



English: Poetry and Hope

What if a poem helped students to think about how they can change?

Liz taught English and wanted to use the poem “Woman of the Future” by Cathy Warry to help students consider what shapes them (see PDF). The poem (which includes some British cultural references that students can be asked to identify) takes the reader through a set of experiences which have happened to a girl. It questions whether these will determine who the woman will be in the future, and asks if there is freedom to escape from the “cocoon.”

“I did not want to go straight to the poem; instead, I asked the students to jot down what their hopes were for the future. These were shared briefly. Afterwards, I asked students to list memories or experiences from their childhood. (We briefly discussed boundaries, and students only wrote what they were comfortable sharing.) They then looked for any connections between these experiences and their hopes. For some there were connections; for others there were no links. I wanted the students to reflect on where their vision of the future comes from and what might be shaping it. The past might shape it, culture might shape it, or family might shape it; there are many possibilities.

We then looked at the poem and I used a series of questions to promote discussion:

- What shaped this woman?
- Are they the same things that shape us?
- At the end, Cathy Warry talks of the “woman of the future”; how should she be shaped? What might she be like?
- Can we leave everything behind and become a beautiful butterfly?
- Should our aim our aim be to become a beautiful butterfly from the cocoon of our past?
- Can we just leave the past behind, or do some things need forgiveness?

- Where does my vision of the future come from?
- Can we change ourselves, or do we need help? What kind of help?
- Would it take a different set of experiences to change my vision, or would a different vision shape the way I reflect on my experiences?"

What's going on here?

Liz **saw** her English lesson as a way of helping her students consider what shapes us and how we change. Are we trapped by our past, or can we make choices and break out of that into something new? This raised big questions about choice and forgiveness.

She **engaged** students in reflection on choice, making it personal and relevant, and helped students make the connection with big questions.

Liz **reshaped her practice** by choosing her questions carefully in connection with a consideration of what story her lesson told about life and how we can change.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Our character is often seen as the result of our genes or our environment; this can lead to an implicit or explicit assumption that we have little control and cannot change anything. Without denying the influence of genetics or environment, Christianity maintains that we can make choices and take responsibility, though in some situations our choice and responsibility is limited. Putting **faith** in God can set people free from a negative past that imprisons them. Forgiveness, of self and others, is a large part of that breaking with the past and is a fresh start. God's **love** and forgiveness can heal the past. This gives people **hope** of a different future, inspired by God's vision of what we and our world could be.

What difference does it make?

Liz reflects: “This poem sends a powerful message to those who feel trapped by their past, and to those with the power to shape the experiences of others. I wanted students to engage with this issue and others raised by the poem. We can break out of the ‘cocoon,’ but what do we break out into? I have often wondered what my vision of the future would be if Christian hope truly shaped it, and how that would relate to all the experiences that have already gone into shaping me.”

Where could we go from here?

Students could rewrite the poem to describe themselves and to reflect their lives and hopes. They could write in prose, reflecting on what kind of person they were a year ago, where they are now, and where they hope to be. Another way into this discussion is to use the following case study: a visitor to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City tripped and accidentally smashed three 17th-century Chinese vases estimated to be worth \$500,000. An art restorer rebuilt the vases; she could have covered the cracks, but she didn’t. The fall was now part of history of these vases. Leaving the cracks meant that what we now see is genuine and authentic. This can become a metaphor for our lives; our history is part of us, it shapes us. We don’t have to deny it, but it does not have to determine the future—we don’t have to remain broken.

Digging deeper

While recognizing factors such as genetics and environment, Christianity maintains the freedom of the individual to make responsible choices concerning faith and morals (Joshua 24:15). There is a difference between influences on our behavior and not having any choice.

Man must cease attributing his problems to his environment, and learn again to exercise his will—his personal responsibility in the realm of faith and morals. Albert Schweitzer

The choice for God—in response to being chosen and forgiven by God—is often called conversion. This is a new beginning in a close relationship with God and a changing relationship with others. Conversion can be dramatic, like the Apostle Paul’s, or slow and imperceptible. Conversion is only the beginning; it starts a process of change with the

help of the Holy Spirit. People undergoing this change are called “a new creation” (2 [Corinthians 5:17](#)). Christian history is full of people whose lives were turned around. Not every story is dramatic; but, however ordinary it might be, there is a change of direction that changes the future.

“The vision that shapes the future and the present, for Christian, is the vision of the Kingdom where peace and justice reign”(Isaiah 9:7; Revelation 21:4).

Explore similar examples

Woman of the Future by Cathy Wary

*I am a child.
I am all the things of my past.
I am all the freckles from my mother's nose.
I am the laziness of my dad
Resting his eyes in front of the television.
I am all I see,
Boys doing Karate Chops.
Rubens' lovely ladies,
Fat and bulging,
TV ads of ladies who wear lipstick in the laundry.
And worry about their hands
And their breath.
Madonnas with delicate faces holding little bundles of Jesus.
I am all I hear.
'Look after him. You're his sister.'
'Come and get your hair done.'
'Rack off, Normie!'
Waves lapping or crashing at the beach.
And the wind in trees and telegraph wires.
I am all I feel and taste.
Soft and glossy mud on toes.
Hairy insect legs
Slippery camphor and laurel leaves
The salty taste of fish and chips on my tongue*

*And the watery melting on iceblocks.
And all I remember.
A veranda shaded by grape vines,
Where I stepped off the edge and flew
Like Superman.
And waking up in the cold in a car where dad changed a tyre.
And being lost in the zoo with my cousin.
I am all I've been taught.
'I' before 'E' except after 'C'.
'Smoking is a health hazard.'
I am all I think.
Secrets.
Deep down inside me.
I am all those things.
I'm like a caterpillar
And these things are my cocoon.
But one day I'll bite my way out
And be free
Because
I'm the woman of the future.*



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