



O Public Road... You Express Me Better Than I Can Express Myself

by Francis E. Kazemek

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**JOURNEYS
IN LANGUAGE,
LEARNING AND CULTURE**

Helen Woodrow · Carmelita McGrath, Editors

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O PUBLIC ROAD... YOU EXPRESS ME BETTER THAN I CAN EXPRESS MYSELF

Francis E. Zazemek

The road calls, and you head east this time. Next to you are tapes for when the radio dulls, a book of Cesar Vallejo's posthumous poetry, your worn and dog-eared copy of *Moby Dick*, a notebook and pencil for capturing ideas and images as they come, and a collection of maps (Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota) to help you imagine your way more than plan it.

You say goodbye to your friends and gas up the truck at a convenience store in Spokane. The clerk is a middle-aged woman named Helen who had been in one of your literacy classes at the Goodwill several years before. She recognizes you first and beams with pride. She left Goodwill a year ago and has been clerking since. "I'm up to \$5.50 an hour now," she tells you. "The reading class got me going, you know, got my self-esteem up." You think sadly of \$5.50 an hour and congratulate her. She says she's in line for a raise.

You ask her what she's been reading and writing lately. "The same things, the only things, you know, the Bible and my prayers. They're the only things worthwhile." You remember how she joined the literacy class in order to be able to better read the Bible. It was the only book she wanted to read, and then she got excited about writing little prayer-poems that she gave to friends, relatives, and members of her church. She wrote one as a gift for you, and you still keep it as a bookmark: "We should not live by bread alone/The Lord's word will take you home." You wish her well and tell her to keep reading and writing. "I'm working my way through the Old Testament now," she tells you, "and I'm into Joshua, you know, the walls of Jericho, Rahab the harlot, and all that."

The radio plays country and western, and each song is a story: "She likes Elvis/She likes Andy/So she's fine and dandy with me." You cross into Idaho, and the road signs, billboards, and bumper stickers tell stories: Treaty Rock; Veterans Memorial Centennial Bridge; Mullan Tree. Coors will keep you slim and young; maybe it'll help you have a good time. Someone on public radio is telling a story of what it's like to grow up poor in Appalachia. You station surf and catch an oldie, "Dream," by the Everley Brothers. You remember them singing on Christmas Eve in Marine Corps boot camp over thirty years ago. How many times have you told this story to students? You sing along with Phil and Don, doing your best to keep nostalgia for lost youth at bay.

You pass the Cataldo Mission where Native Americans still gather at times to tell the stories of their past and traditions. You remember attending a powwow there. You think of how their stories are told from one generation to the next. You wonder how long this will continue. Oral language is so much more important at times than the written. You muse over the small part that the spoken word plays in most literacy instruction and how the living language of real people is often denigrated. You contrast coyote tales told by a Native elder with little formal education to the sterile correctness of workbook passages and drills. You sigh when you think of your own failings: how at one time you ignored the richness of the oral language and stories around you and how your classes were less for that ignorance.

You pass through the Silver Valley and the old mining region. All is gone except for the destitution and heavy metal pollution that continues to poison the children. The disk jockey on the Wallace contemporary station has an ironic sense of humour and introduces Bruce Springsteen's "Youngstown" as "our own valley anthem, folks." Springsteen sings stories of the devastation caused by corporate greed and corporate abandonment of the working class: "From

the Monongahela valley/To the Mesabi Iron range/To the coal mines of Appalachia/The story's always the same/...Once I made you rich enough/Rich enough to forget my name." You love The Ghost of Tom Joad from which "Youngstown" comes. Springsteen gives the poor, outcast and downtrodden a voice on the CD, and you tell yourself you will use it and the printed lyrics in one of your classes. With our recent so-called welfare "reform," lines like "Shelter line stretchin' 'round the corner/Welcome to the new world order/Families sleepin' in their cars in the Southwest/No home no jobs no peace no rest" become all the more important.

In St. Regis, Montana the locals chat with tourists at the truck stop ATM machine. "Yeah, the big city's comin' to us, all right." You eavesdrop as they tell of a recent past when people often paid by having the merchant "put it on the bill." You browse the signs on a corkboard near the cash register and smile at the way people often use literacy in various ways to connect in non-school settings: garage sales; services offered for house painting and lawn mowing; Ron will clean and dress your deer and elk; Beatrice will make a "memory quilt" for you from your cherished scraps. How do you get Beatrice's memory quilt and Ron's language — "You shoot 'em and I'll clean 'em!" — into your classroom?

