

I Could Be a Poet
by Taylor Mali

I think I could be a poet because I like to wear a lot of black.
And I can think of incongruous images like a Marxist with a trust fund.
A Porsche pulling a U-Haul, a lobsterman in Birkenstocks sipping a cappuccino,
with his pinkie pointing toward the sky.
I have studied the poets who sing song out their lines
for no other reason than that's how it's done,
in love with the sound of their own voices,
ending each line going up,
every single line going up,
as they read, and read, and . . . read?
See, declarative sentences that in prose would go down,
in poetry seem to go up
as if it adds some hidden meaning:
I know what I'm talking about and you should too.

And I am not afraid to get pissed off!
I am not afraid to use that ONE requisite swear word
to let you know I am FUCKING serious, man!
I'm not afraid to

SHOUT! WITH INTENSITY! AND LONG, DRAMATIC . . .

PAUSES

FRAUGHT WITH ANGST!

And still you can hear the lines going up.
And the words, the vocabulary words—
Glaconian, distemic, irrepscenteelia—
Thrown in to remind you
“I am a writer! Eat my Verbal dust!”

And then the end
Spoken softly, hauntingly tender,
Though not devoid of irony,
Ending abruptly as if there is more . . .

Miracle Workers
by Taylor Mali

Sunday nights I lie awake—
as all teachers do—
and wait for sleep to come
like the last student in my class to arrive.
My grading is done, my lesson plans are in order,
and still sleep wanders the hallways like Lower School music.
I'm a teacher. This is what I do.

Like a painter paints, or a sculptor sculpts,
a preacher preaches, and a teacher teaches.
This is what we do.
Experts in the art of explanation:
I know the difference between questions
to answer and questions to ask.

What do you think?

If two boys are fighting, I break it up.
But if two girls are fighting, I wait until it's over and then drag what's left to the nurse's office.
I'm not your mother, or your father,
or your jailer, or your torturer,
or your biggest fan in the whole wide world
even if sometimes I am all of these things.
I know you can do these things I make you do.
That's why I make you do them.
I'm a teacher. This is what I do.

A homeless man asked me for change
on the street one night when my pockets were empty.
"Come on man, it's Christmas," he pleaded,
and I knew I had become a teacher for better or worse
when I spun on my heels
and barked: What did I just say?
Don't make me repeat myself!

In the quiet hours of the dawn
I write assignment sheets and print them
without spell checking them. Because I'm a teacher,
and teachers don't make spelling mistakes.
So yes, as a matter of fact, the new dress code
will apply to all members of the 5th, 6th, and 78th grades;
and if you need an extension on your 55-paragraph essays
examining The Pubic Wars from an hysterical perspective
you may have only until January 331st.
I trust that won't be a problem for anyone?

I like to lecture on love and speak on responsibility.
I hold forth on humility, compassion, eloquence, and honesty.
And when my students ask,
“Are we going to be responsible for this?”
I say, If not you, then who?
You think my generation will be responsible?
We’re the ones who got you into this mess,
now you are our only hope.
And when they say, “What we meant
was, ‘Will we be tested on this?’”
I say Every single day of your lives!

Once, I put a pencil on the desk of a student
who was digging in her backpack for a pencil.
But she didn’t see me do it, so when I walked
to the other side of the room and she raised her hand
and asked if she could borrow a pencil,
I intoned, In the name of Socrates and Jesus,
and all the gods of teaching,
I declare you already possess everything you will ever need!
Shazzam!
“You are the weirdest teacher I have ever—”
Then she saw the pencil on her desk and screamed.
“You’re a miracle worker! How did you do that?”

I just gave you what I knew you needed
before you had to ask for it.
Education is the miracle, I’m just the worker.
But I’m a teacher.
And that’s what we do.

Totally like whatever, you know?

By Taylor Mali

In case you hadn't noticed,
it has somehow become uncool
to sound like you know what you're talking about?
Or believe strongly in what you're saying?
Invisible question marks and parenthetical (you know?)'s
have been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences?
Even when those sentences aren't, like, questions? You know?

Declarative sentences - so-called
because they used to, like, DECLARE things to be true
as opposed to other things which were, like, not -
have been infected by a totally hip
and tragically cool interrogative tone? You know?
Like, don't think I'm uncool just because I've noticed this;
this is just like the word on the street, you know?
It's like what I've heard?
I have nothing personally invested in my own opinions, okay?
I'm just inviting you to join me in my uncertainty?

What has happened to our conviction?
Where are the limbs out on which we once walked?
Have they been, like, chopped down
with the rest of the rain forest?
Or do we have, like, nothing to say?
Has society become so, like, totally . . .
I mean absolutely . . . You know?
That we've just gotten to the point where it's just, like . . .
whatever!

