Plato

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Reading this should make science types (I maybe these) recognize the same issues in their field.

FEAR OF POETRY
--or--
WHOSE WOODS THESE ARE I'D RATHER NOT KNOW

I am going to assert that the current American marginalization of poetry among both the priveleged and the underpriveliged is at fault for our continuing crisis in education. If we define literacy as the ability to read and write for meaning, not just how to spell or sound out words, then fear of poetry is a national problem linked to our shamefully low literacy rates, from the basic and functional to the literary and scientific, and I will suggest how to address it. In order for our students to match the achievements of students in other countries, to regain their former (higher) SAT scores, to become involved, nonapathetic citizens, successful mathematicians and scientists, and competent writers and workers in any field, we will have to get them--and ourselves, their teachers and parents--conversant with poetry.

Many educated people, including teachers, are ashamed to admit their tenuous relationships to poetry. Others are glad to tell you that they couldn't care less about it. Students barely into two-digit ages groan when a poem approaches; they don't remember that a mere five years ago they were speaking poetry in their daily lives. What has gone wrong? In accusing a fear of poetry as being at fault for poor learning and low literacy rates or success in all fields, it is necessary to look at the causes of it.

We are a suspicious and a lazy society, and the two are a dangerous pair. We don't want to work too hard, think too hard, take any more steps than are necessary to get the job done. We seem unwilling to rise to challenges--to see challenges as exciting possibilities of discovery instead of "work" or impediments to ease. If it's "hard" then it's "not good"; at best it might be "hard but good" but never "hard *and* good." We have forgotten the delight in accomplishment for its own sake we once felt as small children. Partly at fault is the materialism of the goal--praise, a grade, the finished product, all of which we are taught to value above all else--so that the feeling of losing

oneself happily in a process is no longer experienced or at least no longer considered, the way once it was in our earliest years.

At the same time we are allergic to the unknown, which might interfere with our mindless habits and make us have to stop and reconsider for a minute. Fear of the unknown leads to ignorance and credulity, and is a close relative of fear of poetry.

Certainly these two unfortunate traits lead us to lives of isolation and removal from the effort of having to talk to one another. And if a child has been taught--however subtly or indirectly--not to examine himself or others too deeply, what can happen to him in school? He will be happier either dutifully memorizing facts and getting good grades *or* acting out and getting suspended than having to think things out for himself. Either way, he falls through the cracks of this typical school structure, because he does not have any deep understanding of information or ideas, and can't apply knowledge in new situations. Problems are interferences--instead of actual doors--to growth. And his teachers, staggering under their load of a hundred fifty other students, is happyier this way; it keeps things simpler for them.

At home the child's parents, however kind, have their own pressures, and also give a message that challenging and questioning is at best something they just don't have time for, and at worst something to get punished for. The child learns to shut up and everyone seems fine. We have just lost another scientist, artist, or poet. But while artists and poets can often grow in the dark on their own, in response to the ills of their societies, it is harder for the young scientist to go on challenging and discovering her concrete world in this closed environment, and if she loses those "brash" qualities she will not succeed in her career, even though everyone will think her pleasant enough. And I should point out that this is one reason why women scientists have been scarce: If anyone in our society is permitted to be assertive with ideas, it is not girls or women. All of this suppression, for the girls or the boys, leads to more fear of the unknown, and more children who will become none of these things, nor know how to appreciate them either. More illiteracy.

Despite our rhetoric as the country of freedom and the belief in the pursuit of happiness, there has always been, here, a hatred of difference, change, even beauty, and yes, freedom--in

others. The political climate of "dumbing down the masses" is one with which the masses seem only too willing to comply. The masses are the student in the classroom, the government the teacher who doesn't want to be questioned, challenged, or argued with. Perhaps the government, if I may put it back in its proper place, does not want our children's education to be successful--to make them thinkers in their own minds. Ignorance and stupidity make good opiates--and students are future voting-ages citizens. (But students— get out of this system now— while you still can! Learn! think! Read!)

Even among the successfully educated and employed ther are varying degrees of accepted "dumbing down." The mind loves a state of rest--hence, for instance, television. And our literature reveals the influence of weekly sit-coms and easy entertainment in the contemporary novel's withdrawal from omnisient narrator, its structure of short sections, often from different point of view, and its minimalist refusal to analyze or discuss either cultural or psychological events, preferring merely to illustrate or even just mention them. All of these literary styles are forms of avoidance of the harder work of truly and fully examining characters and issues for the sake of understanding. Likewise poetry itself frequently moves away from lyricism or tropism of any kind, often sounding more like a short story. memoir, or vignette than an actual poem.

