until now, when she realized she really should let me know that she might be missing class this afternoon.

Spring Quarter

Matt is waiting outside my office when I arrive. He reaches for the stack of books and briefcase I am carrying and holds them while I unlock the door. 'How was your spring break?' I ask. 'Not good,' he says, closing it behind us. Face pale, he describes his week. He was diagnosed with AIDS on Monday, and on Wednesday, drove to his small rural hometown to break the news to his parents—not only that he has is sick, but that he is gay. He describes his mother's pain, his father's rage, his own fear. When he finishes telling his story, I stand, hug him, hold him. Then close the door behind him, and gather myself for my next class.

Previously published in *Earth's Daughters*

JOY REID

Accused

Two girls stand before me.

One seems genuine.

Her fluttering hands are butterflies of breathy assurance.

Could it be she?

She has always performed delightfully
strode forward eager with beaming face and compliant palms –
offered
unsought services, compliments.
Her neon eyes and eggshell skin argues…

The other stands mute – an asphyxiated Kewpie
relying on projection and a practised unctuous aura to
soothe.
Her insincere sincerity and scapegoat eyes
disturb.
Unconsciously she leans toward me, her obscene closeness argues…

Could it be her?

If I could separate
yolk
from white
my decision would be golden – but truth is scrambled.

Two girls stand accused.

Perhaps… one
tells the truth.

But the other,
the other
is lying.

Previously published in *Wattpad*

TERRY MARTIN

The Third Wrestler Cries

Never the football players.
Never the basketball players.
No baseball or track or soccer guys.
Only the wrestlers.

Jaime is the third.
Freshman coiled tight as a spring,
biceps bulging under t-shirt sleeves,
here during my office hour wanting
to talk about the Sherman Alexie poem
he has chosen for his class presentation.

All earnestness, gaze direct, he practices
reading it aloud, knee bouncing
up and down like a jackhammer.
When he reaches a line that moves him,
lips tremble and he halts, unable to continue.
Brown eyes look up at me, liquid pools
teeming, startled fish about to spill over.
'see, I *get* this guy' he tells me, voice cracking.

Jaime, I'm not as hungry as you,
spitting and sweating and starving away
those last three pounds, trying
to make weight by Thursday.
Not as tired as you,
dark circles ringing your eyes.
But believe me: *I get you, too.*
See, I know about intensity—
its blessing and its curse.
Know the pressure of one-on-one,
how it feels to be alone out there,
on the mat, in the spotlight,
facing that next opponent.

And isn't the point to love—
even if too much, or the wrong way?
To lose yourself in what you do
in hopes of finding yourself?

Listening, nodding, I shove
the Kleenex box across the desk,
offer the tissue.

Previously published in *This Assignment is So Gay: LGBTIQ Poets on the Art of Teaching* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013)

Commentary. So much of what's interesting, and exhausting, about working in higher education happens outside the classroom. This poem is one of a series exploring the teaching that happens one-on-one, during office hours, which may be some of the most important work we do.

CHAPTER 5

SCOTT WIGGERMAN

Advocate

They come to me like penitents,
past the pink triangle on my door:

plodding gaits, jittery eyes,
voices seldom rise above whispers.

They confess: *I think I might be gay.*
They want absolution, not realizing

the canyon between secrets and sins.
I'm often the first adult they've

spoken these words to, the only teacher
they've known who's out.

I listen. I don't have to coax.
The pressure of dammed-up silence

unleashes floods of words,
the long breath after time underwater.

I give them my blessing: *It's okay*.
And add: *Don't ever apologize.*

Previously published in *This Assignment is So Gay: LGBTIQ Poets on the Art of Teaching* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013)

KATHLEEN M. QUINLAN

Academic Priorities

No. Today is for research. I only see students during office hours.

She's perfectly justified.

Just because her door is open to the common room,
doesn't mean students are welcome to come in
to discuss an essay or ask a question.

If I'd passed through the door
instead of standing timidly on the threshold
she'd have to let in the other two dozen students
from her 'Abnormal Psych' course,
although none of them was around to notice.

She needs to set her boundaries, manage her time.
After all, she's a professor and
an actual, real-life, practicing psychologist.
(There aren't any of those where I come from.)

