A Poet-Teacher’s Minifesto

Listen to your students. 
Listen as though you were walking the streets of a strange city at night. 
Watch closely as you listen. They are your teachers.

Imagine each of them as an instrument, unique and essential to the whole. 
Play their notes lightly and with caution, as though from their song, you could tease out information from a foreign culture, learning its tastes, manners, myths and fears.

Ask your students challenging questions. When they answer, imagine you are the conductor and they, the composers of an orchestra. Study their melodies slowly and with patience. 
Let harmonies evolve organically and rearrange the dissonance.

Believe their answers about themselves and their world as you would believe an elder of a native tribe.

Trust that in their hearts, they care, 
even when they wear backwards hats and flip flops to class. 
Even if they talk to their friends, interrupt, or check their phones. 
Remember: their hearts are caution-taped in an effort to defend against not knowing.

Stand at times before them in bewilderment. 
If you are brave enough to be vulnerable before them, courageous enough to say, “I don’t know”, I made a mistake”, they will become brave enough to ask the difficult questions and live with the unknown.

Be gracious. Their lives are harder than yours.

Share with them your passion for learning, your love for the subject. Be the aspen that sprouts new shoots from underground, your roots will become their trunks.

Be generous with your words; praise them often.

When they fail or falter, be kind in your criticism. Like toddlers, they’ve extended themselves into a new and strange environment, and in order to master this labyrinth, they must bump into walls clumsily, many times before learning to navigate it well.

A second chance never hurt anybody. Third, fourth and fifth chances can tear down a spirit.

Like all artistic endeavors, teaching is a moment to moment exercise in awareness and presence. Even though legislators focus on desired outcomes, who can say when our lessons
will make a difference, or when they will manifest
in the students’ lives?

The outcome is less important than small moments of brilliance
along the way—
glimpse of a red fox emerging from the trees—

I do not remember the grades I received on each paper I wrote in college,
nor have I hung my diplomas on the walls, but I remember my mentor
bending down to show us a newt along the trail,
fiery red, its nearly glowing salamander spirit

Take your students outside. Teach them to appreciate this land, this water, the creatures around them. Let them be quiet and listen to the wind in the leaves of the great sycamore
that bows over the creek.

Be still and notice the bullfrogs, the blue-bellied lizard doing pushups on the fallen oak. Point out the swallows nesting in their mud-nests under the eaves, the humming birds darting from blossom to blossom.

Teach them the names of flowers: penstamon, black-eyed Susan, salvia, willow-bark, English lavender, Russian sage, Shasta daisy, mule’s ear, monkey flower, thistle-weed, lupine, snow flower, aster.

Look around you, there are deer grazing in the fields.
This is what matters. This is why we are here.

Note: Title inspired by Brenda Hillman’s title: *Ecopoetics Minifesto: Draft for Angie*

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