Fear of the unknown, of hard work and thought, and of poetry, all fall under what writer Carol Bly calls "mindless pain avoidance." Thinking with intent and clarity and depth requires looking inward; many people would rather not go into those woods without even a farmhouse near, let alone a health club or t.v. I wish I didn't have to blame fear of poetry on bad child-rearing practices that reflect the values of the overall culture, but, as with most things, that's probably at the root of it. Unthinkingly or intentionally, many parents and teachers instill fear of feeling, fear of anything roomy, explorable, and not immediately explainable, anything strange or unpleasant. They take away children's natural sense of playful wonder and replace it with a rigidity they call "control" but which is in reality "fear." It is the same as their own, which they have forgotten that they still have. It is a fear of stepping too close to the edges of the narrow framework they have learned to excel at dwelling in. Everyone is in denial of pain, everyone wants it easy now, and they want it that way for everyone else too. Let's now feel, then; let's not think.

True learning--understanding of concepts and meaning as opposed to rote memorization and recital of information--is an exercise in insight derived from observation, knowledge, and connection-making. Poetry is a coded language, like the language of calculus or of physics, that functions on exactly these skills, and those skills are the same ones that, as infants, we used moment by moment to make intelligible, and enjoyable, our world. But although poetry is based in our earliest selves (more on this later), somewhere along the way, many of us believe that we have "moved on" to other ways of getting by. Such people do not realize that they still employ daily the same means of integrating encounters with all aspects of life; they also have not been taught how to understand their own means of making sense of the world, and so they "outgrow" their awareness of poetry and now see it as foreign. This split actually only leaves them more in the dark, although they may tell you that they are doing fine. (this is not clear but worth pursuing)

From adults, I have heard reasons for not liking poetry put in these ways: I just don't think that way; I don't get it (implying that I don't need to anyway, thanks); I don't like all that hidden meaning; why not just come right out with what it's supposed to mean; I'm more mathematical or linear; it just doesn't make sense; it makes me feel stupid. All of these "excuses" show a misconception of what poetry is and how people perceive the world in the first place.

Later I will examine what poetry is, but first let's look at what it is not. While it is true that some poetry, as with anything, is difficult, some is obscure, and some is downright bad, I prefer not to blame poems for readers' faintheartedness. The problem with poetry is a problem of perceived definition, and of ignorance. Most people view poetry as effete, elitist. In that case, a) who needs it (if it doesn't want me then I don't want it?), or b) I'm not good enough for it. Neither view is valid because its elitist status is solely a result of the attitude that wants to segregate it, not any intrinsic element of poetry itself.

The same problem exists with the languages of mathematics and science, to name two important ones. Although the humanities and the sciences suffer a false split in the common view (which compartmentalizes thought processes instead of freeing them to connect and therefore enhance learning), they ironically, as "extremes" of interests, are both put on pedestals where they

are either worshipped as esoteric (or "difficult") or avoided as impractical or unreal (or "difficult"). Either way, neither is understood, loved, or utilized as the essential route to making sense of our selves or our world that it really is.

Joseph Epstein, who is known for his much-disputed proclamation that poetry is "dead"--in fact, was murdered--says that he once believed poetry to be an "exalted thing," which is why he now is supposedly in mourning over its demise. But, dead or exalted, he has never been close to poetry, and thus sheds no light on its true nature. Certainly other cultures have believed poetry to be a lofty thing: The Vikings and the Greeks, to name two, saw poetry as a gift from the gods, but that notion of "gift" implies that, while it might be godly, it was available to the lower beings among us, just like fire.

Poetry *is* a "heightened" language, in that it is loaded--not like a gun, but like a cargo train. It is multiple, layered, complex, and therefore a lot of trouble. Poetry is intuitive, so if you are analytical, forget it; connective, so if you are linear, move on; physical, so if you are cerebral, don't even think about it. In fact, poetry can be all these things, loaded with all these modes of apprehending the world and the self, but this is the problem--that we construe complexity to be either a problem to be avoided or a holy gift to be put on the pedestal. Either way the poem is never opened up and read, and so we lose a fundamentally important tool for learning and living here on earth--for opening up the *mind*. As Donald Hall says, "worship is not love," and what we separate from ourselves, in either worship or fear, can never speak to us; dictators have no friends.

