

Inspiration, Love, Imagination

'I don't know'

'Inspiration,' said the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska in her speech at Stockholm in 1996 when she accepted the Nobel Prize for literature, 'is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists ... There is, has been, and will always be, a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It's made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers and gardeners...'

This archival scrapbook contains nothing, anyway directly and explicitly, about inspired doctors or gardeners. Many items in it, however, are about the love and imagination of inspired teachers. What doctors, gardeners and teachers have in common, Wislawa Szymborska said, is that their work 'becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it.' She continued: 'Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know".'

Collected together here in this part of the scrapbook are the texts of various talks and articles about education. When the talks were first presented, the intention was to salute and affirm teachers in the audience, and to strengthen admiration and respect for them amongst non-teachers – school governors, for example, and educational administrators. The intention further was to challenge defiantly the priorities and ruling concepts of the national government, and to support opposition to much of what national government – of whatever political hue – says and does nowadays in the name of education.

At the same time, the talks didn't seek to replace one set of dogmatic certainties, the government's, with another set, those of teachers. For dogmatic certainty of any kind, as Wislawa Szymborska stressed, is inimical to inspired teaching. An essential and continuous assertion for teachers, as for poets, doctors and gardeners, is 'I don't know'.

In order to say 'I don't know', in the sense Szymborska intended, you sometimes have to use metaphor, story, imagery and artistry. If you are teaching a class or lecturing to an audience you have also, in some important senses, to perform - to use the tricks and techniques of an actor. You have to engage your audience's attention, as does an actor, and to hold it with continual modulations of pace, tone and emphasis.

At the same time you must respect the audience's autonomy, their right to shape and compose their own minds, their right therefore to hold back and to keep their distance. The curriculum, syllabus or text is like a script to be interpreted, performed and enacted, or like a musical theme from which to improvise. It cannot be merely delivered.

Metaphor and story may sometimes appear to be a retreat; a refusal to engage with hard issues of politics and administration; an appeal to messy emotion; an escapist blurring of inescapable controversy. The conventional prose of the educational administrator or planner, tackling controversy and conflict head-on, may therefore seem preferable. But surely the issue is not one of either/or.

Metaphor and conventional prose are two poles between which we in education must continually move. Conventional language has its uses and value. But it is tired and spiritless if it is not complemented by metaphor and imagery. Talks and lectures about education are similarly tired and spiritless if they contain no element of performance. Teaching requires artistry. For this reason if for no other, lectures to teachers should surely use artistry too.

'I sometimes dream,' continued Wislawa Szymborska in her Nobel lecture, 'of situations that can't possibly come true. I audaciously imagine, for example, that I get a chance to chat with the Ecclesiastes, the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavours. I would bow very deeply before him, because he is, after all, one of the greatest poets, for me at least. That done, I would grab his hand.

"'There's nothing new under the sun': that's what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were born new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you. And all your readers are also new under the sun, since those who lived before you couldn't read your poem. And that cypress that you're sitting under hasn't been growing since the dawn of time. It came into being by way of another cypress similar to yours, but not exactly the same. And Ecclesiastes, I'd also like to ask you what new thing under the sun you're planning to work on now?'

Her questions to the ancient writer continued. She acknowledged that in everyday speech people don't stop to consider every word, and all use phrases such as 'the ordinary world', 'ordinary life', 'the ordinary course of events'. But for poets 'nothing is usual or normal'. If the word 'teachers' is substituted for the word 'poets', the Nobel lecture concluded as follows:

... But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world. It looks like teachers will always have their work cut out for them.

Source: adapted slightly from *In Praise of Teachers: identity, equality and education, six topical lectures* by Robin Richardson, Trentham Books, 2002