Students are just students. Just because I've dreamed
of a Ph.D. after my degree since I was 16
shouldn't make any difference. I'm not special.
I'm just another kid interrupting her real work.

How could she know that I'd been eyeing her door
for an hour, rehearsing my approach? That I'd used up
all my courage knocking the first time
and wouldn't be able to do it again tomorrow?

Commentary. As a rural student of modest means in a highly selective, private four-year liberal arts college that drew privileged students from around the United States, I often felt out of place and intimidated. On several occasions I sought out assistance from academics during office hours, with disappointing results. This example was, perhaps, the most devastating, as it was in my major area of study. After two years, I transferred to the flagship campus of the state university. There I was delighted to find faculty who seemed to genuinely enjoy teaching and who were happy to talk with me outside of class.

RICHARD M. BERLIN

Surgery Rotation

The last weak rays of sun
shine on the drab green chart room walls.
The evening staff has finished report,
and the wing quiets as night comes on,
our team reviewing the final tasks
on our 36 hour shift –
a dressing for a gangrenous toe,
X-rays to read, IVs to start.
The surgeon opens an aluminum chart
with two hundred colored pages
clipped by a spring, pink for progress
notes, blue for vital signs, lab values
stapled in like tattered rags
on a scarecrow. He points the cold
metal at me like an accusation,
and lets it fall just before I get my grip.
I can still see it tumble
like a cannon ball Galileo dropped
from the Leaning Tower,
and I can still hear it explode
on the linoleum floor,
pages scattered like straw in a thunderstorm.
But what I remember best is how hard
the floor felt against my knees,
the dust balls in the corner,
the way no one moved
to help me pick up the pages,
the shined black leather of the surgeon's shoes.

Previously published in *Secret Wounds* (BkMk Press, 2011)

CAROLYN MARTIN

8 O'Clock Monday Morning

Another Monday and late-comers cruise
to berth in rigid rows. I smile
a knowing smile as they shake off sleep
and grouse about warm beds and how the frost
annoyed their trek and how I'll dare to fill
their minds while empty stomachs growl.

By now, they know I love this class
and challenge them with poetry
that rolls their eyes until it settles in.

I open with a prayer and then announce,
The houses are haunted/ By white night-gowns./
None are green,/ Or purple with green rings,/
Or green with yellow rings,/ Or … .

But before the next line's out,
two chain saws power up across the road
and undercut the poem. We've not been warned
today's the day that rotting limbs will fall.
We're not prepared for wooden rings
to scatter dust across the campus lawns.

I rouse my voice and can't resist
a trek of my own. *Remember*
Dante's hell? The deepest rings
are carved in ice. Forget the myths
of fire. Icy pain defies its thaw.

My students frown – confused by this detour –
but I rev up. *I've known that pain before.*
The freezing out when someone shuns my love.
The freezing in when tears are petrified.
I've known the frost of snubs, a chilling
in the bone. (They're startled wide awake
by feelings slipping through these words.) *I've known*
this all before, will know it all again.

Who wrote those lines? their waving hands
demand. I admit they're mine and try

to circle back to rings of green and blue
but they insist on knowing what I know.
(A dozen Mondays with one breach
and they think something's owed.)

What can I say when decades separate
our lives? How help them understand
a woman in a short black veil
whose silver ring proclaims her vows

desires love as much as they?
How to explain passions denied harden
into icy pain? How to protect
yet satisfy? What can I say?

The noise outside begins to dissipate,
urging me to skim my notes for words
to hide behind, but I find nothing fits.
Perhaps my lines from another poem?
Beware the heart that longs for capturing.
Contentment is the death of bliss.

Previously published in *Finding Compass* (Queen of Wands Press, 2011)

Commentary. As a Roman Catholic Sister of Mercy, I taught a variety of English classes at Georgian Court University, Lakewood, NJ. This poem was inspired by two events. The first was those noisy chain saws that disrupted my class and sent me off on allusions from Wallace Stevens to Dante to the creation of my own poem-within-a-poem. The second inspiration came from the mistake of sharing personal information with students that was far beyond their understanding. I learned to keep my private life very private after that.

