

# Breaking the Cycle: Poetry and Society

by

Judith Tannenbaum

“I think that maybe everyone on earth is a poet,” says Sharon Olds, “and that sooner or later, mostly sooner, it’s taken away from us. We all have feelings and language, and when a fit takes us, human beings cry out in rhythms. This crying out wishes there to be a hearer. We long to sing to each other.”

Olds suggests that “every poet find an institution and teach a class, every creative writing program work with a hospital, a prison, or a city block.” She wants us to ask: “Are we spending as much time on the community of poetry – serving it, enlarging it – as on sending out our own poems?”

The following poets see the “community of poetry” as one that includes voices most often not heard from: the voices of people who are chronically ill, veterans, people in prison, gays and lesbians, pregnant teenagers, bilingual immigrant children, people who are homeless, and people with AIDS. Through their actions, these poets agree with Sharon Olds’s words: “I believe in poetry; I believe in the human. We *want* to give; it’s as if we’re part of each other.”

...The caterpillar must be kept in the image of the butterfly.  
By keeping the image, it is able to make changes.  
And that’s what we are going into now.  
We are going into change.  
I don’t know if we are going on indefinitely.  
Some people think we are going to live a million years.  
It doesn’t matter to me as long as we try to be good and do good.  
I think we will always need love.

(from “The Organization in the End Can Be Named ‘Together’,”  
by Marguerite Hunziker)

In 1985, Sharon Olds was asked by Very Special Arts to begin an eight-week writing workshop at Goldwater Hospital, a public hospital on Roosevelt Island, New York, that offers long-term care for the chronically, severely physically disabled. Olds says, “I had the feeling of a

gift offered, this chance to do something unlike anything I had done. Working with people who were not necessarily currently writing poetry was very exciting to me. The first day I went there I felt, ‘This is a home for poetry.’ These were people for whom poetry could have a real use, people who were conscious of the preciousness of creating, and whose courage enabled them to embrace the seriousness and the joy of poetry.” Olds says that the writers she met and has worked with are “mysterious to me in their human greatness. Their generosity to others, in spite of their own challenges, makes the human look very powerful in spirit.”

In order to keep the program going, Olds and Goldwater established the Friends of the Golden Writers, an organization of volunteers and New York University alumni, to raise funds. This fall, Gwendolyn Brooks will give a benefit reading for the Goldwater poets; there have been many such benefits during the past few years. Every semester, there is a shared reading by NYU students and Goldwater students.

Graduate students from NYU’s Creative Writing Program, where Olds teaches, have been very much part of the program since its beginning. “I live so much in the family of poets at NYU, it was natural for me to think of bringing in these students to work at Goldwater. People at Goldwater are facing terrible suffering.” When NYU students teach at Goldwater, “their opinion of the human race goes up.”

Olds notes some of the changes she herself has undergone: “There’s a slight diminishment of self-pity in my poems, I think, and an intense entrance into thinking about the rights of other people.” Olds says she’s probably been too much of a “border-crosser” in her earlier poems, but her relationship with students at Goldwater teaches her about limits and the impact of fate. She quotes poet Lucille Clifton answering a question from a group of mostly white writers: “When you write about me (an African American woman), maybe write about *you* and me, because then you’ll know a lot about *part* of what you’re writing about.”

In 1992, Olds received a Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Writers’ Award. “Hearing I’d been given one of these awards weakened my knees with happiness. My hope is that we can raise

an endowment. Since the beginning, it has been our dream to make the program perpetual. We're looking for an angel."

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The Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Awards are given annually in order "to provide financial support for talented writers and to encourage interactions between writers and cultural, educational, and community organizations." Writers received \$35,000 each year for up to three years, and the nonprofit organizations with which the writers affiliate are awarded grants of approximately \$10,000 each year.

Bruce Trachtenberg, Director of Communications, says the Fund began its Writers' Award in 1990. "The Fund's larger intention is to build audiences for the arts. There are a variety of ways to accomplish that; an innovative approach to building audiences for contemporary literature is to connect writers and readers." Trachtenberg says that Lila Wallace had been a social worker and was always interested in bringing together her personal love for the arts with her concern to make people's lives better.

Marcelle Hinand, Program Associate, describes the process of selection for the Writers' Awards: A selection committee, representing the entire literary field, meets several times each year. They choose a group of nominators. At all points in the process, there is a wide representation in terms of diversity of geography, gender, ethnic and racial background, as well as aesthetics. The group nominates about one hundred people. The committee does not necessarily seek writers who have done community work in the past; the artistic quality of their writing is the primary criterion. The committee notifies the nominated writers who then can choose to apply for a specific project. These applications go to the selection committee for approval.