On the road again and you catch a Missoula Public Radio station. A guy is reading a short story by Bram Stoker. The story, like Dracula, is scary, but the guy can't read dramatically. You like it anyway. Just hearing someone read an exciting story or an image-rich poem is often enough. Poetry, Robert Bly says, is "for the stomach" not the "head," and it has to be heard. Fellow poet Donald Hall says that you "read poems with your mouth, not with your ears, and they taste good." You agree. You have been reading the poetry of Nobel Laureate Wislawa Symborska to the old folks in your weekly writing group at the senior centre, and they love the rhythms and wit of her language: "My sister doesn't write poems,/and it's unlikely that she'll suddenly start writing poems./She takes after her mother, who didn't write poems...." People spend millions of dollars each year on recorded books. Why then do some teachers still find it difficult to read stories and poems every day to their students, whether kindergartners, high schoolers, or adults?

You stop to stretch your legs and drink some coffee in a little cafe you know in Anaconda, Montana. The smokestack from the copper smelter that once was the economic base of this area still looms over the town. You're glad that you weren't born and raised here when it still spewed arsenic and other pollutants into the air along with the money. It's the home of your friend and backpacking buddy from your previous university in Spokane. Tom is a plumber on campus; he was a pipefitter at the smelter until it closed. A man from Montana forced to leave the mountains he knows and loves. A displaced person is what he calls himself.

You think of Tom as you order a piece of huckleberry pie with your coffee: the trips the two of you took into the mountains; how he showed you the world he loved. Tom is a working class guy with a high school education. You smile as you remember the time you showed him the world you loved and gave him a paperback copy of Norman Mclean's *A River Runs through It*. You were camped in the Pintler Wilderness and sipping from a flask of Calvados in front of a campfire. You knew he'd love the story of Montana flyfishing, loyalty, love, and commitment in an era that is almost gone. And he did: reading the story non-stop while you reread Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River."

You think of Tom and his knowledge of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery. He has read their journals several times and scores of books on the expedition. He knows more about the subject than anyone you know, including academics, and his knowledge is wedded to his passion for those men of undaunted courage and their heroic journey. You remember how you would invite him to speak to your undergraduate students. He would begin nervously, but then carried away by his love of the topic he would engage the students with his deep and lived understanding. It made no difference that he was the university plumber who unclogged their

drains in the dorm. It made no difference when he said, "They had went..." They recognized his formally unrecognized scholarship and historical literacy.

Testicle Festival: Have a Bull of a Time! Oh, how you wish you had time to stop and banter with the locals at their fair! What stories they could tell you! What poetry you'd hear! Carl Sandburg says somewhere that common people talk poetry every day but don't realize it. You know that if you want to understand and appreciate the rich linguistic resources that even the most "illiterate" adults possess, you have to hang around fairs, restaurants, shops, pubs, workplaces, and kitchen tables. You'd love to stop and listen to the jokes and witty comments at the Testicle Festival, but you're on your way, making up stories of your own future: scenarios, adventures, accomplishments.

"Everybody likes to cha-cha-cha," sings James Taylor, and you think of a girl you were wild about as a teenager. She tried to teach you how to cha-cha, but your feet simply wouldn't cooperate. You laugh when you remember how you played the fool dancing for your fourth-graders during your first year of teaching in Chicago. "Hey, Mr. K, you got no rhythm!" the girls would chant.

Fourth-grade girls. Teenage girls, and an idea pops into your head for a short story or a novel about a 14-year-old kid who lives with her family in the mountains of Idaho or Montana. Home-schooled by a Christian conservative mother, but one who values literature and writing. The kid's name comes to you, Rebecca (it has to be Biblical), but everyone calls her Becca. You half keep your eyes on the road and jot down notes as the ideas flow one into the other: Becca likes most of all Emily Dickinson; she's kept a journal since she was six. Imitating Dickinson, she writes poetry about God, her maturing self, family, nature, and her first love:

I went with my love to the fields —
I told him — Everything —
He said — Where are you going?
I smiled — South, Dear — South.
He asked — May I come too?

Becca is particular, and her story, if you ever write it, will be of a particular person in a particular time and place. The fourth-grade girls who used to tease you still are particular in your memory after almost thirty years: Rhonda with her wide eyes and combative personality; Billie and her love of the stories in the old basal readers. Each one of Dickinson's poems is a particular world; that's why she is inexhaustible. You think of the students in a recent ABE writing class and how they differed one from the other: Steve who had a hard time reading more than his name but told wonderful stories of his days kicking around the country on construction jobs; Betty who struggled with three kids, a full-time cafeteria job, and hopes for a job as a medical technician.

