



Grantmakers in the Arts  
2004 Conference

## DANCING WITH DIFFERENT PARTNERS

### Proceedings from the Conference

October 17-20, 2004  
Renaissance Cleveland Hotel  
Cleveland, Ohio

### KEYNOTE: NAOMI SHIHAB NYE THE WHOLE DAY AS A DANCE FLOOR

Literary artist Naomi Shihab Nye was born to a Palestinian father and an American mother, and grew up in St. Louis, Jerusalem, and San Antonio. Drawing on her ethnic heritage, the cultural diversity of her Texas home, and experiences traveling in Asia and the Middle East, Nye uses her writing to attest to our shared humanity. Her books include *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*, *Fuel* (poems), *Never in a Hurry* (a collection of essays); and *Habibi* (a novel for young readers).

A Lannan Fellow, Nye was also a Guggenheim Fellow, and a Wittner Bynner Fellow. She has received a Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets, four Pushcart Prizes, and numerous awards and citations for her children's literature including two Jane Addams Children's Book Awards.

She is a regular columnist for *Organica* and poetry editor for *The Texas Observer*. Her work has been presented on NPR's *A Prairie Home Companion* and *The Writer's Almanac*. She has also been featured on PBS's *The Language of Life* with Bill Moyers, *The United States of Poetry*, and *NOW* with Bill Moyers.

Nye lives in San Antonio with her husband, photographer Michael Nye, and their teenage son.

*October 19, 2004, noon*

What an honor to be here with you. I'm thrilled! I don't think there could be a better group to be with in the whole world, and I mean that with all my heart. What you do in this world, for me, is the balance for everything else. And I need it, and I appreciate all of it.

When I started working 30 years ago, through the Texas Commission on the Arts – it's very touching to me to have so many members of the Texas Commission on the Arts, here today – I had no idea that I could remain an itinerant in the world of poetry and an artist in the schools, arts education, so long.

Yesterday, when I was taken for a hobo in the lobby of this fine hotel, and escorted to the front door against my will, I couldn't quite figure it out. I realized that I deserved it, because I have always chosen to be an itinerant in the realms of arts and arts education. I thank you all for the grants you give to enable so many of us to do work.

I'm grateful for your devotions and your labors and all you encourage and enable. And I just want to say in this fraught time that whatever happens, I vote for you.

One of the best things about getting older in this field is that you can say dramatic things like, "For 30 years now I have seen..." and it's true.

When you are a visiting artist all the time, you're not there to receive evaluations from people or keep up with them years later. When I run into many of you and we've meet in so many different places in the world, I feel like that's a kind of affirmation that it all matters and that we're all still here doing this kind of work.

But after 30 years you do run into many people, in drugstores, on streets, in airports who say, "Those poems we talked about? They're still in my heart." Or, "Do you think if I started writing poems again as an adult, I might feel smart again?" Actual quotes. Or "Do you think if I encouraged my children to write poems, they might feel a tiny bit of the power that I felt way back then?"

I am here convinced that encouraging others in the field of arts is the most important thing we can all do. And I am so grateful to you for how you support that.

I wanted to read a couple of poems that strike an important key to me.

Pablo Neruda, "This is Simple":

Power is mute (the trees tell me)  
and so is profundity (say the roots)  
and purity too (says the grain).

No tree ever said  
"I'm the tallest!"

No root ever said:  
"I come from deeper down!"

And bread never said:  
"What is better than bread!"

That's a tone I need to hear. From William Stafford, "Peace Walk":

We wondered what our walk should mean,  
Taking that unmarch quietly.  
The sun stared at our signs:  
Thou shalt not kill.

Men by a tavern, said  
"Those foreigners."  
To a woman with a fur  
Who turned away  
Like an elevator going down.  
There, look at us.

Along a curb, their signs lined across,  
A picket line stopped and stared the  
whole width of the street  
At ours.  
Unfair.

Above our heads the sound truck flared  
By the park under the autumn trees  
It's said that love could fill the atmosphere  
Occur, slow the other fallout  
Unseen on islands everywhere  
Fallout  
Falling  
Unheard  
We held our posters to shield our eyes  
At the end we just walked away.  
No one was there to tell us where to leave  
the signs.

