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Q & A with Taylor Mali

By Patricia J. Murphy | Apr 25, 2022

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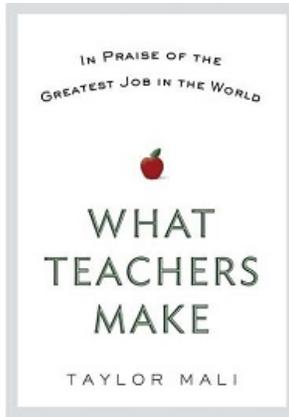
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Taylor Mali.



You could say that Taylor Mali is poetry in motion. A published poet and four-time National Poetry Slam Champion, he has been featured on HBO's Def Poetry Jam. In addition, he is also a former teacher, present day "traveling poet" (more about that later), and the author of five books of poetry, including a volume of essays titled *What Teachers Make: In Praise of the Greatest Job in the World*. His debut rhyming picture book, *The Teachers I Loved Best*, illustrated by Erica Root, will hit shelves in spring 2023. In honor of National Poetry Month, we spoke with Mali about his roles as poet and teacher—and how they intertwine—how he "snatched" a picture book deal, and why he believes in the beauty, truth, and power of poetry.

Which came first for you, writing poetry or teaching?

I think I was a poet first. My dad used to write poems that he would recite at weddings and birthday parties, so poetry was always a very public art form for me. Then, when I went to graduate school in Kansas in the '90s to become a better poet, it was also where I taught my first class, freshman composition, which everybody has to take. And, while many of my colleagues went off to get their PhDs, I decided that I wanted to teach. I love teaching.

What did you teach and for how long?

I taught for 12 years. In addition to teaching composition, I taught eighth and 11th grade English, and sixth and seventh grade history and math.

How did your teaching and poetry become further intertwined?

Who thought that there was a career as a professional poet? I did it. The poetry slam had only been invented the year when I went to graduate school [note: the art form of poetry slam was invented in the mid-1980s by Marc Smith in Chicago, but the very first National Poetry Slam was in 1990 in San Francisco]. And, if I had stayed in the Bay Area and not gone to graduate school, I would have discovered the Poetry Slam earlier than I had, and would have been a much worse poet. Also, I probably would have never gone to graduate school. So, you know, poetry was what led me to teach. And, then I found that since you're told to write about what you love, and I loved teaching, I wrote about what I loved best about teaching. This included writing about when "the lightbulb" goes on over a kid's head—which is just such an electrifying moment. It's one of the hidden joys of teaching.

So, I write a lot about teaching. And, that's what led me to write what has become my most well-known poem, "What Teachers Make."

Can you tell us where this poem came from?

To be completely transparent, it was actually a New Year's Eve party where someone asked me the question, "What do teachers make?" I changed it to a dinner party in the piece because it makes for a better story. But, it was indeed a New Year's Eve party on New York's Upper West Side hosted by a lawyer. My wife and I were the only non-lawyers at the party. The host became a little bit tipsy and



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walked up to me and asked, “Be honest, Taylor, what do you make?” Unlike what I say in my poem, I remember looking down at my shoes, and I said, “\$28,500.” The poem was my way of rewriting the past—what I wish I had said. Poetry can do that. It can be a re-envisioning of the past.

It seems poetry caused you to re-envision and reimagine the trajectory of your career. When did you decide to take your poetry on the road and become a “traveling poet?”

Since 2000, I’ve been traveling the world doing poetry readings and teaching poetry workshops. I’m often brought in as a visiting author/poet at high schools, middle schools, colleges, and universities. Sometimes it’s for a day, a week, or a month. My travels had led me to every state in the United States, except Wyoming, including a lower school dance class in Hawaii where fourth graders danced it out—it was one of the best gigs I’ve ever had—and to some 60 countries around the world.

Outside of dancing, what else do you do during your poetry workshops?

Oftentimes, I’ll briefly introduce three different types of poems you can write, answer questions about them, read examples, and then ask the students to pick one and try it. Next, the kids write, and then I walk around and give them little tips. Of course, as a Poetry Slam poet, I end every poetry workshop with a bit of performance, and I teach them how to perform their poetry.

