

City

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SOUL SPEECH

Poet and publisher Dale Davis

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Helping the soul to speak

by Ron Netsky

Rochester poet Dale Davis: researching Kurt Cobain and Ezra Pound.

It's that day in early March, the morning when the snow that refused to come down during January and February decided to fall all at once. It's not a morning conducive to showing up at school, let alone learning. But the students in the Young Mothers program on Rochester's northeast side are in their seats and ready.

Some of the students have given birth as recently as a few weeks ago. One of them is so close to delivery that the baby inside her is moving around constantly, doing its best to distract her. Because of their special situation, these students, ranging in age from 13 to 17, have left their regular schools to continue learning here, in a more supportive environment.

Standing before them is Dale Davis, one of Rochester's literary giants. Davis's friends and associates have included some of the 20th century's greatest poets, literary critics, and publishers. But on this day, Davis is deeply involved with the poetry of her teenage students. And although she will eventually have them read the words of authors like bell hooks or Harriet Jacobs, today she has brought in two unpublished poems by another writer she admires: the rapper, Tupac Shakur.

Davis doesn't sit down for a moment, and she won't sit down through the next several classes. She continually walks through the classroom reading student poetry, asking for responses, pausing at a student's desk to see how her work is progressing. Then, borrowing a concept from Jonathan Kozol's book, *Amazing Grace*, she begins:

"These are Rochester's children," and she names a high-school student she worked with in another program. "I have to talk about Oscar. He was a very good poet. The first time we did the program, his girlfriend said, 'My boyfriend didn't get picked to be in this program, but he'd like to come.' So I said sure. The next week he

came. He was very quiet. He sat in the back of the room. He had all of his poems and they were wonderful poems. He mailed me some poems after that. And then I read that he was shot. This was written by a friend of his."

Davis reads the soon-to-be-published student Mourning Card, a format she came up with as an outlet for student grieving:

"Oscar, better known as Ozie, was a special friend to me. We used to dance, sing, laugh, and play together as if we were brother and sister. To this day I still cannot believe that he's gone. I guess it's because I never got to say good-bye. Oscar, if you can hear me, I will never forget you. You will always be in my heart. May your soul rest in peace with the Lord above, Oscar. I love you."

Davis adds, "I have to say that Oscar will always be in my heart, too."

Davis is here, working in collaboration with English teacher, Roberta Liebhaber through Project UNIQUE. Her work with the program, which sends artists-in-residence into the schools, has spanned 22 years. The program's director, Karin Wieder, has been on a journey with Davis from Poets in the Schools in the mid-1970s to the rap music of today.

"What's really fascinating to me is to look at the cycle of growth over two decades," says Wieder. "Dale, as a scholar, has grown and changed in her approach. She's really developed her interest in urban culture and urban youth who feel disenfranchised."

Wieder is not exaggerating. Davis, a world-class literary scholar, is genuinely interested in the poetry of Tupac Shakur and other rappers. Her respect for pop-culture poetry has allowed her to meet her students on their own turf. The results are impressive; Davis awakens the students to their own verbal abilities.

"It's empowerment, an engagement with

language," says Wieder, "It reinforces what their teachers are helping them with. We've seen a tremendous surge in writing, and the students love seeing their work published. She's the resource, she's the spark. Without the ability to interact with the students, it wouldn't work. She's sincerely interested in kids. Kids know that immediately, and they respond."

Mary Jo Skeet, principal of Young Mothers, agrees.

"She's incredible," says Skeet. "Her sensitivity, her kindness — she draws words out of them. When I read the poems and the Mourning Cards: She gets deep, deep into their feelings. These girls are in a difficult time in their lives. They're young women who are experiencing physical changes in their bodies. They're experiencing a whole new lifestyle in caring for another child."

"Some of them are barely able to care for themselves because of their youth. They're in transition into young adulthood, and they have very strong feelings about themselves, about society and sensitive issues. Most of these feelings are kept to themselves until we have a master like Dale come along. She's a master. When you walk in and see Dale with tears in her eyes and the girls, too, it's mind-boggling. So much of herself is there, she's exhausted when she leaves. There's a physical exhaustion."

Davis is aware that her involvement with rap music may be a hard sell in inner-city neighborhoods.

"I'll often say to them, 'So what does the old white lady know about rap?' Then they know, after a while. I'll tell them about the first time I heard Public Enemy: They were my politics, and you could dance to [the music]. They're fascinated that I go to concerts."

Davis has always taken her young students seriously. Two decades ago, as a founding

member of New York State Poets in the Schools, she invited the great Mexican poet Octavio Paz to teach a fifth-grade class.