Sometimes I feel that people like you are the ones who tell us where to leave the signs, where to hold the signs, where to gather.

June Jordan of California, a personal hero of mine, beloved poet, teacher, activist:

These poems  
They are things that I do in the dark  
Reaching for you whoever you are.  
And are you ready?

These words they are stones in the water.  
Running away



These skeletal lines,  
They are desperate arms for my longing  
and love.

I am a stranger  
Learning to worship the strangers around me.  
Whoever you are,  
Whoever I may become.

And from Robert Sund whose work I first came  
to know north of Seattle at a poetry festival a  
couple of years ago, "To One Far Back in Time":

A thousand years ago, someone prayed for the  
rain that is falling today.  
If I knew who it was, I would turn now and  
call back to tell them,  
"It's raining."

To that one far back in the darkness of time,  
I would say, Come look in my garden, I  
planted squash.  
Sturdy old blossoms. Enough light in them  
to carry us both through the dark.

There's a lot of dark. Yesterday, I woke up in  
Toledo and an image came to me. I think I  
had been dreaming about it. I didn't make the  
conscious connection that Danny Thomas was  
from Toledo. But I did have the connection with  
your title, "Dancing with Different Partners" in  
my mind. And this is what came into my mind,  
thinking of you.

When I was a child, my father and mother owned  
a store for handmade crafts in the lobby of the  
Sheraton Jefferson Hotel, a grand old building  
sort of like this one but a little smaller, in St.  
Louis. The shop was off the lobby. We spent  
many days after school and in the summers  
there. We were told we could go anywhere in the  
hotel, but we could not leave the hotel.

We became experts on broom closets,  
underground corridors, all kinds of mysterious  
hotel backroom scenes. Many celebrities stayed in  
that hotel in those days. Danny Thomas was one  
of them.

And we got to know him by name and we were  
very proud that when he came back through  
St. Louis on another tour he would greet us by  
name, as we lounged in the lobby, reading our  
library books.

One day he came in with an armful of records and  
said, "Come on up to my room and dance. I think  
we should dance. There's not enough dancing."

I remember this vividly, not because I was scared  
to go to a celebrity's hotel room, in those days no

one seemed to be scared of anything. But I just  
couldn't imagine that I would be able to dance  
well enough to dance with Danny Thomas. And I  
said, "Could we bring our mom?" He said "Yeah,  
bring your mom. Bring your dad too. I like him.  
You know, he's an Arab, I'm an Arab American.  
Bring them, let's all dance!"

So we went and asked our parents and they  
put that sign on the shop door that said, "Gone  
for 30 minutes." And we all went up to Danny  
Thomas's room.

He had a portable phonograph there which  
seemed a little esoteric and wonderful, and he  
put these waltz records on and we all danced.

What I remember is Danny Thomas dancing  
with my brother, who was about this tall, and  
my father who never danced! And the look of  
wonder on their faces.

What I would carry forever after, that someone  
of his notoriety, celebrity, so beloved to so many  
people, would take time to dance with kids! That  
to me was a kind of artistic greatness.

Although I fell in love with poetry as a child,  
I didn't realize that I could work out in public  
in the field of poetry until I was getting out of  
college and heard about the Texas Commission  
on the Arts, and their education programs.

That idea, that you can go and dance wherever  
you are, in any school in any gymnasium, in the  
tiniest town on a back road where no poet has  
ever been known to come before. You can go  
there and dance with whoever awaits you.

And it will work! That's right, and it happens  
because there are always human beings there.

I thought of that yesterday and then I mentioned it  
to my hosts and they said, "Well, you know, this is  
where he danced first. Toledo was his town."

The ability to interpret, translate, transform  
the world. Only recently have I realized we can  
answer questions in the simplest ways. When  
kids say, "Tell us what it's like to be an artist."  
You can say, "Well it's great because you can  
just stare at stuff and tell people you're on the  
job. You can just ruminate, daydream, wander  
around and say, 'I'm working.'"

Even the name of this hotel made me think a lot  
yesterday. We need a Renaissance of sense and  
sensitivity in this land.

This poem is called; "Cross that Line." I have  
loved Paul Robeson, another great hero, since I  
was a child, his voice.



