

Our Contemporary Shamans:

ALAN 2015 Workshop Keynote Address*

First off, I want to tell you how honored I am to be sharing the stage this morning with the amazing, electrifying Kwame Alexander, who I heard speak at the Newbery banquet, and it was like getting struck by lightning, *that* inspiring and dazzling. And now I'm just going to get right to it and tell you all how beside myself I am to be in a room full of English teachers and that I'm going to sound a bit nutty and evangelical in this talk today because of this belief I have that English teachers are our contemporary shamans: the wakers of sleeping souls, the planters of dreams in heads, the imparters of some of life's most valuable gifts: compassion, empathy, humanity, ambiguity, wonder, joy. Steinbeck said, "A great teacher is a great artist . . ." and that ". . . teaching might even be the greatest of all the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit."

This has indeed been my experience, and I thought I'd talk about a couple of those experiences today.

It all started in ninth grade.

A year earlier, I'd moved to Southern California from the East Coast with my mother, and I was still reeling at how light poured out of the sky, how I could swim in the ocean before school, how right outside our living room window, there were kids carrying actual surfboards with which they planned to ride actual waves. Also, I'd always had highly hippie tendencies and realized quite quickly I could ask absolutely any-

one in this town their astrological sign without receiving a single eye-roll. All to say, I was most definitely *California Dreamin'* when Ms. W came along and shook me awake.

It became apparent to all of us right away that our new ninth-grade English teacher was half-woman, half-tornado. She did not smile at us as we all filed into her class that first day, nor would she much for the rest of the year. She was a serious, formidable woman with anguish in her face. And she had this extraordinary hairdo. Perhaps the most extraordinary hairdo I've encountered to this day. The best way to describe it is that there was a nuclear mushroom on her head.

So there she sat on the edge of her desk that September back in the Paleolithic era when I was 14, nuclear mushroom on her head, this elegant and thundery woman, who had an air of the Gulag about her, who belonged in a black-and-white movie with subtitles, cigarette holder in a black-gloved hand even—completely out of context in this Technicolor Southern California idyll. And this impression was further confirmed when she finally spoke and announced that our theme for the year was going to be *Man's Inhumanity to Man*. We were going to read books that explored genocide, poverty, oppression, racism, human cruelty and brutality, existential angst, social alienation, loneliness, moral bankruptcy, spiritual impoverishment. The list went on and on. We were going into *The Heart of Darkness*.

The surf was not up, dude. Not in this classroom. I knew I would not ask Ms. W her astrological sign . . . ever.

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Every day that year, the “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad” world filled the classroom, and with Ms. W guiding us, we soon stopped being ourselves. As Marilynne Robinson said, “Nothing is more human than a book.” And David Foster Wallace, “Fiction’s about what it is to be a f*#cking human being.” And so the stories we read became our stories. We became a Jewish boy in a Nazi death camp with Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (1960), an African American boy living in fear and poverty in Jim Crow Mississippi with Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945); we became Samsa Gregor with Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915), and then we were all stoned to death by our community with Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (1948).

Audre Lorde said, “The learning process is something you can incite, literally, incite, like a riot.” This is what happened that year. We read and talked and disagreed, and the world, so very much world, began to shake inside us as we found our humanity in all this inhumanity, found empathy and compassion, found moral compasses, as we learned to hold history accountable, to hold the newspaper headlines accountable, to hold each other accountable. And all this in English class, not at home, not at church or temple or mosque, but from reading novels with Ms. W. In one year, she’d turned us into thinkers. I began to understand reading and writing as revolution, thinking as being a profoundly active verb. I began to understand that a person writing quietly in a room might be burning down the world. And then rebuilding it, word by word, into something magnificent.

It’s like this: You don’t even know you’re sleeping until a great English teacher comes along and wakes you up.

In my novel *I’ll Give You the Sun* (2014), I’ve given Jude’s stone-carving mentor Guillermo Garcia some of Ms. W’s mojo. I describe him as I would her: as someone who walks into a room and all the walls fall down. Guillermo says to his sculpture students, “No time to waste. Nothing to lose. We are remaking the world, people.” Because that’s what I learned in Ms. W’s class when I was 14.

“A professor is someone who talks in someone else’s sleep,” W. H. Auden said. Ms. W has been talking in my sleep for 35 years now.

Then we blinked, and we were seniors, and another kind of English teacher altogether was about to change our lives. If what Steinbeck said is true and

teachers are the greatest of the artists using minds and spirits as their medium, in ninth grade Ms. W attended to our minds; as seniors Mr. E attended to our spirits.

Mr. E was a human of the magical variety: elfin, brilliant, funny, joyful, and madly, passionately, ridiculously in love with words. He spoke with *drama*. “*Death*,” he would say. “*Life*.” “*Love*.” And we’d reel with emotion, hormones off the charts, on the brink of adulthood, hungry and tortured, and so very alive like most 17- and 18-year-olds, waiting for life to begin already.

The best way to explain Mr. E’s English class is to go back to 1817 when the great French writer Stendhal went to Florence and visited the Basilica of Santa Croce and saw Giotto’s frescoes for the first time. Stendhal was overcome with emotion and wrote: “I was in a sort of ecstasy . . . I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations . . . Everything spoke so vividly to my soul . . . I had palpitations of the heart. . . . I walked with the fear of falling.”