“We hope this will catch on,” Hinand says. “We want to encourage writers and organizations to establish connections. We hope our support will lever other support, on-going support, of such projects.”

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...Smoke gloomed the Saigon horizon.  
Warplanes streaked the sky.  
A curious crowd collected.  
The monks solemnly intoned  
an ancient, Buddhist chant.  
The monk read a poem of his  
anguish over the war, ending  
with a plea for peace.

The pungent smell of gas  
pierced the air.  
The chanting began again.  
He calmly struck a match,  
flared into flame,  
and became a suttee for peace –  
an ash memorial sent  
into the Great Void.

(from “The Flaming Lotus” by Sherdyl Motz)

Another writer to receive a Writers’ Award in 1992 was Maxine Hong Kingston.

Kingston decided that she wanted to offer poetry workshops to Vietnam veterans through the Community of Mindful Living in Albany, California. In addition to these Bay Area workshops, Kingston will travel around the country with Buddhist teacher and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh, this fall. She will offer poetry workshops to veterans who attend.

Sherdyl Motz volunteers at the Community of Mindful Living. A Vietnam vet himself, Motz was able to get the word out to veterans about Kingston’s work. Workshops were held in June and August of this year. Therese Fitzgerald, Director of the Community of Mindful Living, reports: “ ‘Art,’ Maxine explained, ‘is the transformation of feelings and experience into meaning. Writing is a tool for accessing events and memories and giving them meaning. For twenty years, you have lived with your war experiences in your hearts. Now we can put them

through the process of art and thinking. Now is time for the healing and the coming home.’” To those who said, “But I’m not a writer,” Kingston suggested thinking about the ways they’d already written, such as letters home.

Writer and vet, Larry Heinemann, and his wife, Edie, co-taught the second workshop with Kingston. Heinemann talked about the “peculiar blessing of the war” that opened up his life and “turned on” his writing. Motz talks about war experience as a step in the transformation towards being a peace warrior.

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Paul Minicucci, of the Joint Legislative Committee on the Arts, says, “In the late seventies I was visited by Cultural Counselors from Germany. These artists opened my eyes to the fact that art is the ultimate neighborhood activity. In Germany – and in many European countries – arts funding is given for a contract between the artist and the community. If an artist is needed in the schools, the artist goes there; if a mural’s needed, the artist works on that. In France, an *animateur* goes into a community to do a play with residents that takes as its subject the social needs of that particular town. When an artist is part of a community, you don’t have to defend arts programming. Everyone knows the artists and the work they’re doing. It’s part of their daily life, and no one wants to lose that.” The California Arts Council’s Residency Program was begun with this vision.

Carol Shiffman, Manager of the CAC Residency Program says “Art really changes people’s lives in positive, life-affirming ways. The aim of the Residency Program is to encourage the creativity of participants and to increase artists’ contact with people. This way, artists participate in society, and society appreciates artists more.”

California artists can apply to offer workshops to people in schools, communities or various social institutions. Grants (\$800 per month from the Arts Council, \$500 per month from

the sponsor) allow an artist to offer a twenty-hour a week program for up to eleven months a year for up to three consecutive years. The California Arts Council differs from every other state in providing funds for long-term, in-depth, programming.

Wayne Cook, Program Administrator, says “Our programs are locally produced rather than having the Council tell people what their needs are. The artist has a vision, and the sponsor knows the needs of its constituents. So each project is related to those who live in a given community – whether that community is a school, a jail or a neighborhood community center. Our artists understand they’re not *bringing* something to people who don’t have it; we believe everyone has part of themselves that is an artist.”

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#### MARVIN SANG

Marvin sang for a witness  
i cried for the same – tears  
(i was wrung out)  
monkies, jungles and guns  
i will never  
sink  
solo  
again

Marvin cried for a witness  
i sang for the same, to the strungout cockroaches  
at a no star motel  
i will never  
sink  
solo  
again

(Rob Dickman)

Phavia Kujichagulia is in the second year of her second CAC grant cycle at San Quentin.  
“The general public has no love for men in prison, but they don’t realize that many people we bump into each day are just out of prison. If they come out better, it’s better for all of us.”

Kujichagulia says that the men she works with didn't get love and attention and a sense of self worth when they were growing up. She wants to break the cycle. "The arts get people to grow and change. The power to control words leads to the power to control yourself."

There are men of every background in Kujichagulia's class, including gang members from rival gangs. In class, these men work together. When they leave the classroom, others in the prison see the possibility for cooperation. "We're looking at differences as beautiful rather than as a threat. The arts are good for this."