Paul Robeson stood on the northern border of the USA,  
And sang into Canada, where a vast audience sat on folding chairs waiting to hear him.  
He sang into Canada.  
His voice left the USA when his body was not allowed to cross that line.

Remind us again brave friend what countries may we sing into?  
What lines should we all be crossing?  
What songs travel toward us from far away, to deepen our days?

That was during the time when Robeson was not allowed to leave the United States, as a punishment for his activism, his civil rights work. I love that this past year there was a stamp with him on it. How times can change. Very hopeful.

A few years ago I received a letter from a boy, age seven, J.D. Linton, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He said, "I've been reading an anthology compiled of poems. Here it is. They're mostly from Texas but some from elsewhere too. "Salting the Ocean: A Hundred Poems by Young Poets." I like them and I thought I should send you one of my poems in return. In thanks. I do think I should tell you I have many doubts about my work." And I look back, how old is this guy? Here is his poem:

Swirling and Twirling

I don't think I am a real artist yet, even though  
I have developed  
Swirling and twirling.  
Some say art is the movement of the pencil,  
and the swirling of the paint.  
But I disagree with that.  
I think art is about the brain,  
Its movement, and feeling.

There is one secret some are missing.  
Here is the secret.  
It doesn't matter how your art turns out.  
It's how much it winks at you, and your mind,  
And your mind's feelings.

I took a deep breath, when I read that poem. And I wrote to him immediately.

"Mr. Linton, the answer to your doubts is in your poem! The wink has lifted up my day. May it lift up yours, may you always have the confidence to send your poems to strangers. Thank you very much, for helping me out and giving me that wisdom."

A few months later I received a large box from Manitoba, but not from him. It was from two boys named Thomas and Kiernan. They said,

"We are really hockey players. Now and then in our spare time we write poems. If you liked J.D. Linton's poems so much, wait till you read ours. We are much better!"

I read their poems. They were fabulous!

They had also included artwork, done in beautiful color Xerox copies, from their classmates, some originals. I was instructed to return the artwork please, but I could keep the poems.

I read these poems, and I was just amazed! What was going on in this classroom?

I wrote back and I said, "Take me to your teacher. I want to talk to your teacher, who is she?"

I started getting e-mails from Lisa Siemens, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She said, "I am not an artist." Ha! "But when I was little growing up on a farm, out in snow-covered Manitoba – a very isolated farm – the one gift I had was that my parents took me to the library, and they took me to the museum in Winnipeg. I became aware that this world of art was out there, somewhere beyond the snow, waiting for me, speaking to me. I knew that my life was larger because of it and I didn't have to feel as lonely because of it.

"I decided that I would become a teacher. My key word would be 'expose.' Expose them to voices and art, and they will never be alone."

She said, "Would you come up here?"

I had never been to Manitoba. I flew up there and I saw in the classroom with these amazing kids, the entire classroom papered neck-and-neck with great artists plus their art. There was not an inch of wall space, including the entire ceiling, because she said, "We have very long winters, and kids sit here with their heads staring up a lot. I don't want to lose that space."

She told me they had many, many student-run literary events. The students did one for me, where the students brought all the refreshments, were the moderators, the presenters. The only thing I found interesting was they didn't want their parents to come. I don't know what that meant.

They were fantastic and I learned, being with them a couple of days, that her exposure had worked. She said, "I'm not an expert, I just believe in exposure."

I wanted to say that to all of you, because that's what we do. We try to bring the sense of opening to every group that we meet.



Yesterday, I did have a chance to see John Lennon's report cards. For those of you who don't get over to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and for any of you who have a teenager, as I do, who's very smart, but may not have done so well in school, I was very heartened by these report cards:

"I feel sure that this is not his best."

"A poor result due to the fact that he spends most of his time devising witty remarks."

"When he can learn to control himself, he will make some progress all around."

"Poor, very poor. He never makes any sensible effort. He is so fond of obtaining a cheap laugh, that there is no time for serious concentration. What a boy! Content to drift."

Would that we all would be that content to drift.

My Palestinian grandmother lived to be 106 years old. She couldn't read or write. She used to say she didn't want to die 'til everyone she didn't like died first. We think she succeeded.