We have taught people to expect certain things in life, and to work towards such predictability. Things should make sense, should follow chronologies or regular patterns. Sometimes nature and poetry—and children—follow these rules; sometimes they do not. What to do when the poem doesn't cooperate? What's missing? In fact, poems may be like puzzles, something--as May Swenson had it--to "solve." But they are not perfect puzzles. When an analytical person looks for the linear sense, how all the parts fit together to make one coherent whole, he may find extra or missing parts and decide the poem has failed. The poem has not failed; the reader has failed to find, perhaps?, in himself those pieces that are missing, and to enlarge the scope of the "puzzle" to make room

* - see next page
(And really they cannot be "solved" in any more than can the universe itself.)

for those "extra" pieces, in order to complete the "sense" of the poem. But this participation in the actual making of the poem's sense cannot come from one rigid approach to thought. When a reader says, "I like it but I don't understand what this part means, how it relates," she is failing to create her own understanding from her own emotional ground. This requires a flexibility of thought processes that the reading of poetry can help to generate, and that the fear of poetry stiffens and breaks off.

In a suspicious society, words are all the more worth scrutinizing. But too often a minimal awareness of the power of words leads to a fearful shunning of their careful use instead of a critical, involved attention to them. Certainly political language manipulates us with its creative inventions of new names (peace keeper, for a missile that kills) and its way of gagging us with phrases bereft of content. George Orwell warned us of the danger of being unaware of the meanings in our own words as well as others'. The precision of poetry is another of its teaching assets, but instead of being practiced for that reason, it is held hostage. Perhaps students were told that there is a secret or hidden or buried message in a poem, and this makes them either insecure around it (they don't own the digging tools) or resentful (it is trying to make a fool out of me). ~~Everyone is~~ afraid of ascribing the wrong meaning when they try to "pick it apart."

If we have expectations of being fooled, duped, tricked, we *will* resent a poem. If we expect it to be obscure, sticking out its tongue at us while hiding its "truth" behind its back, we will hate it. If we expect nothing (this is another fault of ignorance or bad teaching) we will see nothing. But if instead we expect to be surprised, to see something about ourselves or our world that we never expected to see there, we have a strategy for reading, thinking, and understanding. When we expect surprise, or a tantalizing strangeness, we find it in the place where what we're given and what we bring along meet and get exchanged. The "hidden meaning" is clear because we helped create it, or we have allowed ourselves to sense it beyond paraphrase. The insight into ourselves came because *we* figured it out through a sort of interdisciplinary process. But of course we needed the poem in order to do all this at all.

Poems make sense the way babies make sense. They do, but you may not know how or why. They do, but you may not always "get it." They do, but you only know it by instinct when you get close enough. It's a feeling, not a fact. Unfortunately, that way of looking at it will turn some people on their heels. Like Locke (or was it Kant), some people hold poetic language suspect because it often favors passion over reason. This kind of thinking holds that we lose our "better judgment" for some inferior model when we switch from "fact" to "feeling"--as if it were impossible somehow to integrate both into our thinking. When we think metaphorically (which is the form of thinking most often associated with poetry, but which is in fact--as I will get into later--the single most fundamental method of thinking humans use in *all* areas), engaging our senses in images in order to understand the unvisualizeable, we do not "lose our senses"--or, in other words, our "good sense." Instead we enhance our chances of coming to knowledge. The more rivers we have--of perception, awareness, connection--the greater the ocean of viable information we can swim in.

Accompanying the feeling-vs.-fact issue is the myth that poetry (because it is associated with emotion) is for wimps and wispy girls, while science (because it is supposedly based on "hard" facts) is manly, sturdy, and logical. Poetry requires being emotional; science requires being sensible and smart. Poetry has no rules; science is entirely rules. This ridiculous split hurts both areas of study and many others related to them, and closes off vast numbers of people from fully appreciating or participating in either one--let alone their own identities.

In fact, both science and poetry rely on an openness to the unknown, the relation of the self and interpretation to information and experience, strong powers of observation and attentiveness to detail, structure, and form, and an ability to use language to articulate connections between common and extraordinary things. Both are driven by a sense of wonder at the strangeness of the world and our own lives in it. They are both ways of making sense of those lives and that world.

The false differentiation between sciences and arts is the fault of an uninformed, fearful society that has elevated technology to the same distant status sometimes held for poetry, and in such blind worship there can be no real examination of the differences between the good and the

bad, the useful and the damaging, the true and the manipulative. It's a set-up for trouble--ignorance and fear, leading to loss of knowledge or potential discovery, and a lack of real participation in individual or national life.

Poetry does connect us to our lives. It is, in the words of the late poet Eliseo Diego, "the act of paying attention in its utmost purity." Others have called it "a momentary stay against confusion" (Frost) and "something that exists beyond what can be said in other words" (Henry Taylor). Poetry calls us to the things of this world, makes visible the invisible (Marianne Moore). It defies paraphrase because it is layered and mirroring, its meaning greater than the sum of its parts because its words are freighted with interpretation and connection, the hallmarks of all true thinking.