Kujichagulia has moved the focus of the class from poetry writing to performing arts. "Those who can write, write; others shine in performing. Before, some men were afraid to show that they couldn't write; now no one has to 'prove' anything. If the class were only targeting those who could write well, we'd be sending out a message I don't want to send about difference. Now we've got Crips acting like Ozark mountain folks; they're able to create a character who is not like them and see the humanity in that person. Poetry allows identification with self; performing arts allows identification with others. Maybe when they get out of here and they see people who are different from themselves, they'll respond with respect; maybe they'll be able to feel comfortable with all kinds of people on this earth.

"Our one rule is to respect everybody. Derogatory language is not allowed. We don't go into character until we're cleansed. This might be the only place in prison where all human beings are looked at as beautiful."

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## DEEP HARVEST

You win your pride slowly, like rain that falls  
on crops gone dry too long. You strain to feel  
joy about being born that way – coming  
out from the soil, girl without a choice. Still they  
call you names, people hate you for who they  
say you are. Hard words pelt down on the fields

of your soft brown roots and scar deep. So you  
struggle to grow in this country that brands  
you unwanted. You stand up straight to reach for  
true light and pray you'll look good enough  
to be chosen. Learning to heal yourself  
steadily, you hold out your best, knowing  
that same fruit can make you whole. Then you will  
raise yourself high in your strong, worthy hands.

(Ana Castanon)

Terry Wolverton is a CAC Artist-in-Residence at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center in Hollywood, where she directs the Perspectives Writing Program. Wolverton offers five ongoing workshops: "Live to Write/Write to Live," for people with HIV; "Healer Heal Thyself," for professionals who work with people with AIDS; "Flex Your Writing Muscle," for beginning writers; "Making It Better," a critique group; and the "Women's Poetry Project."

Wolverton has been teaching writing in the community since 1977, but until 1988 this was in women only situations. Many of these classes were offered at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, where she eventually became Executive Director. "Feminist, community-based art is based on the perception that everyone has a fundamental right to their creativity; everyone has something to say, a story to tell.

"In the mid-eighties, I began to feel that working with women only was a little too insular and in some way protected me from the AIDS crisis. This felt awful to me, like being a bystander during a war." This feeling took Wolverton to the GLCSC where she asked: "What do you think you need most?" She developed her classes from the answers she received.

"The disenfranchisement of gay and lesbian people means that one is told his or her existence is illegitimate. It's necessary to claim your life; if you don't claim your life, you can't claim your story. It's necessary to say, 'Whatever the world says of me, I do exist, and here is my story.' Also, any identified group of writers – 'women writers', 'African American writers' – is not only about that definition. Anyone who has been disenfranchised is an acute observer of the mainstream.

“I want people to know that there is tremendously exciting writing going on outside the academic literary establishment. One way – often the first way – we encounter people different from ourselves is through art and literature; these have the power to dismantle people’s misinformation about who we are.

“People with HIV have an acute sense of urgency. If these stories are not recorded, they are lost to us. It’s necessary to leave behind a record.”

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Yo creo que seré cantante  
Yo creo que la gente nunca va a morir  
Yo creo que soy Blanca Nieves  
Yo creo que cuando hablan ingles  
Solamente están diciendo garabatos  
Yo creo que el dinero es como agua  
Porque en cuanto lo tienes  
Se te va por las manos...

(from “Mi imaginación,” by Zulema Diaz)

Aleida Rodríguez is beginning her second year as a CAC Artist-in-Residence at Sherman Oaks Elementary School in the San Fernando Valley. She works with bilingual children who have come from Armenia, Russia, the Middle East, Cambodia, China, Mexico, Central America, and the United States.

Rodríguez says, “The impact of having a ‘professional poet’ stand in front of the room speaking Spanish and telling you that what you’ve written is exceptional, cannot be underestimated in terms of self-esteem building and identity pride. The more confident these kids get in the poetry workshops, the more grounded they all feel in the outside world.” Sometimes immigrant children feel their English is too limited to allow them to write poems in the language. Rodríguez tells such a student that the most important is her *idea*, and that spelling and grammatical errors can be corrected after the poem is written. “When that fear of failing is taken away, they really *fly!*”

Rodríguez herself came from Cuba at the age of nine without her parents and was placed in a foster home in Springfield, Illinois. She says, “I know that I began to ‘own’ my world when I began to express myself creatively in language, a second language acquired at great personal cost. The English speaking kids take language for granted, since they’ve never been denied it, but an immigrant or bilingual child know that it’s a powerful survival tool.

“Often the kids who have not excelled, who are not popular, who do not play sports, *do* write wonderful poems. I see their pride. Here is one place these children can shine. While I see – generally speaking – the level of language skill diminishing for the English speakers, the immigrant kids still have the freshness of vision and vocabulary that continues to blow my socks off!”