"I did that because when my child was in the fifth grade, I was asked to bring in tacos. I suggested to the teacher I wasn't a good cook, but I knew quite a bit about literature. They still wanted the tacos, actually. The next year, I decided I wanted to work on the fifth-grade Latin American curriculum. There was more to a culture than the food. I brought in Octavio Paz to teach fifth grade for two days."

The response she got from the literary community was as snobbish as it was predictable.

"Someone wrote in *Montemora*, a little magazine, that I would bring Georgia O'Keeffe in to teach finger painting in the kindergarten. And actually, I would. I think you study with the best. That remark always bothered me. It was all right to teach in a college but not to teach kids who were 12. I believe in K-12 education."

Davis has also brought to Rochester Robert Fitzgerald, a Harvard University professor who is the leading translator of Homer's epic poetry into English. Fitzgerald worked with a sixth-grade class.

"A reporter asked him what was the difference between Harvard and the sixth grade, and he said, 'None; a classroom is a classroom.' I knew I had met someone I agreed with. He also put ancient Greek on the board, and kids who didn't know Greek took it down in their notebooks. He said poetry is the speech of the heart and the speech of the heart, after all, is what matters."

Davis took her own education in poetry and literature where she could find it. She grew up in the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts, where her father owned a barbershop. Her mother, a hospital administrator and an avid

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reader, was a great influence on her. And so were some other women who Davis once thought were unlikely to have an impact.

"Ursuline nuns were extremely important, more and more, as I realize," says Davis, who attended the College of New Rochelle. "I can never believe I would say this. When I was younger, I used to think, why did I go to a Catholic, all-girls college?" She answers her own question. "Because you got to be called on and you had to think."

"There was one nun who used to preach on a soapbox in Greenwich Village. Junior year, I was doing a paper. I kept taking it to her, and she didn't like it. Finally she took me to the library and said, 'Look at all these books. You find one that interests you and do your paper on it.' She was quite quirky. You never quite knew what she was going to talk about when you went into her lecture, and that appealed to me."

Although she majored in psychology in college, after graduating Davis got a job in the economics department at Massachusetts Institute of Technology with economist Paul Samuelson.

"At one point, he said, 'You haven't read anything.' I said, 'Where do I start?' He said, 'Oh, Thomas Hardy.' I would read Thomas Hardy, and we would end the afternoon talking about the reading. He took the time to care about somebody who he felt should be much better read. That was a very good education in reading for me."

Another unconventional part of Davis's education came later when she was typing William Carlos Williams' poetry to bring it to her students. "You learn how a poem comes together by typing somebody else's, I swear."

In addition to her work in inner-city schools, Davis travels to schools all over the country under the auspices of National Faculty, a highly select group of master teachers from across the nation. When she's not engaged in teaching, Davis can be found in the 150-year-old Fairport home she shares with her husband Michael Starenko, editor of *Afterimage*, Visual Studies Workshop's journal of the media arts. It is a home full of books, some of the finest of which were published by Davis herself. It may, in fact, be as a publisher of poetry that Davis has made her greatest contribution to the field.

"When I looked up the history of publishing, so many women had made it possible," she says. "Harriet Weaver, Margaret Anderson, the women that published Pound and Joyce. I was fascinated by the fact that these women published. I wanted to do it. I wanted to find manuscripts."

In publishing the work of poets, Davis has also followed the lead of her mentor, Dr. James Sibley Watson Jr., the Rochester physician who made films and edited and published *The Dial*, one of the greatest literary magazines of the 20th century.

"No one had published Mina Loy," she says. "Dr. Watson was my dearest friend, and he had published her in *The Dial* [in the 1920s]. It was just a serendipity of events that when Octavio Paz was here at the house, I had a *Dial* on a table, and he picked it up and said: 'Mina Loy, one of the greatest writers of the century.' I'd never heard the name."

Davis was curious enough to seek out more of Loy's work. In the early 1980s, she published the first volume of work by Loy to see print since the 1920s. She believes that some of Loy's poems from the teens, in which she talks about marriage and what it does to a woman, are unequaled in literature.

Davis also published a book by Modernist poet and novelist Djuna Barnes was published by Davis in collaboration with Watson. Barnes felt that her work should be on paper that would last 100 years rather than the paper used by New Directions press, which she believed was "cheap."

"I wrote to her that I'd like to publish her on Barcham Green handmade paper and it would last 100 years. I got a letter back: 'Yes, you have my permission.' Dr. Watson wrote the intro-

Students' voices

In recent years the books Davis publishes, through the New York State Literary Center she founded with the late A. Poulin, Jr., have been vehicles for the voices of the children she works with.