In his early years, Immanuel Kant was interested in how we physically translate external experience. We perceive experience first through our senses (which are physical) and immediately interpret the "information" we receive, and these interpretations are based on an infinitely complex soup of past experience both individual and cultural, past interpretations, and natural or imposed disposition. A poem, like any utterance that we offer, is a physical translation of experience or idea (physical in this sense because it employs words), crafted in such a way as to recreate the complexities of perception that go far beyond mere incident, passing through the emotions--which is why some people have said that the best way to "know" if something is a poem is by the "feeling" that it arouses.

Of course words tend to convey meaning, but a poem is not primarily a form of communication per se. ("If you want to communicate," says Richard Hugo, "use the telephone.") At least, its purpose is not simply to convey information. Jacob Bronowski distinguishes human language from other animals' by focusing on the difference between knowledge and instruction. Though it is not *about* that distinction, specifically, a poem functions on the same assumption: That knowledge is a higher form of awareness than instruction, and that knowledge requires interpretation and a process of conceptualization that includes the physical. Knowledge is a complex amalgam of "what happened" and the emotional responses and connections we make as we simultaneously interpret or internalize experience.

So even when a poem "tells" us something, it is doing more than this, and that "more" is that part that can set some people on edge--the part that needs our rigid sense of "getting to the facts" ~~to let go~~ in order to "get a feel" for the associations of those "facts" in the shared world of the poem, the poet, and oneself. Perhaps one could say that to like poetry you have to agree that there are in fact *few* hard facts, that facts are mutable, suspect, and subject to dissenting interpretation. You have to agree that, happily or unhappily, life is largely a "gray area."

Right now factions are breaking off, saying that anyone who works with the so-called hard sciences is certainly not cut out for poetry, but I will show you how untrue that is. For one thing, scientists are uniquely in need of the services of poetic thought because they make physical and theoretical discoveries for which there sometimes are no other words. Every new unnamed discovery--and there have been hundreds, at least, in the past century--needs to be named, and often these names come from other ~~languages or~~ areas of language that the scientists *associate* with the new thing. This is metaphorical thinking.

Second, ~~there are a growing number of~~ scientists ~~who~~ recognize the possibilities of the still-unknown in what they do know. Facts change. For instance, the atom--named for the Greek word for "smallest unit" or "unsplittable unit"--was eventually discovered to be not the lowest common denominator of all matter after all. When I was in school, we learned of protons, neutrons, and electrons, all contained in the atom. Now there are quarks and other particles in there as well, and it is assumed they did not only recently take up residence there. So much for the facts.

Finally, scientists are influenced by the beliefs and issues of their culture, just like the rest of us, and these become metaphors by which to interpret information. New metaphors can free us from entrenched ways of seeing that have previously blocked our vision, and often it is not until ~~this~~ takes place that we recognize the ignorance or limit of our previous ways. The analogies afforded by a scientist's time and place are ~~further~~ tools for seeing; those scientists whose vision is most free of denial and limitations will have the foresight to understand more, and sooner, than the rest of us, and in this way they are like the poets who see beyond the plain clothes of the literal.

see p. 9 * later I will show concrete examples of how science + poetry make excellent bedfellows.

Because poems often reach for the layered repercussions in any given event, they may at times seem to be like the Red Queen in the looking-glass world, who said one must run as fast as one can just to stay in one place. Even if there is a narrative line of thought to the poem, but especially if there is not, the poem will include an explosion centered in the immediate moment in which a simple perception or appreciation is held between an object, physical or spiritual, and the mirror of language. The language will reflect the ideas, images, and responses that accompany every concrete essence perceived by the poet. If the poem is a good one, it will seem to say that which otherwise could never be said, but which we recognize nevertheless, now. In this sense, a poem is a "word" for one minute truth or one event and all of its expansion of reaction and thought; A poem wants to speak any way it can. For that reason, it may use conventional narrative, ~~(one hopes it will do so with an acute sense of rhythm and music)~~, but it had better use more than that or it might lose its way. A poem uses rhythm ~~and sound~~, to which we respond emotionally, even primally. We are creatures of an earth that repeats itself infinitely--day after day, season after season, generation after generation. These diurnal patterns are ~~a form of rhythm~~, and repetition gives form and predictablity to our lives that are otherwise punctuated with change and surprise. Poetry plays with the making, ~~and~~ breaking and shifting of rhythms to keep us lulled *and* to awaken us.

