

Excerpt from **Interwoven Conversations**
Chapter 7: 188–194
You're Always Right and You're Always Wrong



I glance at the clock—9:45; time to reconvene the large group.

"What do we learn by comparing these four ways of responding to writing?"

"They are all different aren't they," says Barb. "Graves is talking about teacher responses, Elbow about peers responding. Hunt, like Elbow, is making an important distinction between responses which let writers discover what readers experience from the writing, and Serebrin is arguing we need to help writers learn through reading."

"The question about timing is interesting," Maggie says. "Serebrin didn't wait until a draft was completed or until Kristin came to ask him for help. He sensed Kristin was having difficulty and asked her what was wrong. The responding Hunt is talking about seems to come at the request of the writer. The bat asks for reactions when he's finished his poem, although I can see I'm now asking for reactions as I draft each part. I suppose I could even ask for help if I were stuck and not sure where to go next, couldn't I?"

"Of course you could; you can ask for a reaction at any point in the writing. You can even let your reader know what kind of help you're looking for. There are situations, for example, where mockingbird feedback is desirable. Sometimes you're looking for technical support. You can look for it in published writing, if you know the specific question you're asking, like 'how do people open stories?' But sometimes you're not sure what the problem is and you may just need someone to say 'Oh, what you're trying to do is — —, let me show you how to do that.'"

We talk around the issues for another few minutes and I record their comments on a comparison matrix.

I need to be alert for opportunities to use various responding strategies when I talk with people about their writing today.



Ten o'clock. Time for the poetry response group. As we rearrange the furniture several people leave to work on other things. This morning, fourteen of us squeeze around the table.

"Who'd like to begin?"

"Well, I want to talk about 'Inside Out'," insists Norma.

"Me, too" chimes in Leslie, "I couldn't make any sense of that poem."

"I must have read it half-a-dozen times," adds Connie. "It was really frustrating."

"Not me," laughs Earl. "I read it, had no idea what it was about, so I quit and tried another one."

"How did you approach the poem?" I ask. "Did you attempt any freewriting about the images, connections, etc., the words generated for you?"

"I didn't try that," says Norma. "I just read and reread it, but I couldn't see what the poet was getting at."

"Did any of you read it with a pencil in hand?"

It appears nobody did.

Aid spilled on the sink.' Walking the purple carpet into your eye—do I take that literally, can I create a scenario where that would make any sense? A modern painting? (There are other references to paintings, pigments, here)—or is it metaphoric? Is it referring to my trying to get inside this 'other' person or self? 'Come in you said'—an invitation extended, but inside what? Inside his being (I feel the person talking is male, can't say why but it feels like that), the shared memories ('the old songs that line your hands')? Then I sense a change of speaker: 'You cannot let me walk inside you too long—small feet'—a woman? A child to a parent? A student to a teacher? A plea to the other to help 'I' grow from dependence to independence?

I haven't made a coherent whole from this reading, but I have seen new images I missed in earlier readings. A painter and his muse? Could be.

I put my pencil down and wait quietly for the others to finish writing.

"Well?"

Norma speaks first, "I saw more this time. I just let myself respond to the images without worrying about what the poem is about. So while I wasn't making sense of the whole, I was touched by more: 'the whiskers of a cat'—a fleeting, tickling sensation; 'your old hat'—comfortable, like an old shoe; 'spinach leaves holding that one piece of gravel'—an unexpected, unpleasant encounter."

"It feels to me like someone taking drugs," insists Earl.

"Talk more about that," I invite him.

"It's all those disjointed images, and the bit at the end about pulling me like a silver bullet from your arm—I see a needle," he says.

"I didn't see that at all," Connie comments. "I felt it was someone remembering their childhood—screen door banging, flies buzzing, old songs. 'You can't let me walk inside you too long'—I can't dwell in the past too long."

"I was struck by those flickering images of the past as well," says Diane. "It took me a while to see them as memories, though. It happened when I read: 'and old images...flicker' leaving out the images themselves, then I could see them there."

"I don't know what to make of the silver butter server," says Carmina. "Someone is carrying it, but I don't know why."

"What could that be about?" I ask.

"Well, a silver server represents luxury compared to a plastic one, say. And butter is rich, lots of calories," Norma muses. "Is 'I' bringing wealth to this other person, does it represent an abundance of something, if so, what?"

No one responds to her question.

Bruce, sitting beside me, has been silent. The high school English teacher in the group, I expected he'd try to interpret the poem for the others; I was wrong. He's been engaged, though. He's been writing as people talk; from where I'm sitting it looks like he's recording people's impressions. I think I want to nudge him.

"What do you make of the poem, Bruce?" I ask him.

"In some ways, I think the poem could be a metaphor for this experience we're having right now, for the workshop.

Now that's an unexpected connection. Once he says it, I can see it myself. It certainly wasn't an intentional juxtaposition on my part!

"'Come in, you said.' That's what you've said to us. You've invited us to look at your 'paintings'—readings, stories, poems, your writing— to share old familiar songs, to examine our own experiences. But you can't let us stay too long. You can't let us become dependent on you. You have to pull us out, help us stand on our own."

"So you see the poem as a metaphor for teaching?"

"I guess so," he answers.

"I like that—I think you're right, the poem captures elements of the experience I've been trying to set up for you. My own interpretation this time is somewhat different. As I was reading it I was suddenly very aware of the many references to painting. The scenario I found myself constructing was of a painter and his muse; it could be her muse. The muse comes as the magi, bearing rich gifts: 'I walk the purple carpet into your eye, carrying the silver butter server.'"

"All I can think of is drugs," laughs Earl.

"There are certainly elements in the poem which can be interpreted that way, aren't there? What I find so interesting about this poem," I continue, "is how open the text is. It evokes a lot of discussion and there is clearly no single interpretation. The more I talk about it with people, the more I see in it."

As I'm talking I also see connections between this poem and some of the stories we talked about yesterday. Several of the stories were about a secret inner life. This poem could be a metaphor for that inner world. I also wonder what connections the teachers see between this and the other poems.

"What connections do you make between this poem and others in the collection?" I ask.

Connie reads aloud another poem and we move in a new direction.

The conversation weaves connections among the poems, between the poems and paintings we've seen, stories we've read, experiences we've had. Like our conversation yesterday about the short stories, the experience we construct together is far richer than our individual interpretations alone.



We wander these poetic paths for an hour before I ask, "What's been going on here?"

I want the teachers to compare what we've been doing with how they handle poetry in their own classrooms. I'd like them to examine the role I took, how the situation affected the way they read, connections with the story discussion we had yesterday, and what implications this experience holds for them as teachers.

I take a moment to come back again to Elbow's 'giving movies of our mind.' That's been our principle mode of response to the poetry. We've shared images, feelings, experiences evoked by the words on the page.

"How has our discussion this past hour helped you think about responding to one another's writing?" I ask.

Silence for a moment, then Bruce offers a comment, "What you're trying to get us to see is that we ought to be dealing with one another's writing as evoking feelings, images, etc. You're implying that we need to respond to students' writing in the same way."

Bruce has definitely internalized my agenda. He's now seeing this learning experience in terms of its implications for his own teaching.

"That's exactly what I'm trying to help you see. There is no difference between responding to the writing of published authors and to our own, or to our students'. That's Hunt's contention, I think: that we need to be **heard**, not corrected; chipmunk responses, not condescending, kindly mockingbird advice. One of the ways we can help students learn how to respond to other people's writing is by encouraging them to give movies of their minds in response to published works. That's one of the important reading/writing connections I believe we have to learn how to forge."