

Working with Birthday Verses

Birthday or report verses hearken back to indications given by Rudolf Steiner at a faculty meeting in 1921. When speaking about end of year reports, he said, " At the bottom of each report, write a verse for each child that expresses the child's individuality, that can act as a leitmotif for the future." *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*, p. 252

Heinz Müller worked with Rudolf Steiner to bring this indication to fruition. In *Healing Forces in the Word and its Rhythms* he describes how to use imagery, wording, sound, and meter to enhance the power of the verse.

I was inspired by what Heinz Müller described, but I was so daunted by the challenge that I almost gave up on the idea of writing report verses. I couldn't imagine writing dozens of verses (in addition to reports), crafting each one so carefully so that it would give the child a sense that she was truly known.

It wasn't clear to me whether report verses were meant to be read or heard just when the report was received, or whether the child would recite or hear that verse more often. I could imagine it becoming part of the child's bedtime routine, perhaps accompanying an evening prayer. Such repetition would strengthen the power of the verse. I didn't know, however, whether parents would follow through, whether children had a bedtime routine and if so, whether saying or hearing a verse would fit into that routine. So I decided to give each child the verse on his or her birthday, although I also included it in the year-end report so that years later, a child would encounter the verse again. This would accomplish several goals: It would spread out the task throughout the year, making it more manageable to compose many verses, and it would make the celebration of the child's birthday more special.

I also decided that because the power of a verse is intensified by repetition, students would recite their birthday verses on the day of the week they were born. They would do this throughout the school year until the next birthday, when they would receive a new verse. (We would celebrate summer birthdays as half-birthdays, and students who were born on Saturday or Sunday would say their verses on a chosen day.) And I hoped that the impact of the verse would be magnified by having the other children witness the recitation and unconsciously perceive how the verse reflected the soul of the child.

I imagined that first graders would be easily capable of learning their verses and reciting them alone, but the child who had the first birthday of the year—a shy girl—needed me to recite the verse with her. For a few weeks I recited her verse with her. After the fourth time, the rest of the class chimed in and said the verse too. By the end of the year, each day of the week had its special character enhanced by the class reciting the verses of the children born on that day. This

continued until the child's third grade birthday. When I presented the birthday verse, I announced that this year the child would be reciting her verse on her own. We therefore slowly transitioned to a process where each child had a special moment in the week when she would say the verse alone while everyone else listened.

With my second class, students wanted to recite the verse with the birthday child long after third grade, so I didn't insist on individual recitation. Some children announced that they wanted to say their verse alone; others continued to want the class to say the verse with them for years. Another practice that began with my second class was that when a child was absent, we all stood up and recited the verse in her honor. That brought the absent child more fully into the class's consciousness.

One further detail: In order to make the birthday verses more special for the student and the class, I created illustrated versions which were compiled in the "Birthday Book." First and second graders loved to look through the birthday book, and several of them learned to read by reviewing verses that they already knew by heart. It should not surprise you that even in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, students like to leaf through the birthday book and recall the verses that they and their classmates recited over the years. And a packet of a child's collected verses is a meaningful present when the child graduates or leaves the school.

Working with Images

After trying to apply Heinz Müller's suggestions of how to work with all elements of poetry to make the verses more potent, I realized that I didn't have the understanding or the skill to do so. Instead, I confined myself to finding an image or a parable that I felt the mirrored or expressed child and would offer the child soul sustenance for her journey.

Composing a birthday verse that is 'true' requires that we reflect and meditate on our students and that we allow sufficient time for inspiration to come. Over the years I found that if I began to seek for an image that would speak to the student at least two weeks before the birthday, I was likely to find it.

The process of composition also benefited from extra time, because words, phrases, and rhymes had a way of suggesting themselves, often when I least expected them. On one occasion, I had been agonizing over a somewhat self-centered first grader's verse for several weeks, seeking an image that would awaken greater compassion for her classmates. One afternoon I was driving from Richmond to Charlottesville when I suddenly heard her verse echoing in my soul. I pulled over and wrote down the following words:

The seeds of compassion lie buried

Deep in the human soul;
In the light of love they flourish and grow
Into deeds of grace untold.

Another time, I had been agonizing for weeks to write a verse for a child who had significant developmental challenges, but who was the light of our class. A few days before his birthday, I woke up in the morning with this verse resounding within me:

The Light of the World
came down to earth
To shine for all Mankind;

I carry that light
within myself,
In my will, in my heart, and my mind.

Over the years, a few verses came readily to me, but most didn't. As I became more experienced with the process of composing them, I realized that I needed to trust that a verse *would* come; I just had to give it time. Although it was frustrating to wait for the verse to ripen, I consoled myself with the knowledge that my reflection and meditation on the child would reap benefits for the child and for me. And though I was sometimes dissatisfied with the final result, I knew that the child on whose behalf I was working would benefit from my striving to offer something of value.