The same sense of familiarity or surprise can come from the use of sound. Words echo each other, vowels open up, full of air, and consonants knock and sputter and push and slide, all of which--as any product namer knows--cause emotional responses in us. But why? See Darwin for fascinating studies of how human language and gestures parallel animal sounds and facial expressions. For example, "snarl." See how it forces your lip up, your nose out, your teeth suddenly exposed? The word is a mimicry of its own meaning, a sort of visual and auditory onomatopoeia.

While a poem may observe any object, event, place, or person, it may also observe an inner landscape. Best if it does both--exterior and interior observation--because the act of seeing involves an awareness of the self *in* the act of seeing, and an honest ~~expression~~ portrait of the seen requires

either an attempt to remove the self (which is impossible, since the expression is, by virtue of language, an interpretation, a translation, or an inclusion of--or at least nod to--what the self brings along. So a poem usually shows us how the writer feels about the subject. Similarly, scientists aware of this same problem use double blind studies, or include data on the experimenters themselves for greater ~~clarity or~~ accuracy.

This kind of attentiveness is also a skill necessary for visual artists as well as scientists, and it is a form of love. It is a connection of self to other of such profundity that separation between the two becomes difficult, if not impossible, and like scientists, poets are often aware of this paradox. The more one tries to see the other in all its otherness, the more one brings to ~~his~~ her observation ~~his~~ her own self and all its attendant complexities.

But the bright side of this act of connection is that it is a generous one, an attempt at weaving into one the external and the internal, the experience and the language of its interpretation, the thought that is bound to feeling. It uses ~~primarily~~ visual image, since sight is the sense we most frequently use to experience the world; sound, which echoes in our sense of hearing everywhere and always; rhythm, which syncopates with our own breathing and heartbeat and the rotations and forces of planets; and language, which while engaging our senses also pulls in our propensity for thought.

much more must go here about the actual skills we use in it, its uses and its beauty, its roots in childhood and other past and present cultures, etc. What is poetry? How can this definition become attractive and clearly connected with my idea about its uses for learning, etc....

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Of course, though you may not immediately think so, poetry also employs logic, whether an internal logic dictated by the individual poem, or conventional logic--which is closely related to linear thought--or both. Most poetry is made up of coherent, grammatically and syntactically "correct" sentences, or at least phrases. These need to be read for their literal logic, and not overlooked in any search--panicky or pleasant--for symbolic or sensual meaning.

It should be spelled out that language *itself* is both science and art, functioning on a logical, "scientific" system, rooted in the genetic and evolutionary, but also, miraculously, imagistic, + able to be used creatively.

I mean you can be creative with it →

~~creative, and primal~~. Language is an evolutionary extension of other responses to awareness of our selves and our surroundings. Archetypes in particular are human words with contemporary contexts that name aspects of our timeless, species-crossing, habitation on this earth: sun, moon,

mother, sea, prey, rain, darkness, death. These simple words are in fact complex in their ability to trigger deep emotional responses that go beyond our personal, finite, present lives, responses rooted, as Carl Jung defined it, in our "collective unconscious" as beings on earth. Language is also musical because it is produced by wind, reed, and strings (breath, tongue, and vocal chords) and plays a wide range of tones, notes, and timbres. Language is an instinct, an actual part of physical response to stimuli, as we can see hwen even deaf infants coo, burble and "talk" the same as hearing ones.

Along with the scientific aspects of language, and its obvious use as a mechanism for thought, expression and communication, language is a medium, like oil paint, clay or stone, wiht which to shape intangible ideas, thought and feelings. It is a material for art, a toy for play, and a tool for expression and contact.

All of these elements of language function in poetry, which acknowledges experience both personal and universal, and which, in Susanne Langer's words, gives us "forms for feeling" we might not otherwise be able to "handle" (hold steady, work with and cope with). Poetry's greatest value is to reconnect us to life by moving us towawrds feeling and experience, against the strong currents of our resistant psyches and our contrary culture. It pulls us into greateer response to all the mystery of our lives, so that we may be participants in it, examiners of it, not ignorant or passive victims to it. And it does this by involving language in all its capacities, and by our role in recapturing all of the elements that were given to it originally. (that's not quite right)

When I say that as readers we participate in the understanding and meaning of the poem, I in no way mean to say that "a poem can mean whatever you want it to mean." Art has intention, and part of an artist's job is to discover and / or invent that intention from the initial inspiration and *craft* it into the language of the particular piece of art. Once this has been done, we may associate our own experiences with those related in the poem, but we must keep these separate from the poem's own. (see Gardner, humanities, personalizeing etc) We are not rewriting the poem, we are only reading it--completing its cycle in our understanding of it. When students and other readers make this statement that we are all free to interpret it our own ways, what we have is an intermediate level of morality equivalent to a belief that tolerance means that all lifestyles, opinions

and actions are equal. They are not, but it is easier to be "tolerant" if we pretend they are, because we avoid assessment, value judgment, dispute, and a necessity for conversation, self-examination and acceptance in the face of the unacceptable. Such sophomoric reasoning reflects our culture's (and educational system's) lack of commitment to real interaction, penchant for oversimplification and general stance against intellectualism or emotion.

