

Where I'm From: Inviting Students' Lives Into the Classroom

WHERE I'M FROM

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush,
the Dutch elm
whose long gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I am from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from perk up and pipe down.
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments —
snapped before I budded —
leaf-fall from the family tree.

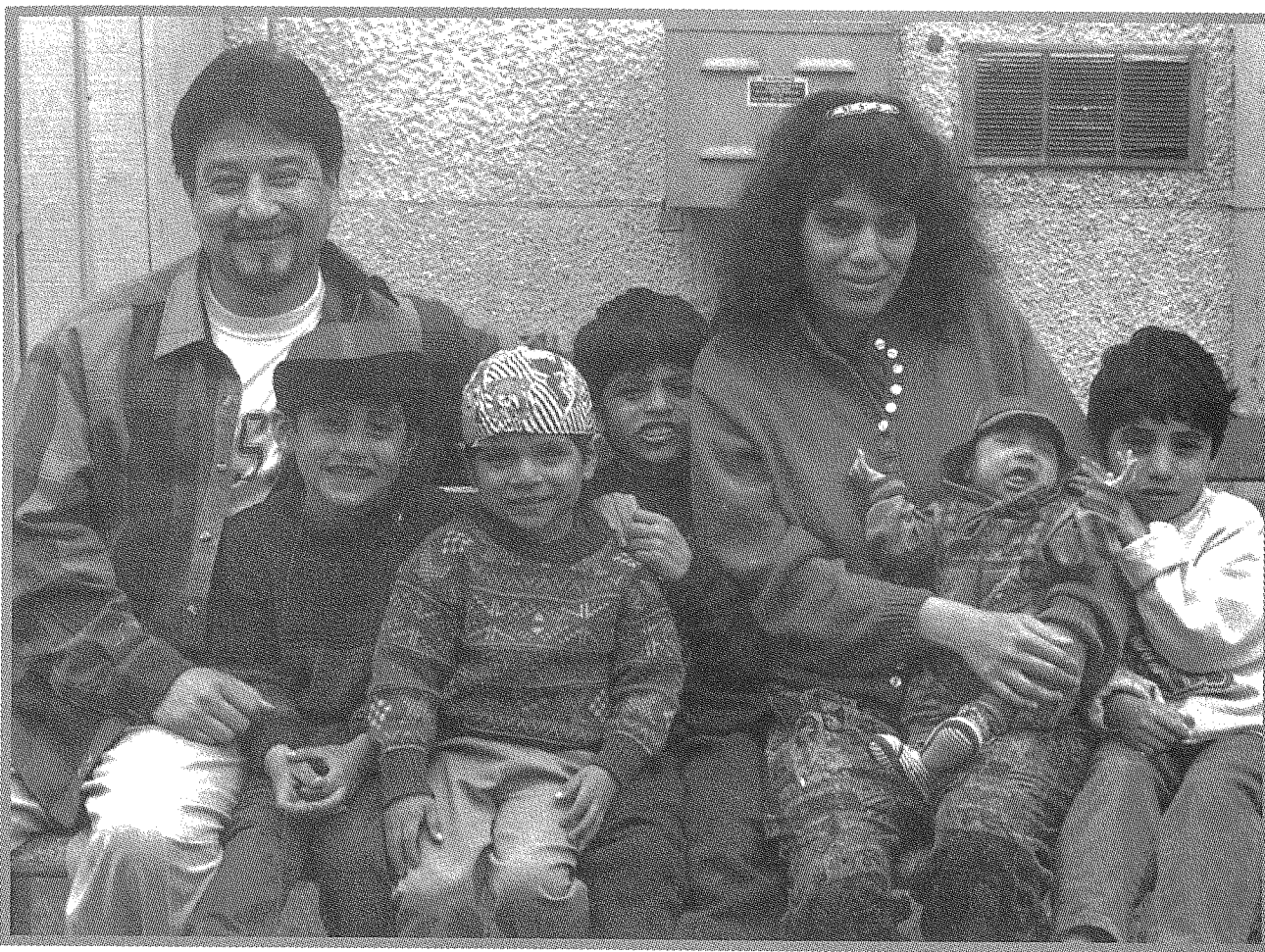
— George Ella Lyon

I remember holding my father's hand as he read my story hanging on the display wall outside Mrs. Martin's third-grade classroom on the night of Open House. I remember the sound of change jingling in Dad's pocket, his laughter as he called my mom over and read out loud the part where I'd named the cow "Lena" after my mother and the chicken "Walt" after my father. It was a moment of sweet joy for me when my two worlds of home and school bumped together in a harmony of reading, writing, and laughter.

In my junior year of high school, I skipped most of my classes, but each afternoon I crawled back through the courtyard window of my English class. There were no mass assignments in Ms. Carr's class: She selected novels and volumes of poetry for each student to read. Instead of responding by correcting my errors, she wrote notes in the margins of my papers asking me questions about my home, my mother, my sister who'd run away, my father who'd died three years before.

