

## I Choose to Call Myself . . .

*Cynthia Blomquist Gustavson*

The poets I know hesitate to call themselves poets. They are waiters or business women or nurses, those labels that give out a steady paycheck. Poets don't get paychecks, two copies of a journal maybe. I knew when I could call myself a teacher. I celebrated when I finally got board certified as a social worker, but it took years before I called myself "Poet."

It happened at the publication of my first book. Others referred to me on radio or in print as a poet, but it still seemed a bit arrogant to refer to myself that way. Then I overheard my scientist husband conversing with another of his ilk about his wife, the poet, how for years he had not understood the workings of her irrational mind, been confused by the stream of unconsciousness she substituted for logic, and how he could now finally categorize her, like an illusive jigsaw puzzle piece, put there to tease, and finally when fit into its place, how it illuminates and makes whole the gestalt.

Okay. If it helped my husband to understand me, well then it might work elsewhere as well. Schools started calling me. Teachers thought I might have some illumination for their children. Most of the girls agreed, most of the boys made paper airplanes with their forced words. I also found that the older the children were, the less responsive they were to both listening to and writing poetry.

That's why I wasn't very enthused when a woman from the J.B.Harville Alternative School called me and asked if I would talk to her class of 14 and 15 year old pregnant girls and mothers. I only said "yes" because I had just had a new book published, a workbook using poetry as therapy. The social worker in me told me that these young women were at a vulnerable time in their life, and maybe I could help them get in touch with their feelings. The poet in me wanted to read Lucille Clifton's "listen, woman, you not a no-place anonymous girl."

The girls filed in, slowly, found places around a long, round table and looked at me with that "you really think we're going to listen to poetry" look. They did. Lucille Clifton's words mesmerized them, all but one. She looked young, was slouched over the table, eyes closed, as if she were asleep. She never commented, smiled, never opened her eyes. I asked the students to participate in one of my poetry therapy exercises. They were to think of an object in nature or make of car that symbolized who they used to be, and then change that symbol according to who they had become. One girl wrote, "I used to be a rusty Chevy with a honk-honk horn, but now I'm pure Cadillac and I don't need to honk." The girls all giggled and patted her back at such an accomplishment. Each girl shared her vision of herself via poetry, until we came around to the girl whose head was still lying on the table.

The teacher had noticed that she had been writing something on her tablet. She looked over the girl's shoulder and read the words on the page. "Please, LaShandra, read your poem. Everyone wants to hear it." She was silent. "LaShandra, it's your turn. Please read your poem," urged the teacher. She lifted her head just far enough off the table and whispered, "I used to be a beautiful flower, but now I am a stem, because I am broken."

Broken, the silence had been broken by a real poet. Before any of us could tell her how wonderful her words were, we had to swallow the lump in our throat, catch a hold of feelings we didn't want to feel. The other girls praised her, and she asked me if she could take it home and show it to her mother.

I had wanted to introduce them to poetry. I doubted if any of them would ever read Lucille Clifton again. I had wanted to change their lives, but they were still 14 and 15 year old girls with babies of their own. Instead, they profoundly changed me. I will never again look at a teenage mother without seeing the image of a broken flower, at the same time knowing that hiding within that stem lies a secret poet, with the poet's power to both illuminate and make whole.