On these terms, a poem that challenges personal conventions of thought *ought* to be a path toward greater insight into those stereotypes ways of seeing, and an exercise in accurate, logical reading of a poem can help effect this result. But the "facts" or literal sense of the poem's sentences cannot be the place to end the encounter. (Gardner fact vs. grey area conceptual stuff, same place) As a cursory understanding of history or psychology will reveal, no event, action or idea is an isolated one, and the point of view, perspective and reconstruction through the poet's eyes may be found elsewhree than in the poem's specific phrases. (like where? more)

John Hollander has said that "poetry is a message whose mode of encoding is part of its meaning." And its encoding is an intricate lace of maneuvers through elements of the poet, poem and reader. As the poet composes, she may wander through her own poem in its early stages, curious, looking for clues to tell her where it came from, what it wants to say, not just what it *is* saying or seems to be saying. The poet may discover in this process what the poem's true focus must be, and then work to bring about that vision with crafted clarity. Later the reader repeats that same process, but if the poet has done her work, the poem will reveal itself to the willing reader fairly readily, and if it is a well-crafted poem by a conscious writer, we will not be able to separate, for instance, its form or style of presentation from its meaning, because *all* of it is "what it is about," which is precisely why reading poetry is useful to develop skills for all kinds of thinking, and all modes of learning, both verbal and otherwise.

Fear of poetry prevents our development of these critically important skills. Why do some people make use of poetry while others push it aside? Why do some enjoy it and others struggle in frustration?

Certainly there are people prone, through natural or environmental disposition ~~or developed personality traits~~, to want to explore, or at least experience, the mysterious, the strange, the unparaphraseable but true realms of reality, and others who reject those realms. Though some of these rejectors would cite disinterst or even disdain as reasons for their avoidance, I would call it fear. Fear of the unknown, the unmappable, and also ~~of~~ committing to the specificity of the concrete.

We all need to use and understand words with purpose, feeling, and clarity, or we become silenced, stupefied, manipulatable. We also need the strength to see our own role in how we percieve the world and those around us, and the patience to pay close attention to them. Poetry lifts us out of the surfaces of ourselves and into the world, urban, natural or global. It also holds a mirror up to each of us, a questioning one that asks how *you* fit into its assumptions and denials. In other words, it teaches responsibilty and articulation, and it fosters connection and dialogue.

~~On the other hand~~, Fear of poetry is a loathing for the "terrible specificity of detail," for saying what one means--or even knowing it--for searching at all for meaning. It is a fear of being duped or deceived by encoded messages--which then leads to actually being duped and deceived, unknowingly. Hobbes too believed metaphorical language was a way of deceiving, but in fact it is the most basic way of comprehending that humans have at their disposal. Fear of poetry, also, is a fear of the unknown coddled by laziness and an unwillingness to rise to a challenge. Unfortunately it is not only a cutting off of "the passsions" that avoidance of poetry leads to, but a severence of the intellect. It is a refusal to think, to problem-solve, to learn for the sake of learnig and of the joy it brings to the learner, seperate from judgment or grade.

An avoidance of layered language, a language of concrete image embodying abstract meaning, is a shutting down of the best that is human--interpretation, discovered nuance in knowledge, the awareness of the universal in the specific and one's self in the general, ~~true thought and honest expression, acutal communication beginning in self-examination and awareness of causes and effects in others, taking responsibilty for one's actions and ideas. (tame that, Al.) It leaves us~~ isolated and ignorant, and powerless, we either crave power or cower to authority.

Instead of encouraging communic. begun in self-exam. that acknowledges responsibility for one's actions + ideas, and in a concern for causes + effects in others— we are left

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unable to think for ourselves or to consider the true thoughts of others, we become isolated + ig., and, powerless, we either crave power or cower to others' authority.