SUSAN IOANNOU

Poetry Class

Wrestle with your angel, I tell them,
and there sits a blond, mustachioed Gabriel
blowing my doom,
talking about affaires de coeur
and quoting from Italian.

Every time he glances my way
I feel my old body silken
like the cat lifted before my bath
to slide his thick, black and white fur
across my nakedness.
The cat purred, closed his eyes
imagining no doubt some giant bird
folding him into her downy breast,
and forgot his usual
clawed bolt to the floor.

As I slide Gabriel through my glance,
in his eyes am I sculpted marble,
my animation *cinéma vérité*?
Does he silently unstopper my perfume
and calculate how my blush deepens
as I open one more frozen window?
He quotes me into a corner.
Does my breathing scan like his sonnets,
or am I a pink shell where he listens
to Aeolian sheets snap and billow?

Or have daydreams fleshed into life,
fluorescent light a moon,
chalkboard an invitation.
Dare I step across outer space?
Will Gabriel catch me
if I fall?

Previously published in *Literary Network, Literary Pages*

Commentary. When I led poetry workshops for the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies, working with adult students presented an unexpected challenge. In one class sat an accomplished, handsome, and sophisticated flirt, whose intense gaze and teasing manner were both flattering and disconcerting. While the 'frozen window' stayed firmly closed, his attentions did provoke this poem.

CHAPTER 5

JOANN GARDNER

Modern Poetry

The boy poets enter the room in their alpaca hats,
smiling. They sit down by the window, where
the sun slants in and inhale the stale air. Today,
we are studying Whitman, and one has not
brought his book. I ask him what he will do
without his book, and he quips, 'think deeply
about Whitman?' As if everything he needs
to know resides in his own body, as perhaps
it does. We talk about Whitman's vision,
his transcendental thought launched by touch,
and I discover there are other poets in the room,
boys and girls alike, all in love with themselves
and bristling with personality. One is bald,
her head shaved like a buzzard's. One is small
and dark, the daughter of a hidalgo. One sits
upright in her chair, offering rather than
seeking approval. And there is Evan, fawn-like,
with a blue star on his cheek, and Peter,
whose nervousness belies perfection, and me,
fresh from a season of loss and uncertain what
I'm here for. We talk. The room begins to stir—
each voice sane, considered, genuine. Gradually,
I come alive, respond to their instruction.
They do not wonder why we are here, or sneer,
'What does it matter, anyway?' They tease me
back into the room, back from my brooding sorrow
to the head of the class, saying, 'You are
the teacher. Teach us.' And I do.

Commentary. 'Modern Poetry' and 'The Graduate Poets' (chapter 8) are companion pieces that show a contrast between the actions and attitudes of my undergraduate students and my graduate students. The undergraduate students in this Modern Poetry class were open to learning in ways that 'The Graduate Poets' in chapter 8 were not.

SUSAN CAROL HAUSER

Destination

The day is too fine for lessons: the autumn sun
has overcome this morning's frost, and melts, too,
my yearning toward duty. I gather
my flock and we spill into the out-of-doors,
flutter down to the lake that we can see
from our classroom window.

A hundred feet from brick and mortar,
we choose our places along the shore,
some students gathering in clutches, others
setting themselves aside, as I do,

and all of us taking out paper to write on,
the price of this hour's mutiny.

Just write, I tell them. A letter. A poem. An assignment.
Notes. Your name over and over, if it pleases you,

and it pleases me to see them leaning into their work,
resisting the breeze that is too brisk for our purpose,
and letting the sun and the sound of the waves overcome
the clamor of thought.

Only the geese cause us to stir, to look up.
Restless teenagers dragging Main, they honk
their way into the next week of their lives, the way
these students will leave one day, flapping awkwardly
out of and toward their destinies,

as I will leave one day, squawking like an old hen
deprived of her nest, uncertain of my certain destination.

Previously published (as 'College Writing 2001') in *Outside After Dark: New & Selected Poems* (Loonfeather Press, 2002)

Commentary. The poem was written during a class session and conflates the experiences of the teacher and the students, recognizing that all are on a journey to somewhere.