In *Dear Anyone*, an anthology of 12 years of student poems, an eighth-grader writes a poem titled "Change":

*I change
into someone I don't know.
My body turns around and
devours my image,
switches my life around
as if I never existed.*

In *Once Upon a Time*, a 16-year-old boy with Attention Deficit Disorder begins his riveting account of his troubles this way:

*Pain. I know pain. I live pain. I have done
some things in my life, but I have held on. I
have felt helpless, stuck on a roller coaster twist-
ing and turning. I have contemplated a way
out. Suicide. Suicide sounds quick and easy. All
I look up to, all I love gone, gone. Why survive
all this hatred I feel when all that will come of it
is hate?*

*You hate me. I will hate you right back.
Hit me harder, I can't feel.*

The Other Side pairs the writings of African-American authors with the words of African-American teenagers attending a

suburban school. This student responded to a text by James Baldwin:

*I am outside, in a glass bubble looking in at
the white world. Sometimes white people look at
me as if saying the world would be better with-
out me. With all sincerity I say I cherish my
blackness. White brainwashing fills me with
rage. I will not sink to what they want me to be,
a trigger-happy Negro who will betray myself
and my race.*

Kid Stuff, a Dictionary of People, Places and Things to Know, by sixth-grade students at Bay Trail Middle School in Penfield, is often funny (*Overboard: Where parents go when you get a bad grade on a test.*) But it can also reveal the students' deepest anxieties:

*Divorce: When your parents are divorced
it's hard, and it makes it even harder when they
get married again because there is no hope for
them to get back together. You feel like you are
in a boat in the center of the sea with no paddles
to get back to shore. You always seem to be hang-
ing and wondering. I should know.*

And, in the soon-to-be-published *These were Rochester's Children*:

*I live in a world where love and happiness
are rare. I live in a time where death is expected
and living is strange. I live in a world where I
am suffocated by the memories of my cousin,
Anthony Hackett, a victim of our society.*

**It's easy for adults to
be smug about pop
culture. But children
will buy into it
whether adults like it
or not.**

she was always denouncing anti-Semitism, could she read Ezra Pound and never say anything about his Fascist and Nazi sympathies?

"I said, 'You're right, and from now on I'm going to.' I can still remember one day at the Beinecke (Yale University's Rare Book Library), I was looking at a manuscript of his and I saw 'Hiel Hitler' written on it. I had to close the manuscript and leave the reading room. I stopped looking at Pound's manuscript after that. It was a long time before I could come back to it. I can still read the Cantos now and love them, but when my son asked me that, it was an important question. We have to speak about the anti-Semitism because if we don't, we're not telling the truth."

Davis's son, Christopher, now 30, is very much involved with popular culture, too. As a set-designer and builder, he has worked on a Dennis Hopper film and a Ru-Paul video. His first job was with a rap show on the Fox Network. When the show was canceled and all of the rap videos were unloaded, he sent them to his mother. Davis also has a 27-year-old daughter, Catherine, who is living in New York City and earning a doctorate in sociology.

Davis's involvement in popular culture began at the end of the 1980s, when she was asked to write a play, *Like We Call It Home*, based on the writing of high school students.

"I was still teaching the Modernists in the high schools to get the kids writing. In order to write the play I had to get into youth culture, and I noticed the kids in class were listening to a group called Metallica, so the next thing I wrote was *From Modernism to Metallica*. I actually went out and bought the tapes and loved it."

Songs like *Welcome Home Sanitarium* ap-

pealed to her. She also appreciated songs in which the heavy-metal group addressed injustice in the world. She believed Metallica was dealing with issues that directly affected kids, so she studied the group's songs in the same manner that she would study any other text. But she didn't do it as a detached observer. She not only attended Metallica concerts, she enjoyed live shows by Anthrax, Megadeth, and Slayer.

This was not the first time poetry had brought Davis closer to popular music. Once in the late 1970s she was with poet Gerard Malanga visiting a friend of his in the Dakota, the famous Manhattan apartment building. John Lennon, a neighbor in the building, dropped by. Lennon and Davis soon discovered they had something in common — a passion for the music of Buddy Holly. They ended up singing his songs and dancing together.

"I love rock and roll," she says. "For a long time in my life I wasn't admitting it, but then it dawned on me: Mick Jagger can still be singing it. Well, I can be talking about it. There's so much challenging social criticism written by rock critics today." Indeed, Davis has a bookcase full of books by rock critics, from established writers like Greg Tate to newcomers like Lisa Jones.

It was obvious to Davis that she was at a crossroads in her career. After 20 years of teaching Modernist poetry, she felt that it was time to move on. And she has moved on in a manner that many educators would find radical. At a time when William Bennett and C. DeLores Tucker are calling for boycotts of obscene and degrading music, Davis is now studying the lyrics of Marilyn Manson, the outrageous alternative star.

