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Telling it slant: Using poetry as a venue for healing

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.
—Emily Dickinson

I parked at the back of the small stone church and followed the sounds of shouts and commotion to the basement, where a bevy of young boys was letting off steam in a game of tag. I had been asked to speak to this local Boy Scout troop about child abuse.

One of the leaders rounded up the youngsters and instructed them to find seats on the folding chairs.

Palming a slender book I had brought along, I took my place at the front of the room and began my presentation.

Not formally trained as a teacher, I work by instinct. I had thought about how best to approach this subject with a group of young boys—traditionally a taboo topic, off-limits, something mentioned only in hushed tones and whispers.

“As Boy Scouts, you’ve learned to respect your leaders. They’re there to guide and direct you, to teach you outdoor skills like hiking, camping, and cooking.

“Most times things go smoothly, but sometimes things don’t go so well. It might be because you aren’t listening—or it might be the leaders’ fault. Grown-ups can get angry or act in ways that they shouldn’t. That’s what I want to talk to you about this evening.”

The boys fidgeted in their seats. No one said anything. One boy reached up to scratch his head, then quickly withdrew his hand and stared at the floor.

“I’d like to start by reading you a poem called *My Papa’s Waltz* by Theodore Roethke.”

I opened the book to the place I had marked and began: “*The whiskey on your breath / Could make a small boy dizzy; / But I held on like death: / Such waltzing was not easy.*”

Shortly, the fidgeting stopped. As I moved into the rhythm of second stanza, a hush fell over the room. “*We romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf; / My mother’s countenance / Could not unfrown itself.*”

When I approached the last stanza, I noticed the eyes of one small boy fixed on my face: “*You beat time on my head / With a palm caked hard by dirt, / Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt.*”

I inserted a finger to mark the page and closed the book, holding it in the palm of my hand.

“Well,” I continued, “what did you think of the poem?”

One boy spoke up, breaking the silence. “It was good,” he said. “Maybe a little scary, but good.”

“Why was it scary?” I asked.

“Because his old man hit him,” the boy said.

“With what?”

“His hand.”

Several boys nodded. I talked a bit more, leading them on. “Why do you think a father would hit his son? Do you think the boy did something bad?”

“Naw; it was because the old man was drunk.”

“How do you know that?”

“You could smell the whiskey—it says right there; you read it.”

“That’s true; the father had been drinking. What about the mother?”

Another boy piped up: “She was pissed off at the father.”

“Why do you think she didn’t do anything except frown?”

“She was probably afraid, too.”

“Exactly. Sometimes fear keeps us from saying or doing the right thing.”

A hand shot up in the second row. It belonged to the little boy who had been staring at me intently when I read the stanzas.

“Yes?” I gestured to him. “Did you have something you wanted to say?”

The boy dropped his hand and cleared his throat. He was a scrawny kid who looked to be about 12 years old. “I wanted to ask ... do you think his father loved him?”

Everyone in the room turned toward the speaker. He sat stock-still in his seat, looking at me with deep, moist eyes.

“You know, it doesn’t say exactly in the poem; but I get a sense that yes, the father did love the boy.”

I wasn’t entirely prepared for his response: “If he loved him, why did he beat him?”

I cleared my throat. “Sometimes those who love us hurt us the most,” I said. “It could be the alcohol—the whiskey—or it could be something else. Sometimes we just don’t understand why.”

“What do you think the boy should do?” my young charge asked.

“I think he should talk to an adult—someone he trusts to do the right thing.”

A week later, I got a call from the scoutmaster.

“I had a heart-to-heart talk with that boy who spoke up at the meeting last week. It was his father. It was tough, but another leader and I talked to his dad. We don’t know yet how it will all work out—but at least it’s a start.”

Sometimes telling it slant is the best way to get at the truth—the healing truth that sets us free. **JAAPA**