She also said things toward the very end of her life, when people would ask her what she felt about the peace talks that were endlessly being held with politicians, never seemed to get anywhere. She said very proudly, "I never lost my peace inside."

I thought one thing that all those of us that believe in the arts and voices do: We keep believing, that these are our people, this is our constituency. The people who never lose their peace inside, whose voices may not make it into the news and onto the headlines, but we need to hear them so desperately.

When I put together *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, a book of my poems, after September 11, at the urging and prodding of my editor, she said, "Do this for your grandmother." Because I had mentioned to her that my grandmother would be absolutely horrified at what had been done in the name of the religion she loved so much, so-called, "In the name of the religion," I don't believe it really was. And how her country would come to be represented, or thought of in the wider world, that would have been such a great sorrow to her.

So this idea of representing culture, and wanting to convey better parts of culture, became important to me at that time. I do think that we all probably agree on every act of violence in the world, whether sanctioned or unsanctioned, being a betrayal of language. Being a betrayal

of everything that we were sent off to school believing in: a betrayal of culture; a betrayal of art; a betrayal of our best selves.

Sometimes when I visit with librarians they say, "What if we had only sent books into the rest of the world? Imagine how many books we could've sent for the same amount of money."

Or educators, "What if we had only sent visiting scholars, to many, many places? What if we had only traded artists?"

Twenty years ago my husband and I used to work for the Arts America Program through the USIA, and we were sent usually to places where the attitude towards Americans was not always so benevolent. And harder places where we were hoping to make a good mark of connection, by using art. It always worked. We always found it to work.

I remember landing in Dhaka, Bangladesh and being taken aside by one of the American Public Affairs officers, and she said "I have high hopes for your visit, because the journalist here who is most antagonistic to the United States has the first name of Shihab, your middle name. So maybe you can do some work on him."

I said, oh that's great! I mean, what a connection! Maybe we'll just go trade name cards or something.

But we ended up being very close friends. He ended up coming and studying in the United States, sharing poetry, not trying to defend our country's politics in any way, but just sharing art, sharing poetry. He came to the United States after that to study poetry. The tide turned simply through an exchange of names and poetry.

You know, in every little way we felt that some tiny bit of good was always done. We never went away from a place feeling, well things got worse here. It was always positive.

Every act of violence is a betrayal of what we believe in. So what can we do? We keep doing it more and more. We keep believing more and more that we have to do it at the places and times when it feels hard. We keep believing that the time when we don't want to make that extra step to speak out in a venue where it may be a little more difficult, is a place where we might need to speak out the most.

I feel these days, as many of you may, haunted by the deceptions of language, and the distortions of language. I wanted to read a couple of poems with that in mind.





There's one called, "Ducks" which I wrote after meeting a friend in upstate New York, she teaches math. This was a quote as we were taking a walk, after the first Gulf War.

We thought of ourselves as people of culture. How long will it be 'til others see us that way again?

Ducks.

In her first home each book had a light around it.

The voices of distant countries floated in through open windows entering her soup and her mirror.

They slept with her in the same thick bed.

Some day she would go there.  
Her voice among all those voices.  
In Iraq a book never had one owner, it had ten.  
Lucky books.  
To be held often and gently by so many hands.

Later in American libraries she felt sad for books no one ever checked out.  
She lived in a country house beside a pond, and kept ducks, two male, one female.  
She worried over the difficult relations of triangles.  
One of the ducks often seemed depressed, but not the same one.

During the war between her two countries, she watched the ducks more than usual.  
She stayed quiet with the ducks.  
Some days they huddled among reeds or floated together.  
She could not call her family in Basra, which had grown farther away than ever. Nor could they call her.  
For nearly a year she would not know who was alive, who was dead.  
The ducks were building a nest.

And this is called, "What Kind of Fool Am I?"

He sang with abandon, combing his black, black hair.  
Each morning in the shower, first in Arabic, rivery ripples of song, carrying him back to his first beloved land.  
Then in English where his repertoire was short.

"No kind at all!" we'd shout,  
Throwing ourselves into the brisk arc of his cologne for a morning kiss.  
But he gave us freedom to be fools, if we needed to.

Which we certainly would later, which we all do now and then.

Perhaps a father's greatest gift, that blessing.