These two events from my schooling capture part of what the editors of *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (1994) meant when we encouraged teachers to make students feel "significant" in our classrooms:

The ways we organize classroom life should seek to make children feel significant and cared about — by the teacher and by each other. Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won't share real thoughts and feelings. Discussions will be tinny and dishonest. We need to design activities where students learn to trust and care for each other. Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, pre-figure the kind of democratic and just society we envision, and thus contribute to building that society. Together students and teachers can create a "community of conscience," as educators Asa Hilliard and George Pine call it.



Mrs. Martin and Ms. Carr made me feel significant and cared about because they invited my home into the classroom. When I wrote and included details about my family, they listened. They made space for me and my people in the curriculum.

In my classrooms at Jefferson High School, I've attempted to find ways to make students feel significant and cared about as well, to find space for their lives to become part of the curriculum. I do this by inviting them to write about their lives, about the worlds from which they come. Our sharing is one of the many ways we begin to build community together. It "prefigures" a world where students can hear the home language from Diovana's Pacific Islander heritage, Lurdes' Mexican family, Oretha's African-American home, and my Norwegian roots, and celebrate without mockery the similarities as well as the differences.

Sometimes grounding lessons in students' lives can take a more critical role, by asking them to examine how they have been shaped or manipulated by the

media, for example. But as critical teachers, we shouldn't overlook the necessity of connecting students around moments of joy as well.

I found a poem by George Ella Lyon in *The United States of Poetry*¹ that I use to invite my students' families, homes, and neighborhoods into the classroom (see page 18).

Lyon's poem follows a repeating pattern, "I am from . . ." that recalls details, evokes memories — and can prompt some excellent poetry. Her poem allows me to teach about the use of specifics in poetry, and writing in general. But the lesson also brought the class together through the sharing of details from our lives and lots of laughter and talk about the "old ones" whose languages and traditions continue to

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¹ *The United States of Poetry* (see reference) is a book and a video. *The United States of Poetry* introduces students to political poetry as well as to some old and new poets from diverse racial and social backgrounds. The video uses a music video format and demonstrates performance poetry. I use both the book and video with my high school students. Most of the pieces are more appropriate for older students, but some pieces, like "Where I'm From," could be used with elementary students as well.

permeate the ways we do things today.

Teaching Strategy:

1. After students read the poem out loud together, I note that Lyon begins many of her lines with the phrase, "I am from." I remind the class of William Stafford's² advice to find a hook to "link the poem forward" through some kind of device like a repeating line, so the poem can develop a momentum. I suggest they might want to use the line "I am from" or create another phrase that will move the poem.
2. We go line by line through the poem. I ask students to notice the details Lyon remembers about her past. After we read, I ask students to write lists that match the ones in Lyon's poem and to share them out loud. This verbal sharing

I AM FROM SOUL FOOD AND HARRIET TUBMAN By Lealonni Blake

I am from get-togethers
and Bar-B-Ques
K-Mart special with matching shoes.
Baseball bats and BB guns,
a violent family is where I'm from.

I am from "get it girl"
and "shake it to the ground."
From a strict dad named Lumb
sayin' "sit yo' fass self down."

I am from the smell of soul food
cooking in Lelinna's kitchen.
From my Pampa's war stories
to my granny's cotton pickin'.

I am from Kunta Kinte's strength,
Harriet Tubman's escapes.
Phyllis Wheatley's poems,
and Sojourner Truth's faith.

If you did family research,
and dug deep into my genes.
You'll find Sylvester and Ora, Geneva and Doc,
My African Kings and Queens.
That's where I'm from.

sparks memories and also gives us memories to share as we make our way through the lesson:

- Items found around their home: bobby pins or stacks of newspapers, grandma's teeth, discount coupons for a Mercedes. (They don't have to tell the truth.)
 - Items found in their yard: broken rakes, dog bones, hoses coiled like green snakes. (I encourage them to think of metaphors as they create their lists.)
 - Items found in their neighborhood: the corner grocery, Mr. Tate's beat up Ford Fairlane, the "home base" plum tree.
 - Names of relatives, especially ones that link them to the past: Uncle Einar and Aunt Eva, Claude, the Christensen branch.
 - Sayings: "If I've told you once. . . ." (The students have a great time with this one. They usually have a ready supply that either brings me back to childhood or makes me want to steal their families' lines.)
 - Names of foods and dishes that recall family gatherings: lutefisk, tamales, black-eyed peas.
 - Names of places they keep their childhood memories: Diaries, boxes, underwear drawers, inside the family Bible.
3. We share their lists out loud as we brainstorm. I encourage them to make their piece "sound like home," using the names and language of their home, their family, their neighborhood. The students who write vague nouns like "shoes" or "magazines" get more specific when they hear their classmates shout out, "Jet," "Latina," "pink tights crusted with rosin." Out of the chaos, the sounds, smells, and languages of my students' homes emerge in poetry.
 4. Once they have their lists of specific words, phrases, and names, I ask them to write. I encourage them to find some kind of link or phrase like "I am from" to weave the poem together, and to end the poem with a line or two that ties their present to their past, their family history. For example, in Lyon's poem, she ends with "Under my bed was a dress box/spilling old pictures. . . . I am from those moments . . ."
 5. After students have written a draft, we "read around." (See page 14 for a detailed description of this activity.) This is an opportunity for students to feel "significant and cared about," in