A verbal human's avoidance of metaphorical language (poetry--?) is equivalent to a carpenter leaving half his tools at home in the shed. Maybe he can get the job done somehow, but it won't be adequate. Does he care? Going back for the rest seems like more trouble, even though it will take him all day to do what he might have done in an hour. Does anyone else care? Maybe not--many of us live in pre-fabricated homes with vinyl siding. And this is not unrelated: it is further proof of a lack of care for either beauty or utility, as long as it's just fucking easy. Who cares if the roof leaks as long as I have one dry corner I can squat in over here. I'm talking about available choices, here--not a forced status quo trapped by poverty!

Consider the creative thought involved in the "what-if" factor. Both poetry and science (and many other areas) depend on it. Fear of metaphor is in part a failure of--or fear of--imagination, a very serious condition. When we say "what if" we are automatically thinking in terms for learning and personal growth that lead to a healthier society. "What ifs" are experiments. What if I push this object in a different direction than the one in which it is already headed? What if I had grown up in a family like X's--would I have been as unhappy as X and done the things that X does? Such thinking leads to the breakdown of prejudices and naive or unsubstantiated theories, replacing them with deeper understanding based on broader truths.

Children and adults both need to play that "what if" game--to try on different lives, to formulate and carry out experiments with their physical and emotional environments. But most of us are told not to worry so much, question so much, and the urge is compressed into a hard kernel deep inside. We hear phrases like "don't be stupid," "that's ridiculous," "you're weird," "go to your room until you calm down," "what planet do you live on?" Creative play or exciting, playful thought become replaced by depressing rigidity. There go the artists, poets and scientists. Here come the CEOs.

Gardner - symbol systems - the part abt pretend play leading to imaginative creativity - that can go here? But does all this go in this ch.?

epistemological

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In succumbing to a fear of poetry, we can lose much. We lose a means of seeing--in both the visual and the comprehensional senses of that word. Loss of this kind of sight means loss of insight, a large area of knowing. We are left in a kind of illiteracy that steals a tool for full participation in life. An inability to make connective leaps from literal to allegorical, from example

to whole, from word to feeling, event to cause and response, or even object to object, leaves us trapped in a small, familiar but unexplored room. We lose, as well, cultural intimacy, including the literal and symbolic sense of ethnic fables, world mythologies, the unmodernized language of the Old and New Testaments and other ancient documents, and the literature of past eras. Language is the translation of thought and culture, and if we change or misunderstand the words, we forget the lives that uttered them. Forgetting is another sure road to isolation and the danger of repeating disregarded errors.

Literacy is, as I pointed out in the opening of this chapter, more than knowing the sounds or spellings of words. It is knowing meaning, which requires a vast range of references and allusions, including literary, cultural, historical, political, scientific, and many others. Without these, we perceive a shell of an understanding at best, never the full and living entity tht was meant to live inside it.

We might very well say, here, "Live and let live." Why must my neighbors be informed and literate, as long as they're happy and not hurting anyone else? The answer is that such a scenario is next to impossible, and the "live and let live" credo is akin to "the poem means whatever you want it to mean" cop-out. It is an unconsidered "tolerance" which fails to acknowledge that neighbors need to ~~talk to each other~~ have dialogues or they can become dangerous to one another. The danger comes from fear and distrust that leads to polarization, prejudice and suspicion. It also comes from sheer ignorance. My neighbor may be very "happy" (though I would argue that this is not happiness) dumping toxic waste from his painting business into the garden out back, but his innocence of water seepage, pollution, environmental poisoning and fatal cancer in animals and children is not okay with me. We share this garden--we all do. Letting him "live" can kill me. We need to talk. We need to be aware. We need to be literate, responsible, engaged citizens.

Almost all problems can be solved through thought, communication, patience and imagination. The matter is urgent. If ~~you~~ we know that our country is slipping into mediocrity and apathy, with high suicide and murder rates and a general feeling of remove, and with vast numbers letting their ancestry slip away, not to mention their intellectual capacities, and along with them a

valuable tool for integrating emotional, intuitive, analytical, logical, and associative knowing--if we know this and can acknowledge some dismay at it, we can begin to correct the problem. Let us put our imaginations to the task.

For instance, how can teachers help? Lewis Thomas suggested that we teach science not by demanding early memorization of all the rules and everything we know to be true, but by exploring what we don't know, what each child might yet discover, what each has to contribute. This creates enthusiasm about the scientific method in general and children's own personal involvements in it, so that they then *want* to learn the facts and figures. It is the same with teaching writing: if we allow their imaginative and descriptive writings to stand as they are, if we respond to their *content* and ask questions that generate further writing and thought, children find writing a natural means of recording imagined or real events. Later the desire to know the rules (grammar, conventions) or the information available comes naturally because it has a purpose--the learning is motivated by an integrated need for whatever can help me learn what I want to learn, say what I want to say, communicate to others who may know about this too. The learning of the rules and facts will bolster individual ideas.