So many of the young people I run into years later after arts projects in their towns, say something I find very interesting: We stood up and read our poems or showed our art and we took a risk. It was important to do that. But that was the first time I was ever invited to do that. That has stayed with me as an adult.

When I was tracking down the people in the book, *Salting the Ocean*, to get their permissions, that was a very common comment that came up. It was the first time I thought, well too bad, I'm not being graded on this, I'll just say what I think. That was the first time I had the confidence and I knew that others were there taking the same risk. Art, writing gave me the confidence. That was what I needed to grow up and be a human being. That's one of the biggest lessons I remember from school!

So many times they say that to me and I think, Gee we were only there one week, we were only there three days. And they say that's the biggest lesson they remember from school.

Some of you may know of Nuha al-Radi, the Iraqi artist who died a few weeks ago. She wrote an amazing book called *Baghdad Diaries*. She was a painter. And here's a quote from her, and I urge you to get this book because I think it's one that we can use in our talks and sessions together.

She's talking about her country after the first Gulf War:

The birds have taken the worst beating of all.  
They have sensitive souls, which cannot take all this hideous noise and vibration.

All the caged lovebirds died from the shock of the blasts.

While birds in the wild fly upside down now and do crazy somersaults.

Hundreds if not thousands have died in the orchards.

Lonely bird survivors fly about in distracted fashions.

I urge you in her memory to find Nuha al-Radi.

And here are a few poems I that I shared around this year.

The Day

I missed the day on which it was said, others should not have certain weapons,  
But we could.  
Not only could, but should and do.



I missed that day.  
Was I sleeping?  
I might have been digging in the yard.  
Doing something small and slow, as usual.  
Or maybe I wasn't born yet.  
What about all the other people who  
aren't born?  
Who will tell them?

I tell students that started out as a poem ten times longer. For all the young, innocent students who shouldn't have to face the stuff adults are giving them to inherit, but you give them the better stuff. Palestinians, Israelis, Iraqis, children everywhere in the world. I write this poem to the language of news, which often diminishes their loss.

From "Mohammed Zaid of Gaza, Age 15"—

But I'm speaking to journalists—

There is no stray bullet sir.  
No bullet like a worried cat crouching under  
a bush  
No half hairless puppy bullet,  
Dodging midnight streets.  
The bullet could not be a pecan plunking  
the tin roof,  
Not hardly.  
No fluff of pollen on October's breath.  
No humble pebble at our feet.

So don't gentle it please.  
We live among stray thoughts.  
Tasks abandoned midstream  
Our fickle hearts are fat with stray devotions.  
We feel at home among bits and pieces  
All the wondering ways of words.

But this bullet had no innocence,  
Did not wish any one well,  
You can't tell us otherwise by naming it mildly.  
This bullet was never the friend of life,  
Should not be granted immunity by soft saying  
Friendly fire,  
Straying death-eye.  
Why have we given the wrong weight to what  
we do?  
Mohammad, Mohammad, deserves the truth.  
This bullet had no secret happy hopes.  
It was not singing to itself with eyes closed  
under the bridge.

I know you know these things because you're here in this room. But sometimes when we write poems in classes and share them I feel it's more crucial now than other times, when language is used in so many ways.

I wanted to say for you a poem by a girl. It was the first poem she ever wrote, and I ran into her

a few years ago. She said that was the day I had faith that I did have a voice.

She was very reluctant. Vanji Castillo, at Ralph Waldo Emerson Middle School in San Antonio, very reluctant to put her pencil to the page. But somehow when she saw everyone else doing it she groaned and wrote this. This was her first poem.

As I walk in the moonlight, I sing of darkness.  
Clouds, big clouds, how they change like  
people.  
They meet and they flee.  
I sing of people, rainbows, light, empty roads,  
wooded nights.  
My voice is deep.  
It sparkles to your ears and swirls dust away.  
My voice flaps and moves like a river, it  
whispers in this world,  
Sometimes it shouts,  
But always has a heart.  
My voice can be a swan and speak with  
its wings,  
But behind it is a shadow that looks like  
the world.

When Richard Avedon died so shockingly in our city a few weeks ago, he had been photographing actively up 'til an hour before he was taken ill. He had had a margarita and a Mexican dinner at our favorite restaurant in our neighborhood.