Stendhal swooned from seeing art! I love this so much, and the amazing part is it’s an actual medical condition called the Stendhal Syndrome, and it strikes people viewing art the world over, though for some reason, most often from seeing Michelangelo’s *David* in Florence. It’s described as a disorder that causes rapid heartbeat, dizziness, confusion, fainting, even hallucinations, when an individual is exposed to an experience of great personal significance, particularly viewing art, or for our purposes, reading literature.

I think Mr. E had a permanent case of Stendhal Syndrome—words and stories sent him into deliriums—and we all promptly caught the wonderful disorder. It was a collective, year-long, literary bender, like being inside a Gabriel Garcia Marquez story, or in a Chagall painting, with our desks floating in the air, words bursting from our chests like riots of birds, the ceiling blown off the classroom, and Mr. E above us, hands up as if orchestrating a symphony, coaxing us closer and closer toward the miraculous.

At 17, I longed for something, longed for everything really. And then came this class, this sacred book-y space. The books we read—*Macbeth*, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Rilke, 1929), *Ordinary People* (Guest, 1976), and many more—as Ezra Pound said) became

“balls of light” in my hands. There are so many ways to read and to teach literature, all of which—because of the nature of great literature, because “fiction is about what it is to be a f*#cking human being”—result in this intimate transformative encounter. Looking back now, I think Ms. W’s way was to foster empathy, chapter by chapter, so we could understand and get inside lives outside our own, so we’d become engaged citizens of this terrible beautiful world. Mr. E’s was to frame reading as a discourse with the sublime, reading as a form of prayer, reading as a way to grapple with the big questions, reading as a way to marvel at the world. He showed us how to reach into books and pull out handfuls of joy and to stuff our pockets with that joy, stuff our lives with it.

So much of what I first experienced in his English class at 17 has paved my long and windy creative path and is what I was exploring thematically when writing *I’ll Give You the Sun*. The ecstatic impulse of the artist, the numinous and sacred in art itself, the mesmerizing delirious Stendhalian response to art, the mysticism, the magic and mystery involved in creating it. Jude’s ceramic teacher in *Sun* is absolutely channeling Mr. E when he tells her, “We wish with our hands, that’s what we do as artists.”

I understand that there’s this tragic trend to push novels out of the high school English classroom. I can’t imagine a graver affront to learning, to becoming a thinker, to becoming a wonderer, a citizen, a changer of the world, to becoming a human being.

Obama said recently in a conversation with Marilynne Robinson, “The most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there’s still truth there to be found . . . and the notion that it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you.” Hail to the chief.

I could go on and on too with this ode to the English teacher, so crucial to my life has been the English classroom. There was the poetry professor in college who, fed up with our horrible, pedestrian attempts at poetry, jumped up one day, threw his arms in the air, and hollered, “You guys think you’re poets? You have to stick your asses in the wind!” And then promptly left the classroom and did not come back. The next week, you can be sure our asses were in the

wind, and all our poems had come alive. I put these words of Ken McClane almost verbatim in Lennie’s music teacher’s mouth in my first book, *The Sky Is Everywhere* (2010), and 30 years later, I still hear each butt-kicking one of them pretty much every time I sit down at my computer.

One last thing. There was an English teacher I studied with recently at 40 years old, and she conveyed something to me that inspired me—after a lifetime of only ever writing poetry—to try to write a novel. This was the brilliant and huge-hearted middle grade author Deb Wiles, who was my mentor my first semester at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. “Be yourself,” Oscar Wilde said. “Everyone else is already taken.” This is what Deb drilled into me, that to write fiction, what you need to do is be yourself, but on the page, fearlessly, devotedly, recklessly yourself on *every single page*. I don’t think I would ever have attempted to write a novel without understanding this, without having had Deb as a mentor that first semester.

When doing research for *I’ll Give You the Sun*, I took a stone-carving class and got to see my carving teacher repeatedly take a drill to a hunk of rock and get lost in a cloud of dust, and when the dust cleared, there would be a woman unfurling in the stone. Again and again, I watched him do this. I think that’s what each teacher I mentioned today did in his or her own way; he or she blasted through stone and found me, a truer me. I think this is what English teachers do. They blast through stone and find us. And then they talk in our sleep for lifetimes. They say: “No time to waste, nothing to lose, we are remaking the world, people.” They say: “Wish with your hands,” “Stick your ass in the wind,” “Curb toward joy,” and “Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.”

Ray Bradbury said, “We are cups constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is, knowing how to tip ourselves over to let the beautiful stuff out.” I think it’s you, the English teachers, who not only quietly fill the cups every single day in your classrooms, but who, most importantly, know how and when to tip those cups over so all the beautiful comes out.

Thank you.

Jandy Nelson, like her characters in I’ll Give You the Sun and The Sky Is Everywhere, comes from a superstitious lot. She was tutored from a young age in the art

of the four-leaf clover hunt; she knocks on wood, throws salt, and carries charms in her pockets. Her critically acclaimed New York Times bestselling second novel, *I'll Give You the Sun*, received the prestigious Printz Award and Stonewall Book Award honor. Both *Sun and The Sky Is Everywhere* have been YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults picks, have appeared on multiple best of the year lists, have earned many starred reviews, and continue to enjoy international success. Currently a full-time writer, Jandy lives and writes in San Francisco, California—not far from the settings of her novels.

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