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I stand in the middle of the Arizona desert.  
My family on one high peak  
and my friends on another.  
All I have is me  
and I am like a stray cat,  
I am happy this way.  
But what will I do when this baby is born?  
Will I still be able to live my life?  
How will I act?  
What will I say?  
How will I explain that because  
I wanted to be alone,  
daddy ran away?

(Chelsea S.)

Fernando Castro is beginning a CAC community residency to promote higher education among ESL students in Glendale. Sponsored by Glendale Community College, Castro will be working with junior and senior high schools in South Glendale.

For the past two years, Castro has taught at McAlister High School, a continuation high school in East Hollywood/Echo Park. Here he works with pregnant teenagers in a program that has been funded through the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs.

“At first I thought it would be like teaching at a regular school – lesson plans and all. I thought I’d read multicultural poetry right and left, but it’s not that way.” Castro says the pregnant girls were often very depressed, and that it took four or five weeks just to get out of themselves. He would start each session with a game, some interaction with the group to get the young women to speak. After a while, the girls began to write. After that, Castro could bring in literature written by others; the girls love La Loca, Wanda Coleman and Ntozake Shange.

“At first I thought, ‘What am I doing – a male teaching these pregnant girls?’ At the beginning they tested me, like I’m the boyfriend they really hate or the abusive father. But eventually I became a positive male model; it was a healing experience.”

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### Blue Belly

The poem is a blue belly  
Shedding its lines  
Scaly lizard  
Writing upon a rock  
Underneath is soft  
Just like a blue belly  
Coming out of the rocks  
Sunlight burning  
Within this ink  
Blue belly alive!

(Brian DeBord)

Writers’ Awards and Arts Council grants are lovely. But some writers have simply gone ahead and created classes where they’ve seen a need, grant or no grant. Geoffrey Cook began volunteering a few years ago with the Berkeley Ecumenical Chaplaincy for the Homeless. He went to People’s Park in Berkeley to teach poetry. Working with art therapist, Orena James, Cook learned how to work with this group of writers who had so much keeping them from writing.

“There was one man – a jazz musician – who was under a restraining order not to come into the park. I went searching him out on the Avenue and worked with him wherever I could find

him. Eventually we went to court and got the restraining order temporarily removed so that this man could be part of our performance.”

Recently, Cook has been working with the homeless at the U.A. Homes. “These are folks who have hit bottom, but who are now on the mend.” Seed funds from Poets & Writers, Inc. allowed Cook to offer a workshop. He thought this work would be like the work at People’s Park, but, instead “I ended up teaching a graduate seminar. This may not be encouraging to the rest of us, but nearly everyone there had at least a B.A. Most were very well read.

“I feel it is extremely important for writers to interact with the community. I see this as moral, religious: When I see suffering, how should I react?”

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My desire crawls across a crimson-sand beach  
In the blistering sunlight, cold blooded  
Like an Iguana, belly to the ground, my untrainable pet.  
Flunking out of obedience class again...

(from “My Desire,” by Rob Bregoff)

Kim Addonizio knew she was living in the center of an epidemic and wanted to get close to it in some way. Beret Strong – a Palo Alto teacher and writer – had been doing hospice work, and the two women decided to offer a free writing workshop for people with AIDS. Ralph K. Davies Hospital offered The Gazebo for a workshop, and Addonizio and Strong made flyers which they sent to AIDS agencies and newsletters.

“The group was never more than five or six men. They were all in different stages of health, and their reasons for coming to the group were various. Some had written on their own. Some had more social reasons. Some felt a need for self-expression. Poetry is the most intimate form of expression, and it served these men,” Addonizio says.

“The biggest thing we learned is that we went in with an agenda that didn’t match the needs of the men. We wanted to work on craft, to hone the poems; they needed to get out what

was inside. The men resisted our critical suggestions and told us to let the poem be what it was. Criticism sometimes felt like an invalidation rather than a tool We talked about this.

“This affected my view of poetry. I learned that what poetry is is different for different people. I saw my own impatience to ‘fix the product’, and learned that in some sense the individual poem doesn’t matter. What was more important was to get out of the way of people’s process; I learned to just listen, that it was important to these men just to know they were heard.”

*Judith Tannenbaum was a California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence in poetry at San Quentin from 1986-1989. She currently has a CAC grant to do a cross-age, community poetry program with young people at MacGregor High School and MacGregor Primary School in Albany, California, where she lives. She has written a great deal on issues of community arts and cultural democracy, including “I Am/What They Do Not See,” and “Artistic Imperialism,” which were published in Poetry Flash.*

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