There were many things written in the newspaper after his death, people feeling very sad that he didn't get to die in his own place. That maybe that was more scary than usual to fall ill out of your own town.

A journalist in our town wrote, "Richard Avedon may not have chosen where he died, but he did choose how he would die, with his eyes wide open, his imagination on fire, his mind and body devoted to his life's work." He was photographing soldiers wounded in Iraq, up until that last hour.

In the past few weeks, two other personal friends of mine were lost. One was one of the editors of *Commonweal*, Daria Donnelly, some of you may have known her, her great work in the arts and as a critic in working with children's literature.

And the last piece that she wrote was about literature of empathy. She said, "I think it's what we need in the world more than any thing right now. We need our children to feel comfortable, that they too can go places! Can go many places. That they can't just pick their itinerary of the future with fear and a tiny few places in mind. That we need to give them literature of empathy



so they feel at home with anyone who is a so-called 'Other.'"

Thirty years ago, when I started working this way, I didn't think about those things that much. I was thinking of the human family, we're all together! It seems very sad to me that in the new millennium, we're more conscious of the Other and how scared so many people might be. I think that our work has come to be more crucial because of that. I thank you for what you do because of that.

The cover of my next book is done by a Cleveland artist, so I just wanted to hold this up. By Terry Maher, who lives here, and she also did the work inside. We became pen-pals through the mail. This is her first book she's ever had work in. Her husband is also a sculptor here and he took me on a great tour of the arts district here in Cleveland yesterday, Steven Tator.

I wanted to read two poems from this, one in honor of the other friend I had, who left us. She was in Marfa, Texas if any of you arts lovers have spent time there, you know it's a great place. This is a woman who swears she taught every person in the town of Marfa to read, because she taught first grade for 43 years.

When she died two weeks ago, they took the furniture item, which is mentioned in this poem, and put it up in the front of the church with the casket, and put the flowers on it. I was very honored to hear that. And it's a girl's voice, and I'm only going to read the second and third part of the poem.

Miss Ruth Livingston,  
Who taught first grade for 43 years in Marfa,  
Texas,  
Kept a little reading chair in front of the  
windows in her classroom.  
Whenever her students finished their work,  
they knew that they could go over to the  
little chair and read.  
It was a safe place, their minds could wander  
anywhere.  
I wish every one in the world had a little chair.

Recently a big cowboy wearing sunglasses came  
to Mrs. Livingston's house and asked where  
that old furniture from our class room went?  
She's 97 now.  
She still has her china-faced dolls, from when  
she was small.  
She pointed at the wooden reading chair  
sitting in front of the windows in her  
beautiful living room.  
He walked over to the little chair with his  
hands folded,

And silently stood there.  
Stood... there.

And for the person we may not want to be, this was actually an unnamed university president.

The List! This book is written in the voice of a twelve year old girl, but a few other things sneak in. This could be a twelve year old girl.

A man told me he had calculated the exact  
number of books he would be able to read  
before he died,  
by figuring the average number of books  
he read per month  
and his probable earth span,  
averaging how long his dad and grandpa  
had lived,  
adding on a few years, since he exercised  
more than they did.

Then he made a list of necessary books, non-  
fiction mostly,  
History, philosophy, fiction, and poetry  
from different time periods so there wouldn't  
be large gaps in his mind.  
He had given up frivolous reading entirely.  
There are only so many days.

Oh, I felt sad to hear such an organized plan.  
What about the books that aren't written yet?  
The books his friends might recommend, that  
aren't on the list?  
The yummy magazine that might fall into  
his hand at a silly moment after all?  
What about the mystery search through the  
delectable library shelves?  
I felt the heartbeat of forgotten precious books  
calling for his hand.

I would like to put out a note for Hamilton, Ohio,  
the town where my great-grandparents on my  
mother's side immigrated when they came from  
Germany, the only town I have seen so far that  
has a drive-in library. You can just drive through,  
you call up for your books and they just throw  
them into your car. This is a cool Ohio thing,  
and they said it has tripled their circulation, a lot  
more people coming during the winter months.

For those of you who are border-crossers  
and who have anything to do with children's  
literature, I just wanted to mention a book that  
has meant so much to me this past year, thinking  
of border-crossing and taking on risks and  
imagining the other.