CHAPTER 5

JOYCE KESSEL

Classroom Quixote

Between semesters
there is reflection,
deepening as I toy
with throwing in the towel
or retirement.
Tired of the sameness perhaps
that isn't ever quite the same.
The years of change
that never really change.
How different it is
from this side of the desks,
sometimes more magical,
usually more mercurial.
Time sliding away
with the students
who move on
without a backwards glance.
And yet the small rewards
make me open a new roster,
hold onto tried & true objectives,
ready to tilt at new windmills.

Commentary. As I get closer to considering retirement, I naturally get more reflective and wonder if I have had – and still have – an impact and influence on my students.

JANET McCANN

After the Unitarian Service

He flies the university president
and the board of trustees around Texas,
and I ask him what he flies

and he tells me, so well I can see the plane
and smell it, faint gasoline
and old leather of seats,

board members getting off in Amarillo, Lubbock,
El Paso, the pilot waiting there in the cockpit
with a good book,

and then I am leaving and he says
I want to tell you something
he says, Liberal Arts majors

make the best pilots, always,
but they keep sending us engineers
and they are terrible pilots, make mistakes

and crash planes, and I am wondering
what makes them good pilots, if it's
a feel they get for the air, after all that

Shakespeare, a kind of intuition
of clouds and currents, storms coming, mountains,
or if it's that they're trained to take

the unknown into consideration always,
not just the formula, the squidgy possibilities,
or if some gene or trait that makes good pilots

also sends them into Liberal Arts,
but all I really know is that I like
to think of them, my students, taking off,

waving their mortarboards,
knowing just how to guide their crafts aloft.

CHAPTER 5

CELIA HUNT

Expert Commentary

In responding to these poems I take as my starting point the lovely idea contained in 'After the Unitarian Service' that liberal arts students make better pilots than engineers, perhaps because 'they're trained to take/the unknown into consideration always,/ not just the formula, the squidgy possibilities'. This idea, with its image of learning as developing the confidence to fly one's own craft – developing a sense of agency, in other words – lifted me out of the darker and more difficult themes of the other poems in this section and encapsulated for me both the value and the challenge of teaching the arts in higher education, particularly the literary arts: in helping our students to take the unknown into consideration, alongside studying the more readily graspable histories and theories of our subjects – the 'formula' – we risk opening them up to the more challenging 'squidgy possibilities' of feelings and emotions that are always there beneath the surface of the learning experience but not always acknowledged. This raises the question: how do we take care of our students whilst they are engaging in this risky process; and the related questions: how do we as teachers manage the tricky learning environment that results, and how do we take care of ourselves whilst we do so?

Most of my professional life as a university teacher was spent teaching creative writing as a developmental and therapeutic tool and engaging in research into its effects (e.g. Hunt, 2013). As part of those courses students were expected to reflect deeply on themselves through specially devised creative writing exercises, learning journals, peer group work and reflective essays. It was an approach that often led to students experiencing fundamental change in their sense of self and belongs in the category of 'significant learning' (Rogers, 1951)[1] or 'transformative learning' (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).[2] Inevitably, in that context, it was crucial that we created a learning environment where students felt 'safe-enough' (Winnicott, 1971) to engage in this work, and learning to do that was very challenging for the tutor team (Hunt, 2013, Part III). I talk more about this below.

But whether or not we *intentionally* set out to open students up to deeper self-exploration in our courses, requiring them to engage in creative writing or the study of literature may do that anyway. It is in the nature of the arts to open us up to emotional experience (Robinson, 2005). This is clearly visible in several poems in this section. 'Try Teaching at the Community College' explores how studying Sylvia Plath's poetry puts a student who has recently terminated her pregnancy in touch with a deep emotional conflict. As a result she is: 'mad at you [the teacher]… You couldn't have understood,/ understand'. When we select texts for our classes that deal with emotional pain, depression, suicide, we are risking evoking students' own traumas. We see this again in 'Connection', where an ostensibly straightforward task of asking students 'to analyze a poem/by creating

art – /a painting, a sculpture, a shadow box' results in one student creating a mix of image and text representing self-harm, which, the poem implies, emerges out of her own self-loathing.