Over the years has there been a time where you’ve met some reluctance—or a student who wasn’t feeling poetry?

Yes. I remember at one of my workshops that there was this girl who wasn’t interested in writing a poem. She said, “I’m really more of a math and science person,” and I said, “Well, that’s fine because a metaphor is an equation between an idea and a thing.” I don’t know who I stole that from or whether I’m just smart enough to have come up with it, but it turned out to be a great explanation for a metaphor—especially to a girl who says she’s a mathematician/scientist.

The experience got me thinking about ways where I could help students come to that place quicker and without having to spend lots of time beginning of class explaining the difference between abstract and concrete. And, so that’s where I came up with my “Metaphor Dice.”

What exactly are the “Metaphor Dice”?

I came up with the idea for students to make dice out of paper with the words I wrote on the board. It was a huge hit, but it took too long. So, that was the day that Metaphor Dice as a physical product was born. It’s a poetry prompt generator in which you mix concepts, objects, and adjectives to create metaphors. Basically, I took the 45 minutes that it takes to explain what a metaphor is and packaged it in a box of 12 dice. It is a product [both dice and an app] that I truly believe in and have been promoting at trade shows like Association of Writers & Writing Programs to help other poets.

How did you transition from teaching poetry workshops for kids to writing a rhyming picture book for them? Is it true that it had to do with plastic bags and trees?

Yes, it did! My wife and I have a large window in our third-floor apartment that looks out to some trees. Whenever a plastic bag gets stuck in one of the trees, my wife goes crazy and asks me, “Can you get it out?” So, I went to Home Depot to get a telescoping painter’s pole; and, then I got a hook, a wire hanger, and some duct tape, and made what I call “the Snatchelator.” I’ve used it to get bags out of our trees, and, then almost immediately, when I was removing our bags, people started stopping me on the street and asking if I worked for the city. And, I said, “No, I’m just a concerned citizen who likes to pull plastic bags out of trees.” It wasn’t long until I started getting bags for other people, too. Then, I got a call from a guy who asked if I could get a bag out of a tree in front of his building. He said, “It has been driving me crazy, and I’ve tried to get it myself, but it looks like you might have more success.” And then he said, “And, oh, by the way, sometimes I am a stringer for the *New York Times*, could I write a story about you?” And, he did.

So, how exactly did this lead to your book deal?

Well, Frances Gilbert, an editor at Doubleday, saw the “Snatchelator” story in the *Times* and reached out. She discovered that I was the poet who wrote a poem about teachers, and she had a book by the same name from her publishing house. She asked me if I could write a children’s version of my book. She she had always wanted to publish a book about teachers.

I said that I could do that, *but* that the only problem is I know that the first line of my obituary will read “Taylor Mali wrote “What Teachers Make,” which goes viral every year at the beginning of every school year.” I really wanted to do something different. I told her that I write a lot about teaching, and asked if I could show her what I could do. So, I wrote six poems, and I sent them to her. One was called “The Teachers I Loved Best,” which is about those teachers who stand out from the rest. And, she said, “That’s the one!” It will be coming out in spring 2023. And, I can’t wait for the first reading. I don’t have it memorized yet, but I will very soon. It will be where all my talents are going to combine: teaching, presenting, and writing.

Do you have any advice for fellow teachers who might want to write poetry?

As John Keats once said, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” Poetry is truth and beauty. It’s a dance between the truthful and the beautiful. I think too often when people sit down to write a poem, they try to aim for something beautiful. And, when you do this, the risk is that you end up sounding trite. But, then, when you try to write something simple and truthful, it turns out too direct, and too raw—which in poetry is not really a problem. So, I would tell teachers to focus more on writing something truthful, and if it is your truth, it will carry with it its own beauty. I’d also tell them to share with the world what it’s really like to teach. Teachers need to proselytize for the art of teaching, and they often don’t do this. Through my poetry workshops and readings, I proselytize for the power of poetry.

What makes poetry so powerful to you?

Poetry is how I engage with and make sense of the world. I can't imagine what I would be without poetry. If I'm not pulling plastic out of trees, I am putting words together to make the world beautiful. It's also why I teach poetry workshops: because poetry makes life better. And I want other people to get out of poetry what it's done for me.

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