

Fields to Plow (Tips for Tutors)

Each summer, while I am not working with a student, I always come across words that bring me back to teaching. Inside an article, I found something that Frederick Frank wrote, “Drawing is the discipline by which I constantly rediscover the world. I have learned that what I have not drawn I have not really seen, and that when I start drawing an ordinary thing I realize how extraordinary it is, sheer miracle: the branching of a tree, the structure of a dandelion’s seed puff.” For most of us reading is so natural and automatic that the process is almost invisible. Perhaps it is like Frederick Frank’s drawing, we don’t really see the process until we slow down enough to teach a struggling reader, then we witness all the confusions, all the details (visual, structural, meaning) that we take for granted each time we rifle through the newspaper or scan letters that arrive in the mail. Teaching is like drawing in that it gets us to focus on the miracles around us. Through the work of tutoring a student, we come to see the miracle of reading and all the doors that it can open up.

I read *The Bible Salesman* by Clyde Edgerton in July. I found it on sale at the Food Lion. On page 129, I found some words which demonstrate again what most of us take for granted—the multiple meanings of some words. The central character in the store (Henry Dampier) is considering the word *have*. Edgerton writes, “He described the differences between a woman having a baby and having a car and having a headache, yet it was all the same word. You could get rid of a car in a minute, but not a headache. And to have a baby meant to give birth to. Why give so much work to one little word?” Edgerton’s words remind me of our students who are learning English as a second language and the words that confuse them along the way. Learning English is not easy!

As we begin a new school year, I enclose a poem about one of my students. The student that I am writing about has inspired me and made all of my work worthwhile. May each of you find success with your students this year.

Fields to Plow

He had just started school when it shut down over worn-out books, unsafe buses, and little heat in winter. Teachers and students wanted the same books as the whites-only school, same shiny buses, same pay for their teachers so they all walked out in hope of something better. Both schools stayed shut tight when Prince Edward County refused to integrate and Charles lost all the important years of his education.

migrating geese
the sound of wood
splitting in two

Charles learned other things while the schools were closed like loading potatoes in a truck. He learned how to feed chickens and call cows in from the field, learned how to replace a broken board on the gate and work like a man when he should have been playing like a child.

winter sun
a few lines of words
forgotten

Years passed by and when the schools did open up again, it was too late for Charles. He was too far behind and none of the teachers knew how to catch him up. Charles left soon as he could and did what he knew how to do—work.

Today Charles is nearly sixty, one grown daughter and one still in school. His wife and youngest child are outside now waiting in the truck, waiting for Charles to finish his reading lesson. They will do what it takes to support him. He is going to read and they will wait for him.

winter evening
thick fingers cover
most of a page

I am showing Charles ‘s. “The apostrophe is like a little backward c,” I tell him, “shows that something belongs to someone, like your brother the preacher, he’s good with words, people like to hear John’s words.” I write down John’s words and Charles picks up a pencil and carefully makes his first apostrophe. “I am learning something all the time,” he says and I can hardly get any words out of my mouth.

frozen fields
the words he carries
into the night

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