On the other hand, when we are asked to learn grammar before speech or writing, it is like painting a shadow alongside an object that isn't there. Worse, it tells students that writing *is* grammar, that content--ideas, imagination, thought, feelings--is irrelevant. When we are told to memorize the names of the parts of speech, or are forced to spell according to the dictionary, before we have been allowed to write what we had in mind, the desire to write gets assassinated by the teacher, all in the name of "learning the basics." In the case of science, we learn that it is a thing unrelated to daily life and that everyone has figured it all out already and we have the tedious chore of committing it all to memory.

Children want to do things "right" and that desire is a force in opposition to their other need for artistic or invented expression. It is easy to tip the balance into an obedient compromise that tolls the death knell of creativity. Children see their older siblings, parents, and other adults performing tasks with miraculous ease and ability, and they see the difference in their own attempts.

At two a child knows she is not pronouncing a word the way her mother does, not drawing a shape that really looks like a horse. The drive to speak, to draw, is all that gets her through, although there are also children who simply will not make the step of trying to do a thing until they know they can do it without much error--which in some cases may mean never. Somehow, however, people often don't think the kids notice these differences, and adults feel compelled to "correct" them and set them straight--ostensibly so that they'll improve, or not look bad--which usually tends to dampen the children's spirits further, and is ultimately a symptom of the adults' own fear of looking stupid themselves. A child's natural urge to participate, and delight in making a mark, will get her talking or drawing--whatever--even if she can't do it well. Her natural self-awareness can stop her at any time if she is sensitive, and any contribution from parent or teacher to her sense of shame, inadequacy, or even self-consciousness (which can also come from excessive praise) is entirely unnecessary and in fact deadly for her progress. How easy it is to silence a child.

So let's say a kid has made it to Junior High with some iota of creativity of thought still in her, though she's still a little worried about performing well and not being criticized. Now her English teacher says, here's a metaphor, here's an example of personification, and this is a simile. Now write a poem that uses two of each, and label them. The kid valiantly tries, but the poem just doesn't say anything she cares about. It is an empty exercise, a test. Does her teacher really believe this will lead her to a love of literature? Or is that beside the point? Is it just his duty to "teach" her the terms therein?

Later this same student writes a poem from her heart, about her parents' divorce, let's say, and she carefully crafts it so that its first half takes on new meaning after a double entendre in the central line that connects its preceeding and following parts. This helps her to expose her dual feelings towards her parents. The teacher, in red ink, "corrects" the punctuation, thereby erasing the poem's sense, along with the child's feelings, enthusiasm, and respect. If the child *still* has any gumption left, what she will suffer from is not the loss of poetry (she may keep it for herself, privately) but the daunting dullness of her teacher and other adults like him--a condition she will experience similarly for the rest of her life. More likely, though, the repetition of this sort of

insensitive error in teaching will lead her to believe *she* is the stupid one, or that poetry itself is "stupid" (there's her personification) and she will not be caught dead taking another risk of that sort.

Does her teacher love poetry? Understand it? Fear it? What are his fondest hopes for his students? What in the world caused him to become an English teacher anyway? Is it necessary, after years of either literary criticism in which he was trained to read for symbolism, structure and style or bad teaching just like his own, to remind him that literature is about life, not mechanics? That we read to reconsider and refine our own views about ourselves and our world, to remember our places amongst our neighbors, not our placement of commas?

Teachers who succeed with poetry simply give it to their students. They offer the tools, the time, and the freedom to write it and to read it. They ask students to listen to poems so they can hear and feel them, to read them aloud and to themselves, and to respond to them even without being able to explain them. A young person who is already resistant to personal analysis, who is in the natural but false state of blissful denial that his family is anything but fine, is not going to take well to analyzing a poem in order to be told he was wrong and that in fact the ant really represents a soldier at war.

Children must be allowed to learn by feel, by example, through a process of exposure, or thought and trial and amendment; they must be allowed to learn by desire, not force. And of course the same process of developing, expressing, and getting responses to ideas, of having thought and uses of language modelled for them, and of apprenticing themselves to actual artisans and professionals, should be taking place in all their classes. Their learning needs the context of real life situations in order for students to conceptualize and internalize--and love--information so that they can turn it into real knowledge.

I don't know why I keep going on--I keep losing the point, whatever that is. How to "fix" the situation--change it--from either education or grown-up personal positions. I'm going to end up ditching much of this.

sigh

HG talks about the 5 modes of learning, + of 3 elements to lang. (That wd be in an earlier ch.). Here is the way pp. can work in develop. all these modes.