"Some very bright, interesting kids are listening to him, so that interests me. If they're listening, I know I'd better pay attention."

When Nirvana's lead singer, Kurt Cobain, committed suicide, it didn't mean a thing to most of Davis's generation, but Davis was paying attention.

"I have archived in acid-free boxes every paper on Kurt Cobain's death. The press didn't know how to treat it when he died. I know where I was when I heard about it, and I was terribly bothered by it, because songs like (*Smells Like Teen Spirit* — I love that video. I enjoyed Nirvana. I love that funny little voice with the roughness coming through, with those marvelous words. I thought Kurt Cobain had a lot to say."

At this point, readers who are a bit more skeptical of the value of popular culture may be asking where Davis draws the line. Tupac Shakur may have had a facility with the rhythm of words, but what about the violence in his songs? What about his 12-letter rhyme for DeLores Tucker?

"I start with where they are on the charts. Children have been my best teachers. If a child tells me something is important I'll read it, I'll listen to it, I'll go to it, because I respect their knowledge. Tupac talks about issues. Some of them bother me, but others, like 'Keep Your Head Up' — who else today makes kids living in poverty feel good about themselves? The way he speaks of single mothers on welfare — he speaks about things no one else speaks about in rap."

In the past seven months both Tupac Shakur and his rival, Notorious B.I.G., have been killed in drive-by shootings. (No arrests have been made in either case.) To answer those who connect the violent message of some of the rappers with real-life violence on the street, Davis quotes Jonathan Katz in his book, *Virtuous Reality*: "Rap doesn't kill kids, guns kill kids."

"Censoring rap — what's that going to do?" asks Davis. "What about gun control? It's easier to talk about censoring popular culture than it is to talk about some of the real needs we have in society."

But what about the women, commonly referred to in rap songs (including some of Tupac's) as hos and bitches? Wouldn't a feminist like Davis be appalled?

"Regarding women, it bothers me, particularly in some of the videos. The use of drugs bothers me. I get through all of that and I listen

to it carefully, because kids are listening to it carefully. And then I'm not afraid to say I like it. I'm not afraid to say to a kid I don't like it and this is why I don't like it. I'll say that about women. I'll say that about violence and I'll say it again and again and again about drugs. I've seen too much of the damage drugs do today."

Davis's argument is that while it is easy for adults to be smug about pop culture, children will buy into it whether adults like it or not.

"I try to get the kids to think critically about a text that they know, whether it be music, film, whatever. I want them to think, not to accept passively. Those young women are very aware of the stereotypes of the African-American single mother. Tupac treated the African-American single mother—the poor single mother—with respect in his music. That's quite rare."

Davis's respect for the medium of rap prevents her from assigning the writing of raps to students.

"I don't like it when a teacher will say, 'Write a rap,' because it's very difficult to do," says Davis. "I wouldn't ask them to write a Shakespearean sonnet. I would not demean the form. I think it's a facility with language, a visual sense of being able to see, and pulling that in—it's very fast. I happen to think Chuck B. (from Public Enemy) is a very fine poet."

"If somebody's interested in doing a rap, then we talk about it. We also talk about the economics of the music business, because it's very important for the kids to know what's black-owned, what's white-owned, who's the money behind Death Row (a record company specializing in rap). How does Death Row get distributed? Who gets the money?"

Despite her embrace of popular culture, Davis strongly believes that the classics must remain a vital part of the curriculum.

"The woman who loves rap music mourns the fact that we're losing ancient civilization. I can still remember going to a lecture at Visual Studies, and the lecturer was talking about an MTV video and I'm thinking to myself, this is the Homeric journey, but the people who were deconstructing that video didn't know Homer. And you wonder, they don't know Homer and [the classicists] don't know [MTV videos]—when will they ever come together?"

Although Aphra Press has published some of Davis's own poetry in a hand-printed, limited-edition volume, *For You, From Me*, Davis plays down her own role as a poet.

"I guess when I talk about my own writing I see that my work with kids is so intertwined, I don't know where one ends and the other begins now."

One example of just how intertwined Davis's work is with the work of her students: Last summer, Davis had to have her left kidney removed because of cancer. "The day I was discharged from the hospital," she says, "my mother died. I couldn't go to the funeral. But I had done the Mourning Cards with the girls, so I did a Mourning Card for my mother."

Writing has helped her deal with difficult situations and has allowed her to express her thoughts and ideas. She believes writing can do the same for her students.

"I want them to realize that they have a voice—that they can make a difference, that maybe they can grow up and make a contribution. I don't mean that to sound Pollyannaish; I believe in it. I want them to know there are adults in the world who care about what you think, who care about reading your writing, who care about you. Writing's a wonderful medium." ■