

Artist's Statement

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Like all other artists, I value the personal expression that art makes possible. However, in an approach that has been unfashionable in America for the last one hundred years, I also value the didactic and social functions of art.

Up until the 1920's, poetry was understood to have a didactic dimension—that poetry can teach the reader. I believe that poetry can teach the reader in a variety of ways. Poetry can teach formally and indirectly: the reader can learn about the history (of the forms, genres, and styles) of poetry, which, since literary history is embedded in cultural history, this also implies learning about the human cultures that have composed poetry. Poetry can also teach directly, through content, theme, and imagery, about cultures, social history, family history, and the hopes, dreams, and desires of individual human beings from all walks of life.

Earlier in American history, poetry was understood to be a social art; poetry was written to commemorate public celebrations, to honor the deceased, to mark important social and family events, and to memorialize societal, familial, and personal history. Every small town had its “town poet” who was often asked to supply verses to be published with the obituary of a loved one or to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone for a new church or public building. This type of poetry was actively disparaged by the Modernists and it has, by and large, failed to regain any of its former respect, although the populist literary scene (open mics, community-sponsored readings, slam nights, writing clubs) is evincing more vitality and broad popularity than the academic and “high” literary cultures. Indeed, the Brahmins of the academic and high literary cultures have been bemoaning poetry's lack of relevance and of an audience for quite some time now (“Can Poetry Matter?”), while open mic nights and writers' clubs are still going strong in many urban, semi-urban, and rural areas.

Because I value poetry as expressive art, as didactic opportunity and as social functionary, the body of my own writing engages in all three functions, sometimes simultaneously. When I teach poetry, especially in settings where the learners are not interested in poetry as a full-time pursuit, I find that focusing on the didactic and social

functions of art creates a less threatening environment for workshop participants. It's much more fun to be introduced to writing the sonnet by learning about the time and culture from which it arose, its most common uses, and by examples both past and present, than it is to learn about the sonnet by rote memorization of formal elements or by limiting it to any given artist's personal expression. I particularly enjoy helping workshop participants create social poetry--poetry that arises from family and community history or that can be given as an honor or a gift to someone the poet admires. To concentrate upon creating social poetry is to remove part of the burden of composition from the amateur poet--communal themes rarely result in the sadly self-indulgent poetry that often arises from writing workshops. Personal poetry is much more difficult than it appears to beginning and journeyman writers; oftentimes, inexperienced writers mistake confession for poetry, a mistake that is as painful for the teacher to critique as it is for the student to hear critiqued. Social poetry offers approachable subject matter, suggests formal approaches, and encourages the writer to take the audience into consideration.

I believe in the power of poetry to change lives, both through reading it and through writing it. But because there is always an author *and* an audience, poetry is most powerful when it participates in all three rhetorical stances, the self-expressive, the didactic, and the social.