It's a book by an Israeli writer, her name is  
Daniella Carmi. It's called Samir and Yonatan. It's  
a Scholastic cheap paperback. She does the very  
risky thing in this book of writing in the voice of





a Palestinian boy. Two boys who are roommates in a hospital. It's one of the most unpredictable and exquisite books that I have read and I think, absolutely critical, should be read by everyone in power, every one in government, who continues not to make any kind of peace anywhere. It should be required reading, and since it's a children's book, I think it would be okay.

One last little comment. I think we're going to have a moment for questions, but I think that listening to one another's voices and conveying the many, many truths we find there, is not an accessory. Not these days. Listening to one another's voices and saying we found hope there; we found uplift; we know there's a lot of great stuff going on; we know there are people that are using language not for manipulation, but for honest communication. That matters! And showing the difference.

I always find that if I make some tiny little suggestion to students about something that has bothered me in the news, I just go two inches, they go a hundred miles. They're willing to talk about many more things even than I feel comfortable taking in to classroom settings.

I think about all the different people we keep dancing with in the projects around our land. One of the most successful projects I heard about in San Antonio this past year was literary artists going into juvenile detention centers simply to read to them.

Having these young people who could not leave the detention centers saying, "Nobody read us those books when we were small. We never heard *Goodnight Moon*. This is a first. Can we write our own? We want to write parallel books, make our own books, because we never got to hear those books. We have a lot to catch up on."

Working in projects with mental health, something I've done a lot. Adults diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Working in projects where we think there might not be any constituents coming to be there. I remember working in Nome, Alaska, in a community writing project sponsored by the NEA, a rural project, and having a 17 year old girl come in. Then her 15 year old brother, who looked shocked that she was there. "What are you doing here?" She said "I like to write." He said, "I love to write." I said, don't you guys talk?

And then most shockingly, their mother appearing! The town of Nome, Alaska, three people from one family, none of whom knew the

others had an interest in writing! They hadn't talked about it around the dinner table, they all showed up at the writing workshop for a week, and they wrote the most incredible things!

I said what, does somebody have to come from Texas? To say, hello would you like to meet your brother? Come on! You don't need me, you can do this on your own.

All the ways, all the venues, all the places we've been, something important always happens. You step into the bus, you read the poem, your day changes, you step into anywhere, you hear something, your day changes.

The principal who said to me some years ago, "I wish I could do something with poetry, but I'm only a principal." I said, who has the intercom in his office? I said, who reads the daily announcements? "Kids." I said, couldn't you read a poem before the daily announcements? "Never thought of it. I'll read poems!"

Going to his school, it's one of the toughest neighborhoods, in San Antonio. It's like you walk in there as a poet, they welcome you with open arms! Poetry belongs to them, because they hear it every morning from their principal's own voice. They don't study it any more than anyone does, necessarily, they just hear it, they're exposed to it! It's their own, they're surrounded by it.

I always say when I'm there, we could do some mighty project because you're so passionate here! It's just because they feel comfortable. That's the work we're all about, helping more and more people feel comfortable with that culture that belongs to us all.

I did have one hundred other things to say, but I'll just close with this poem and then if any of you have any questions...

This is called "Red Brocade." As an Arab-American, one thing I feel very sad about is the tenor of the headlines going both ways across the ocean. These are not our best selves being represented to one another. I think about the hospitality of the Middle East, the kindness of the Middle East, the humor of the Middle East! That's not in many of the headlines. And vice-versa. That's one thing that art and culture can do that other stuff can't.

The Arabs used to say, when a stranger appears at your door, feed him for three days before asking who he is, where he's come from, where he's headed.  
That way, he'll have strength enough to answer.



Or by then you'll be such good friends you  
don't care.  
Let's go back to that.  
Rice, pine nuts. Here, take the red brocade  
pillow.  
My child will serve water to your horse.  
No, I was not busy when you came, I was not  
preparing to be busy.  
That's the armor everyone put on to pretend  
they had a purpose in the world.  
I refuse to be claimed.  
Your plate is waiting.  
We will snip fresh mint into your tea.