Many teachers think that they do not have the talent or skill to write verses for their students. Or they may think that since they didn't start the tradition in first grade, it's too late to start later. Both are not true. One can start working with birthday verses any year (though for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students are more responsive to poems and prose passages by other authors). And every teacher is capable of creating a heartfelt message for her students. I strongly encourage you to try; you may be surprised by what you are able to create, and you will definitely be gratified by the students' responses. And in those desperate moments when you don't feel up to the task, you can take solace in Ben Johnson's maxim: "What is written without effort is read without pleasure."

Although birthday verses composed by a teacher may have special meaning for her students, verses from any source can be equally meaningful and effective. Heinz Müller includes many examples in his book, and in Heather Thomas's *A Journey Through Time in Verse and Rhyme* includes many verses. I have included verses to give plenty of examples for emulation, adaptation, or to be used as written.

Composing Your Own Verses — a Primer

Although I don't consider myself an expert in composing birthday verses, I certainly have had plenty of experience and have done my share of agonizing. I will therefore try to describe how I approached this challenge in the hope that it will support your creative process.

The Central Image

In my opinion, the most important aspect of the birthday verse is the central image. This image should express who the child is or is becoming. When children receive a verse with the right image they feel seen and known and they are reassured that we understand and love them.

Lest you think that we can only find images through some mysterious, esoteric process, let me reassure you that images are all around us—we just have to begin to pay attention in a different way. Every natural phenomenon can speak to us and reveal its message if we but look and listen with our souls. The same type of images that we used for nature stories, pedagogical stories, or parables, can serve in birthday verses.

Here is an example of a situation that I wanted to address: A child's family is going through a divorce, and she is feeling deeply unsettled. When I looked for an image, I thought of a ship helplessly tossing in a tempest. The image of the tempest-tossed ship led me to think of the ship's anchor. This child needed to be reassured that she was well-anchored.

With these thoughts in mind, I sketched out my idea: A ship that is being tossed about by the blasts of a storm needs an anchor to hold it. What anchors us in our lives? Our relationships with one another. I tried to express the image poetically. Finally I arrived at a statement of the image: 'Firm the anchor holds the ship.' Then I asked myself, what does the anchor do? It keeps the ship secure. It stops the ship from drifting away. I tried some synonyms and come up with 'sure' and 'fast.' The first part of the verse was now 'Firm the anchor holds the ship and keeps it sure and fast;'

Then I tried to express the correspondence between relationships and anchor. I cast about for the best word for relationships and decided to try 'bonds.' This matches the idea of an anchor on a chain. The expression 'So the bonds that link us all' came to mind and I held it as a possibility while I tried out various possibilities for the last line.

The necessity of rhyme often works magically to help us find the right words. To rhyme with 'fast' I chose 'blast' to express the storms of life. Now I had a final challenge: to express what the bonds that link us all allow us to do with respects to the storms of life. After trying several

expressions, I settled on the verb 'weather,' pleased with its double reference to the storm and to making it through the storm safely. The second part of the verse now became 'So the bonds that link us all will weather every blast.' I agonized whether I wanted to use the verb 'will' or 'can.' 'Will' had the advantage of alliteration, but this child was a melancholic and if the verse is too affirmative, I thought that it might not ring true to her. So I settled on the verb 'can' which leaves a little doubt. I hoped that the reassurance of the verse would come from repetition.

The final version read:

Firm the anchor holds the ship
And keeps it sure and fast;
So the bonds that link us all
Can weather every blast.

In eighth grade, when we reviewed our years together as a class and discussed the experience of reciting and hearing birthday verses, child for whom this verse was written told the class that this verse sustained her through the years, and she predicted that she would never forget it.

Birthday verses can also express hopes or aspirations. The process of finding an image for such verses is identical to the one described above. Once you have found the image, you need to articulate the hope or intention that the image inspires. This step benefits from making a prose statement before trying to put it into the verse. For instance, I decided that a good image for a timid girl was the moon which starts off as a crescent but gradually gains in brightness. The hope to be expressed was: I will try to be brave enough to show the world who I am.

After some poetic wrestling, I came up with this verse:

The crescent moon so meek and mild
Prefers to hide her face;
But when she waxes full and bright
She shines with strength and grade.

O may I too be brave enough
To shine with all my might;
And like the lovely silver moon
Fill all the dark with light.

If my process of composing verses does not reflect yours, I would not be surprised. Each of us has a different way to tread the path of creation. Whatever your process, be patient with yourself and take joy in your efforts. Any verse you create will be received by your students with gratitude and will nurture their souls.