The teacher in 'Connection' is clearly shocked by what she learns about this student; as is the teacher in 'To the Young Poet', who both marvels at, and is terrified by, the difficult and dangerous things revealed about her otherwise quiet, cautious student through his poetry. His 'rappelling/without harness' in his 'daring descent' into extreme experience, the poem tells us, makes uneasy watching. What if he falls? Who will be to blame? And what if the worst *does* happen, and a student who has been studying literature with us commits suicide, as explored in 'Christine, at Night, I Tired; Early Morning, I…'? Do we have the right to place our students in these risky situations?

Paradoxically, if it is the case, as Seamus Heaney suggests in his discussion of Sylvia Plath's poetry, that finding a voice as a poet requires 'getting beyond ego' and plumbing one's own depths, then apprentice writers need to be able to explore the darker and potentially more dangerous regions of the psyche (Heaney, 1988). The student in 'To the Young Poet' seems able both to access his own difficult material and objectify it sufficiently to create art (Hunt, 2001); that is, he is able, on the one hand, to engage deeply with what may be painful or challenging memories or feelings, but also, on the other hand, to distance himself sufficiently from them to transform them into art. Being able to distance himself from his material creatively implies that he is able to 'hold' it in the 'potential space' of the creative process; to allow a sense of internal space to open up in the psyche so that the imagination can move freely (Winnicott, 1971). In other words he is able to think reflexively, which I understand as being able to loosen cognitive control and open up spontaneously to the contingency of learning, whilst at the same time managing the flow of feelings and emotions that accompanies it (Hunt, 2013).[3]

Whilst this young poet seems already to have learned how to do this, many others in our classes will not yet have done so, and will need to be well supported in this new learning. As many of the poems here articulate, the teacher's role is not to be a counsellor or therapist (Yorks & Kasl, 2006); yet there are other things that can be done to provide that support. In our creative writing and personal development courses we learned how important it was to begin with a group discussion of the risks of writing creatively and the duty of self-care that all participants have. Students were encouraged to create a group contract, a list of things they would like everyone to bear in mind as they worked together: things like the importance of listening to each other, of robust but respectful and sensitive feedback, of not passing on to others outside the class what they might learn about each other. One can also allow time at the start of a course for students to get to know each other through ice-breaker exercises (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006), and dividing them into small work-sharing or discussion groups that remain constant throughout the course will deepen that engagement (Hunt, 2013, pp. 119–131).

A similar approach could be valuable in literature and other classes too; after all, it is not just the things students discover through their reading and writing that challenge their ability to engage with their feelings and emotions. As the poem 'Office Hours' shows, there are also the painful life experiences students bring with them into their studies: homelessness, rape, the challenge of 'coming out'. What I learned from my own teaching experience is that, by creating a learning environment where emotions are an acknowledged part of the learning process, it is possible to render that process safer than if feelings and emotions are deliberately excluded, as some commentators would prefer (e.g. Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008). And creating an environment in which students learn to hear and support each other may even go some way to alleviating the pressure of their often difficult lives beyond the seminar room. Of course, it is also important to gauge when a student needs extra support and should be directed to counselling or other student services (Crosling & Webb, 2002).

All of this implies that we as teachers constantly need to be aware of students' vulnerability as they open themselves up to emotional learning. Such awareness involves us in cultivating the same kind of reflexivity as I discussed above, although here it is for a different purpose. We can learn to access the feelings and emotions that emerge as we teach and engage with our students, and also to distance ourselves creatively from them so that they are 'held' in that space for the imagination (Winnicott, 1971) and continuously available to us, rather than kept out of sight. I think of this metaphorically as cultivating a listening/watching/feeling stance, in which we learn to hover at the edge of our 'felt sense' of ourselves (Gendlin, 2003),[4] able to move fluidly back and forth between immersion in that felt sense and standing outside it (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, pp. 1–8). It is a form of self-management as opposed to self-control. This is what the narrator of the poem 'Destination' does, when on a lovely summer day '…too fine for lessons', she abandons her teaching plan and takes the students and herself out into the sunshine to write by the lake. In that spontaneous act she relinquishes her self-concept of teacher and becomes just another student, opening herself up to the insight that we are all – students and teachers alike – 'flapping awkwardly/out of and toward [our] destinies'. Similarly, the narrator of 'Modern Poetry' is flexible enough to let go of her 'brooding sorrow' and loss of meaning by responding to the felt sense of aliveness and spontaneity generated in the seminar room by her students. It is a two-way process, this teaching: helping students to open up and allowing ourselves to be opened up by them (Rogers, 1989).