Particularity. If literacy education isn't grounded in the particular, then it's useless, little more than indoctrination or training for the menial. You grimace when you think of an ad for a literacy computer program that guarantees consistent results "in any environment" and is not dependent on "teacher training, classroom size, prior school performance, race, socio-economic level, age, subject matter, neighbourhood values or IQ." "Bah!" you shout out the open window to the fence posts and barbed wire. Consistency. Bah! Oh, you dream of an education built upon Walt Whitman's particularity, inconsistency, and contradiction: "Do I contradict myself?! Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

You spend the night in Billings and see that there is a cowboy poetry reading taking place downtown. After a mediocre meal at a national chain restaurant you find the bookstore and pay your \$2.00 to enter. Most of the people in the audience appear to have come in from the ranches: probably relatives and friends of the poets. They certainly don't look like the college

educated sophisticates that attend readings back home. And the poetry is certainly different from that which you'd hear, say, at the Hungry Mind Bookstore in St. Paul, Minnesota. The cowboys reading all use strong end rhyme, thumping meter, and, regularly, cliché built upon cliché. You like it anyway.

The last reader is a big man with his belly hanging over his belt buckle, and it's obvious everyone has been waiting for him. He appears to be in his late sixties or early seventies. His black stetson ringed white from sweat frames a bulbous nose and blue eyes fixed in a permanent squint. His hands are as red and heavy as hams. He doesn't read but instead recites, no, sings, his poems from memory. He tells of the loneliness of range life, the mystery of steadying a still-wet calf dropped from its mother, and the growing burden of sorrow that one must stoically bear as side-kicks grow old and die. As you listen you think of how this big-bellied singer of tales is as clear and true here on the edge of the bad lands of Montana as Homer must have been among the olive trees of Greece.

You leave early next morning and the right-wing talk shows take you through much of eastern Montana: crazy stories, strange visions of the world. You wonder if people really believe such things. You surf to a religious station and someone tells you that people are empty inside. You think of the many ways we try to fill the emptiness. Another preacher rails against the "evils of gov'ment." He makes you think of the wild sermon of the "famous Father Mapple" in *Moby Dick*. At your next coffee stop you read Chapter 9, "The Sermon": "Delight is to him, who gives no quarter in the truth, and kills, burns, and destroys all sin though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges." Life imitating art, you smile to yourself.

They Have Night Crawlers at the Beer Jug in Downtown Glendive! And they have great sandwiches too. *Whoopup Creek Road* and then *Wibaux, Montana* where the high school kids are driving back and forth down the five-block main street. African-American rap music blares from their cars: stories of inner-city rage, violence, and despair that these kids can't even imagine. Something about the kids and your stop at the Pair Queen adjacent to a Catholic church make you think of a title for a possible essay: *Theology of Reading*, or maybe *Theology of the Road*. You scribble words and images in your notebook. How do these ideas come to us? How do we help our students become open to and comfortable with their own ideas and connections in order to get them down on paper?

You cross into North Dakota and think immediately of Thomas McGrath and his great epic poem, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. Communist Tom: who spent his whole life resisting the grinding injustice of corporate capitalism and imperialism; who sang the prairie radicalism of the twenties and thirties; who wrote one of the great epic poems of the second half of this century. Tom, whose life was "Love and hunger — that is my whole story./An education in the form of a night journey! Congo of the heart..." North Dakota for you is Tom McGrath. You see his words everywhere just as he saw North Dakota everywhere, even when in Greece: "North Dakota/is everywhere./This town where Theseus sleeps on his hill —/Dead like Crazy Horse./ This poverty./This dialectic of money —/Dakota is everywhere." Poverty and the dialectic of money. You wonder why those politicians, corporate types and education officials who prattle on about the evils of illiteracy never discuss poverty and the dialectic of money. Dakota is everywhere.

You pitch your tent for the night at Cottonwood Campground in the Theodore Roosevelt National Monument. You drive into Medora for dinner and a beer at the Cowboy Cafe. You sit reading *Moby Dick* and half-watching the other customers. The guy sitting at the table next to yours is dressed in dirty work clothes and appears just to have gotten off the job. He's alone and reading Frederick Manfred's great Western, *Lord Grizzly*. You tell him how you read the book one time and admire the mountain man, Hugh Glass. "Yeah, he's a tough sonsabitch, ain't he, but he's got a code to live by. That's what I like about him," the mechanic says. He reads a bit to you to prove his point.

