**FRAGMENTS FROM TEACHING**

**Dale Davis**

**1995**

Is it really that simple, believing in a young person. I cannot imagine working with young people if you do not believe in them, no matter who the young person is. Yes, he did not come into my room for two weeks, yes, we did not know each other, but I have expectations and my expectations were that he would work and that we would work together learning, and I believed he could work. This is why I asked him to contribute to the Tupac CD.

His surprise was that I asked him. “No one has ever asked me before,” he told me. He could not believe I asked him. He did not know how to answer a question he had never been asked before. I knew he wanted to. I knew he loved Tupac. I knew a bit about him from knowing he loved Tupac. Tupac is a love we shared.

“My father is the only person who believed I could do anything,” he said. Why? If I did not believe he was capable, why would I work with him?

He said thank you.

**1995**

“Here are more poems I have written, and I want to read the book” (Nathan McCall’s *Makes Me Wanna Holler*”). How many copies of this book have I given away? I read aloud parts of it to him yesterday, and he was hooked. I told him he was going to need a bookcase now for his library. Last week I gave him Tupac’s *A Rose That Grew From Concrete*.

Sometimes you just have to own a book, to hold it, to be able to go back to it, to know someone cares about you enough to give you a book. Sometimes you have to give someone something you love to show him you believe in him.

**1995**

The Howard Stern Shock Jock effect, the genre of writing born from the student is so unsure of himself or herself and the ability to put any idea on paper that the way out is to shock the reader, not a la Poe with flair but in the line of drugs, mocking of peers, teachers, sex. I will strike you before you strike. I will give you all the reasons you need not to like or respect me because I know you really don’t like or respect me.

What I notice is the absence of imagination. The imagination, like the body, must be exercised. When it is not exercised, it withers. Does it die? I witness its absence every day. I think this is why so many of the young people with whom I work cannot read poetry or fiction. For a story to become more than a plot to be memorized with its elements to be listed, it has to be alive in the reader’s imagination. The leap from the literal, unless it is to horror, is a vast uninhabited space.

When does it happen, the withering of the imagination, how does it happen? No time to be a child, not trusting anyone, seeing and experiencing loss of family members, friends, pain, the pain of simply living, all of these surround its absence. The imagination grows with the luxury of leisure and security and being fed stories and nursery rhymes and poems. The imagination grows with care.

**1995**

It is not that simple I know, but yet I know it begins with belief in the young person as an individual and respect. Is that any different for anyone really? Respect differs greatly from assumed authority. The assumption of paid position authority, the do it my way, is a wall with the children with whom I work.

Crystal is fifteen. She is a Latina. She and her mother live with a man in his house. He supports them and the household. He beats her mother. Crystal walked in on him beating her mother. She ran upstairs, got his gun, and came back downstairs. She did not fire, she said she was not intending to fire. She wanted to intimidate him. She wanted him to stop hitting her mother.

Crystal is small, just about five feet, and twig slim. We worked together for about a month. She comes into the room, we talk, and we read some poems. She loves Tupac. We read poems from issues of *Streams*. I gave her Stickies to post on the poems she likes. She has a boyfriend in the school. I always speak to him in the hall when I see him. He is usually with Crystal.

Crystal told a teacher about her mother being beaten by the man she and her mother live with. She was so frightened for her mother and felt responsible for keeping her mother safe. The teacher went to a social worker, as mandated by law, with what Crystal told her. The social worker sent Child Protective Services to the home. The social worker did not tell Crystal what he was planning to do. Crystal arrived home from school and Child Protective Services arrived.

She came to speak to me. We had never really spoken other than the poems before. She looked ill and trapped. She was going very fast and did not know where to go, whom to talk to, whom she could trust. Everywhere seemed to be a new corner she was forced into. She worried about anyone coming into the home as there was drug paraphernalia everywhere. She did not say specifically what was there, but I inferred. She felt she was putting her mother at even greater risk now.

“They want to put me custody,’’ she said. “I can’t. Who will take care of my mother. They don’t know what it’s like. We have nowhere to live. We have nothing. We don’t have any money. We’d have to sell the TV., the VCR to pay rent. Where could we go.” She was getting sick to her stomach.

Where was Crystal in this, her rights, her safety? Christmas was certainly not a reality for her. The holidays are harsh. There are no holidays from the reality of a harsh life.

What is the right thing to do? Crystal’s safety and security come first. She has neither now, and she has lost respect for the system as well as wondering if there are any adults she can trust. What has she learned? I will ask her.

**1996**

I thought of Milton, who is in jail now. Milton once told me the room was the only place in the world where he ever felt save. Milton came in, sat down. Sometimes he slept, sometimes he wrote, and sometimes we talked. We learned to trust and respect each other. That may not be much in the larger scope of tests and grades and the streets and mandates, but it is a moment. Moments are what I have come to believe in.