But opening ourselves up to our students can be a risky business too. The poem 'Advocate' suggests that we can help students by revealing intimate information about ourselves, such as our sexual orientation, which may enable them to feel safe-enough to 'come out'. Yes, certainly, but this has to be done carefully and with an awareness of just how far we ourselves can safely go; sharing our own

personal material too deeply, as '8 O'Clock Monday Morning' reveals, can make *us* feel vulnerable and exposed. As the narrator of this poem says: 'How help them understand/a woman in a short black veil/whose silver ring proclaims her vows/desires love as much as they?' An important part of learning to teach is learning to be open and present to the students, whilst also being aware of boundaries/limits. Again, it is a matter of closeness and distance, getting the balance right, which only comes when we are open to experience.

And that experience can be extremely challenging. The teacher-narrator of 'Classroom Quixote' wrestles with the sensuality generated in her 'old body' by an attractive, flirtatious student, daring her to 'step across outer space', make the imaginary real. In 'Night Class' a teacher is reading her students' thank-you letters set as homework. Whilst the majority are addressed to significant others in the students' lives, one letter '… is addressed to me, the shaky hand/claims there is nobody else'. The presence of transference in the learning space – the tendencies we all have to idealise or demonise the other, to project onto him or her old images of good or bad parents, siblings or teachers – can be extremely discomforting. Understanding the ubiquitous presence of transference in all human relations and how it works (see Britzman, 2009; also Hunt, 2013, pp. 151–163), and even better being able to discuss it in professional development groups, can be enormously beneficial.

Peer mentoring, where we regularly pair up with a colleague to share issues that arise in our teaching, can be useful here too, as can dialoguing with oneself by keeping a teaching journal (Moon, 2004). Using creative writing as a means of engaging with challenging or traumatic events can provide creative distance on them (Chandler, 1990; de Salvo, 1999), as the author of 'Christine, at Night…' finds. Trying to deal with the guilt that remains after her student commits suicide, she objectifies it by writing it out. The vividness of her image of the student's hanging is shocking. She imagines her 'inside a closet/where you hung among jackets, above shoes.' And then she goes further, imagining not just the body after the act, but the act itself: 'Did you kick a vacuum aside like woman flinging bras in Filene's Basement,/ or were you trying to pray, a mantis with legs slowly lifting?' This level of detail brings the act to life, helps to unpack something that is very difficult to think about. In the unpacking the recreation of this terrible act can be looked at and experienced more directly, and whilst at first it is shocking and upsetting, perhaps in the longer term giving the act shape and reality helps it to become more tolerable for the writer (Bolton, 1999).

As the poem 'The Art of Teaching' suggests, learning to be a teacher sometimes requires us to contort ourselves into uncomfortable and difficult emotional positions. Learning techniques to enable us to become a calm, listening presence, both for our students and for ourselves,[5] is, as many of these poems make clear, at the heart of learning to take care of self and others.

NOTES

[1] For Carl Rogers significant learning takes place when the organisation of the self undergoes change (see Illeris, 2004, p. 94).

[2] There are many different understandings of 'transformative learning' and some criticism of the broad or loose use of this term (Newman, 2011). I understand it as similar to Rogers' significant learning.

[3] See also Daniel Siegel's view that reflexivity is a deeper and 'more automatic meta-awareness within the larger framework of reflection' (Siegel, 2007, pp. 126–133).

[4] See Perl (2004) for a practical approach to reflective writing drawing on Gendlin's notion of 'felt sense'.

[5] See Hunt and West (2006) on cultivating 'reverie' (Bion, 1962) in teaching and research; also Hyland (2011) on the role of mindfulness in teaching.

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