"This is the part where Hugh is making his long crawl. Remember? He comes upon the old Indian woman who's dying. He could easily rip her off or even kill her, but he doesn't, Hugh wouldn't do no such thing: 'No, there's some things this child won't do, no matter how far his stomach's made him backslide. I can't skulp a live red devil, or desert a friend or take orders from a tyrant, or hurt Indian wimmen. Pa'tic'Iy old red-devil grammaws on their last legs.' See what I mean?" the guy says to you. You tell him you do, and suddenly realize that what you like most about the novel is its dialogue and dialect. You never thought of it until now as you heard him read it to you.

You have a couple of beers with the guy (his name is Randy, and he is a mechanic) and talk about books. He "never finished school 'cause it was too boring," but he "reads all the time." He prefers Westerns and especially likes Manfred and Louis L'Amour. "I read 'em all the time, you know, living out here, they give me a sense of the history of the place, kinda like what it was in the old days." He leaves with Lord Grizzly in his large, grease-stained hand, and you walk out with *Moby Dick*.

Home on the Range, North Dakota, and then you drive through places with Biblical references: *The Brick City of Hebron*; New Salem; and then Medina. At a Perkins in Jamestown you eavesdrop on a group of elders at breakfast. The women order for the husbands: "He'll have one poached egg..." "Oh, no, no bacon for him, dear. He has to watch his salt intake." They remind you of the seniors with whom you write each week. You carry the brightness of the old folks and their laughter over stories with you back onto the highway. The sprawling fields of sunflowers turned to the morning sun make you want to shout for joy, make you think of the tenuousness and brevity of life. You open Vallejo and glance-read for the hundredth time a poem you love, "Black Stone on White Stone":

I will die in Paris
with hard, dirty rain
on a day I can already remember...

You pull off at a rest stop and read Vallejo for a half-hour: "Life, this life/pleased me, its instrument, those doves..." You leave with his images and metaphors dancing through your head: "Man from Estremadura,/ I hear under your foot the smoke of the wolf..." You consider ways of helping your students discover their own poems that they will read again and again with joy and wonder.

And then you're into your destination, Minnesota. Coming up is Saux Centre and Sinclair Lewis. You'll stop before St. Cloud and visit his boyhood home. How long has it been since you've read a novel by Lewis? You put one on your mental list of books to read. It is a long and ever-growing list, and you will never read all of the books on it. But that's not important as long as you have one. The list doesn't have to be long; it might be a single book. You remember Helen and her reading through the Old Testament.

You think of the classes you taught and those you will teach. What do you tell your students about literacy? How do you help them see the infinite possibilities of language in their own lives and those of others? Paulo Freire's phrase comes to mind: we must read the world in order to read the word. The word, sacred and profane, capable of beauty and horror, always embedded in the daily world and the stories we tell about that world: stories of love, hate, forgiveness, possibilities. Stories that are infinite, various, new.

Reading is a peek into that infinity, and writing can be a glimpse into the depths and infinity of ourselves. You think about ways of helping your students live through literacy experiences that make them more compassionate, sympathetic, empathetic. You try to remember the exact words of the late Joseph Brodsky who contended that it is more problematic for someone who

has read a lot of Dickens, Melville and others to kill someone in the name of an idea than it is for someone who has read no Dickens, Melville and others. How will you help students and yourself walk inside the city of each woman, child, and man all of you meet?

There are different ways, but your way is through literacy and literature. You see now more clearly than you have in a long time that literacy is wayfaring. It's being on the way and never arriving. Lines from Robert Bly's wonderful poem, "People Like Us" come to mind: "You can wander into the wrong classroom, / And hear great poems lovingly spoken / By the wrong professor. And you find your soul..." You know that you intuitively dislike certain forms of adult literacy education because they want certitude. They want the exactness of correct answers on worksheets, grammar drills, or tests. They never allow students to wander into wrong rooms or take to the road.

You remember the words of the French priest, novelist, and essayist, Jean Sullivan: "The only kind of writing that interests me is one that opens up on the impossible and the unknown. Such is my way. It is only one way. According to it, to read, as well as to write, is to emigrate... Reading is completely pointless if it doesn't teach us to understand life, especially the burning passion of life itself."

You think of the road you just travelled and those that lie before you. If you didn't have promises to keep you'd turn around and head west on different roads this time. Like that bard of the open road, Walt Whitman, you know that travelling alone calls forth something from deep inside you: "O public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you, yet I love you, / You express me better than I can express myself, / You shall be more to me than my poem." You think about poems and an essay on literacy. Between Avon and St. Cloud you start to jot down words and phrases: "The road calls, and you head east this time..."