And so actually our disarticulation . . . ness
is just a clever sort of . . . thing
to disguise the fact that we've become
the most aggressively inarticulate generation
to come along since . . .
you know, a long, long time ago!

I entreat you, I implore you, I exhort you,
I challenge you: To speak with conviction.
To say what you believe in a manner that bespeaks
the determination with which you believe it.
Because contrary to the wisdom of the bumper sticker,
it is not enough these days to simply QUESTION AUTHORITY.
You have to speak with it, too.

The the impotence of proofreading

By Taylor Mali

Has this ever happened to you?
You work very hard on a paper for English class
And then get a very low grade (like a D or even a D=)
and all because you are the word's liverwurst spoiler.
Proofreading your peppers is a matter of the the utmost impotence.

This is a problem that affects many, many students.
I myself was such a bed spiller once upon a term
that my English teacher in my sophomore year,
Mrs. Myth, said I would never get into a good colleague.
And that's all I wanted, just to get into a good colleague.
Not just an anal community colleague,
because I wouldn't be happy at an anal community colleague.
I needed a place that would offer me intellectual stimulation,
I really need to be challenged, challenged mentally.
I know this makes me sound like a stereo,
but I really wanted to go to an ivory league college.
So I needed to improve
or gone would be my dream of going to Harvard, Jail, or Prison
(in Prison, New Jersey).

So I got myself a spell checker
and figured I was on Sleazy Street.

But there are several missed aches
that a spell checker can't catch.
For instance, if you accidentally leave a word
your spell checker won't put it in you.
And God for billing purposes only
you should have serious problems with Tori Spelling
your spell checker might replace a word
with one you had absolutely no intention of using.
Because what do you want it to do?
It only does what you tell it to do.
You're the one with your hand on the mouth going clit, clit, clit.
It just goes to show you how embargo
one careless clit of the mouth can be.

Which reminds me of this one time during my Junior Year.
The teacher read my entire paper on A Sale of Two Titties
out loud to all of my classmates.
I'm not joking, I'm totally serious.
It was the most humiliating experience of my life,
being laughed at publicly.

So do yourself a favor and follow these two pieces of advice:
One: There is no substitute for careful editing.
And three: When it comes to proofreading,
the red penis your friend.

Silver-Lined Heart

By Taylor Mali

I'm for reckless abandon
and spontaneous celebrations of nothing at all,
like the twin flutes I kept in the trunk of my car
in a box labeled Emergency Champagne Glasses!

Raise an unexpected glass to long, cold winters
and sweet hot summers and the beautiful confusion of the times in between.
To the unexpected drenching rain that leaves you soaking
wet and smiling breathless;
"We danced in the garden in torn sheets in the rain,"
we were christened in the sanctity of the sprinkler,
can't you hear it singing out its Hallelujah?

Here's to the soul-expanding power
of the simply beautiful.

See, things you hate, things you despise,
multinational corporations and lies that politicians tell,
injustices that make you mad as hell,
that's all well and good.
And as far as writing poems goes,
I guess you should.
It just might be a poem that gets Mumia released,
brings an end to terrorism or peace in the middle east.

But as far as what soothes me, what inspires and moves me,
honesty behooves me to tell you your rage doesn't move me.
See, like the darkest of clouds my heart has a silver lining,
which does not harken to the loudest whining,
but beats and stirs and grows ever more
when I learn of the things you're actually for.

That's why I'm for best friends, long drives, and smiles,
nothing but the sound of thinking for miles.
For the unconditional love of dogs:
may we learn the lessons of their love by heart.
For therapy when you need it,
and poetry when you need it.
And the wisdom to know the difference.

The solution to every problem usually involves some kind of liquid,
even if it's only Emergency Champagne
or running through the sprinkler.
Can't you hear it calling you?

I'm for crushes not acted upon, for admiration from afar,
for the delicate and the resilient and the fragile human heart,

may it always heal stronger than it was before.
For walks in the woods, and for the woods themselves,
by which I mean the trees. Definitely for the trees.
Window seats, and locally brewed beer,
and love letters written by hand with fountain pens:
I'm for all of these.

I'm for evolution more than revolution
unless you're offering some kind of solution.

I'm for the courage it takes to volunteer, to say "yes," "I believe," and "I will."
For the bright side, the glass half full, the silver lining,
and the optimists who consider darkness just a different kind of shining.

So don't waste my time and your curses on verses
about what you are against, despise, and abhor.
Tell me what inspires you, what fulfills and fires you,
put your precious pen to paper and tell me what you're for!