²William Stafford, Oregon's poet laureate for many years, published many outstanding books of poetry as well as two wonderful books on writing: *Writing the Australian Crawl* and *You Must Revise Your Life*. See references.

I AM FROM PINK TIGHTS AND SPEAK YOUR MIND

By Djamila Moore

I am from sweaty pink tights encrusted in rosin
bobby pins
Winnie-the-Pooh
and crystals.

I am from awapuhi ginger
sweet fields of sugar cane
green bananas.

I am from warm rain cascading over
taro leaf umbrellas.
Crouching beneath the shield of kalo.

I am from poke, brie cheese, mango,
and raspberries,
from Marguritte
and Aunt Nani.

I am from speak your mind
it's o.k. to cry
and would you like it if someone did that to you?

I am from swimming with
the full moon,
Saturday at the laundromat,
and Easter crepes.

I am from Moore and Cackley
from sardines and haupia.
From Mirana's lip Djavan split,
to the shrunken belly
my grandmother could not cure.

Seven diaries stashed among
Anne of Green Gables.
Dreams of promises
ending in tears.
Solidifying to salted pages.

I am from those moments of
magic
when life remains a
fairy tale.

the words of *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, as they share their poems.

6. Seated in our circle, students read their poems. After each student reads, classmates raise their hands to comment on what they like about the piece. The writer calls on his/her classmates and receives feedback about what is good in the poem. I do stop from time to time to point out that the use of a list is a technique they might "borrow" from their peer's poem and include in their next poem or in a revision. I might note that the use of Spanish or home language adds authenticity to a piece and ask them to see if they could add some to their poem. After a few read-around sessions I can spot writing techniques that students have "borrowed" from each other and included in their revisions or in their next piece: dialogue, church sayings, lists, exaggeration.

"Where I'm From" is an opening lesson in a year of critical teaching. As we create schools and classrooms that are "laboratories for a more just society than the one we now live in," we need to remember to make

our students feel significant and cared about. These kinds of lessons keep me going, too. When the gray days of budget cuts, standardized tests, school restructuring plans gone awry, and kid-bashing talk in the teacher room pile up one after another like layers of old newspapers on your back porch, pull out George Ella Lyon's poem and invite the stories and voices of your students into the classroom. ■

References

- Bigelow, Bill, et al. *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 1994, pp. 4-5.
- Blum, Joshua, Holman, Bob, and Pellington, Mark (Eds.). *The United States of Poetry*. New York: Harry N. Adams, 1996.
- Stafford, William. *Writing the Australian Crawl*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1978.
- Stafford, William. *You Must Revise Your Life*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1986.

I AM FROM . . .

By Oretha Storey

I am from bobby pins, doo-rags
and wide toothed combs.
I am from tall grass, basketballs and
slimy slugs in front of my home.
I am from prayer plants that lift
their stems and rejoice every night.

I am from chocolate cakes and deviled
eggs that made afternoon snacks just right.
I am from older cousins and hand me downs
to "shut ups" and "sit downs."

I am from Genesis to Exodus
Leviticus too.
Church to church, pew to pew.

I am from a huge family tree,
that begins with dust and ends with me.

In the back of my mind there lies a dream
of good "soul food" and money trees.
In this dream I see me on top makin'
ham hocks, fried chicken
and smothered porkchops.
I am from family roots and blood,
Oh, I forgot to mention love.

I AM FROM

SWINGSETS AND JUNGLE GYMS

By Debby Gordon

I am from jars for change collections,
cards from Grandma,
and chocolate milk.

I am from swingsets and jungle gyms
rusted metal mounted in dirt
used by many kids,
well broken in.

I am from the cherry tree,
and the pudgy faces climbing out on the branches
for a piece of juicy red fruit.

I am from tattle-tales,
keep-it-froms,
and "shut-up and listen to me."

I am from Rice Crispy Treats,
and pretty rings,
from Melvin and Earline.

I'm from Will and Sharon's long branch,
chunky Peanut-Butter and Jelly,
from the house we lost to fire,
and surgeries we all have had.

I am from the old scrapbooks,
where pictures,
remind me of days that live only in the minds
of those of us who were there.

I am from the people who paved a way for me,
I am from the best that could be,
and I am the best I could be.