I always feel when I enter a museum and I see art  
calmly on the wall, waiting for someone to come  
and look at it, it's that sense, your plate is waiting.  
This piece of art was waiting for you. Thank you  
all for all you do.

Thank you so much you're very generous. I  
appreciate it thank you. Thank you so much, I'm  
very grateful thank you. Thank you so much.  
Any comments or answers? I take answers as  
much as questions these days. On any topic, any  
of you old pals?

[Inaudible]

J.D. Linton's poem to my knowledge, was only  
published in his school book, but he has given me  
permission to send it to you, to anyone. My email  
is nshihab@aol.com. And if you just write to me I  
have it in my computer and I'll just send it to you.  
Just say, "The wink poem." I'll know which one.

See they already know the answers. You guys just  
need to go take a break or something. Anyone?

[Inaudible]

There was something in here that I was looking  
for, could I just look for a minute while we're  
looking for your questions?

**AUDIENCE:** I don't really have a question, I just  
want to say, this is my favorite kind of church.

**NYE:** Oh, thank you, thank you! That's so kind of  
you. I found what I lost a minute ago.

This was to me, of all the letters that artists get  
after they visit schools, one that I found very  
touching and funny. I think he was in Michigan,  
and his name is Jackson Block, and in many  
schools you get extra credit, not just for writing a  
thank-you letter to the visitor, but if you use your  
vocabulary words in the letter. So I think that  
explains the letter a little bit:

"Dear Ms. Nye,

I am jovial about the fact that you came to visit.  
I thought the poetry stuff you told us was truly  
compelling."

This was fourth grade by the way, fourth grade.  
And this is the great part. This refers to what  
you do:

"I have only one problem, but really I'm not sure  
it's a problem. For the rest of the day, everything I  
think is going to turn into poetry. The way I walk  
down the hall, with click-clack of my shoes, the  
way I solve math problems so neatly. The way I  
feel my heart pump like a clock, click-clack, in  
my chest. I hope to feel this way many times in  
my life."

Thank you for what you do. Thank you. Thanks  
to Jackson. And that's one of those confirmation  
letters that you pin up on your curtain in front of  
your desk to say, yes it matters to go into schools!

So just read two more things? Is that okay? Is that  
all right to close? Is that all right for your time?

Did any of you in this room get to meet or hear  
in your life times Peace Pilgrim? Did anyone ever  
hear of her? Those of you who didn't hear of her,  
now that there's an Internet you can go on there  
to Friends of Peace Pilgrim. She was one of the  
true eccentric hobos of our land, sponsored by  
no one, but her belief. When I hold my finger up  
those are actual quotes from her.

My mother met her when I was a baby and  
brought her home always to sleep on our couch.  
She loved arts and culture and she loved when  
people would take her along the way to an art  
museum or gallery, or to hear live music or  
anything. But basically she was out there with a  
message walking our land for about 35 or 40 years.

Peace Pilgrim you are still walking on the long  
roads, late at night.

So many years after you died, you're not off  
the hook.

You're keeping the pace, swinging your  
strong arms.

Who among us found a clearer way?

I shall not accept more than I need  
While others in the world have less than they  
need

We can work on inner peace and world peace,  
at the same time

Little people of the world, may we never feel  
helpless again.



I marveled at your many-layered pinecone  
heart  
And three possessions: toothbrush, postage  
stamps, comb  
Walk 'til given shelter, fast 'til given food  
Still, you're starting before dawn, finding a  
path between these trees,  
Pausing at a roped off trail that says, this is  
no longer a footpath  
Shaking your head  
I'm sorry you can't rest yet.

One day I woke thinking, it's good you're dead  
We are still fools in a world of war  
Then I recalled the navy canvas of your suit  
How it always felt fresh, not tired  
We listened as hard as we could  
What can't we learn?

I would establish a Peace Department in  
every government  
Under the swollen orange moon, on the rim  
of the sad city  
In a cardboard box under the overpass  
You held the calm in the strong conviction  
Oh Peace, dear Peace, don't give up on us  
Don't leave us stranded, please.

All the materials relating to her are free, you can  
order them for community centers, detention  
centers, prisons, anywhere in your area for free.  
From the Internet, they'll just mail them to you.

I thank you very much for your kindness.

**END**