**1996**

“I want to do something meaningful in the community to help.” Several friends have told me this as if I know what can be meaningful for them. I don’t know the magic formula. I want to tell them to open their eyes and to look at their own community, to see what is going on, and to think about what they are seeing. I want to ask what does what they know once they have looked mean now.

**1996**

Damien. How long have we been together, at least three years. He has been coming to the room for three years. He goes to few of his other classes, but he always comes to the room when he is in school.

**2002**

He raps. Rap is the only thing in his life he cares about. Rap is what brought us together. I began working with him last year. He comes into my room, almost always on time, seemingly oblivious to all others around him, sits at the computer and works on his raps. He writes, and he writes. The dictionary is his constant companion.

He smiles. He has a shy smile, and he doesn’t smile often. He expresses his needs in two or three words and is not one for conversation. He told me his mother is in jail and will be released within the year. He lives with his grandmother.

He processes (what a terrible word but it is the one I want) the world in his raps. Rather than talk about what’s on his mind, his views on the world, he raps. Rap is his only means of expression.

He spent much time last year writing on September 11 and his thoughts on America today. The assignments I gave him related directly to the CD I was producing, *The America CD*.

He writes to a beat. A beat is part of his writing process. His thoughts take form to a beat.

This year his writing process has changed. He writes words in a single column down one side of the page. He then composes rhymes to the words

**2005**

**Credo**

I believe all children can learn.

I believe in intellectual curiosity.

I believe in flights of the imagination.

I believe that in 1982 Grandmaster Flash put a microscope to what America wanted to hide, and he did it with turntables and attitude.

I believe in being part of the solution, not part of the problem.

I believe in roses growing in concrete.

I believe in Tupac Amaru Shakur.

I believe in music, in spoken word.

I believe in the spatter of color on paper or on wood or on iron or canvas.

I believe in the power of language to change the way we see the world.

I believe in listening to children and connecting children to larger worlds and communities.

I believe in the power of ideas.

I believe in the power of language to record our lives from Pausanias to Homer to Virgil, from Dante to Milton to William Carlos Williams, from to H.D. to Frederick Douglass to Harriet Jacobs to Russell Simmons’ *Def Jam Poets on Broadway*.

I believe in dreams.

I believe in, and he would want no other with him in one line, Alfred Stieglitz.

I believe in Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, Mary Butts, Fanny Lou Hamer, Elizabeth Eckford, and Daisy Bates.

I believe Antione found a sacred space for his dreams in his poems and that he does want to take the risk of living to twenty-five and try to make something of himself in the world.

I believe in not giving up on Damien because he knows I don’t give up on him, and he thanks me for it.

I believe there are moments, and those moments connected together make our lives.

*Number 4, “Still D.R.E.” from Dr. Dre 2001 softly in background*

I believe in the beat.

*Turn volume up*

and the beat goes on.

*Enough bars to let the poem settle*

**Talking Bout**

me

that’s who

me here in the MCJ

trying

to get through

when it seems like

no one wants me to.

Do you?

**The Things I Know For Sure**

are every day the streets are there

in wait

for you to fall,

fall,

fall,

fall into the kingdom of no return,

to fall

fall,

fall into that place

that I know will erase

every trace

of you.

**2006**

**The Building of Ladders**

I have seen first hand how the streets eat childhoods.

There is no discrimination

just randomly picking whatever is around,

devouring it in one full swallow, and

spitting out any bones of humanity.

And I ask why,

and I rage at what I see,

and I cannot stop thinking why does this happen.

And I cannot stop thinking

why do we let this happen.

I have seen the dreams in your eyes,

way back where you think you have hidden them,

I see them trying to grow,

trying to find light.

Where is the ladder for your dreams to climb?

I think what I mostly do is try to show you how to build ladders

that your dreams will be able to climb.

**2009**

**The Dream**

Where is it?

Did some CEO

swallow it whole?

Some Enron, Global, ImClone,

where vision is no endless horizon

but a barnyard of gluttony

and greed.

Somewhere on our merry way to 2007,

who stomped,

spit upon,

scraped and scratched

the Dream

and buried it in the graveyard of dead sitcoms

and teenage horror flicks?

Did the Dream

disappear into failing schools,

and standards

and eighth grade tests that eighth graders cannot pass.

Did it

dissolve into a history,

that is slowly, slowly, slowly being erased

from everyone’s common memory.

Was the Dream

gobbled by divorce

and drugs

and the discontent

of instant gratification.

Where oh where have you gone American Dream,

Oh where oh where can you be?

Are you alive in the shape of hope today,

in what we dream?

Where is our future together?

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