

Learning To Read Ain't Been No Beautiful Walk In The Woods:

Writing Poems of Encouragement

by Janet Kaplan-Bucciarelli

My idea for this lesson was to inspire learners in my developing level literacy class (reading level 2-5+) to write a poem encouraging other learners to stick with school — even when the barriers seem too great to overcome. As a starting point, I chose a poem I had studied (and loved) in high school: Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son."

First, we read the poem together and discussed the basic ideas — a mother encourages a child when things get tough. Then we looked at the images Langston Hughes had used and how he had structured the poem — he chose to compare living life to climbing a crystal staircase, then he made the stairs ugly, scary, and dark to represent life's challenges. Next, we tried to write a new poem as a group. Imagine a beautiful place. Describe it. Now think of everything that could take away from the beauty of that place. Write down those images. Next, imagine how you'd move through that place despite the barriers. Finally, encourage someone else to do the same.

We then brainstormed possible images for our own poems. Lastly, they worked in groups to create their own versions. In sometimes mixed images, they succeeded in expressing support for each other in a poetic form — and that was the true goal of this lesson.

On the following page is an example of a poem the learners in my class produced.

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Mother To Son

by Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor —
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now —
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.



Student To Student

by Lawrence Linton, John O'Connor, and Thelma Mitchell

Well, friend, I'll tell you:
Learning to read ain't been no beautiful walk
 in the woods.
It's had rotten limbs falling from trees,
And sudden snowstorms when you have no
 coat or hat,
And patches of poison ivy,
And darkness when you can't see a thing –
a cave.
But all the time,
I've been reading other peoples' inspiring
 stories,
And asking for help when I need it,
And playing games to help me learn to spell,
And sometimes picking up spelling books
 and learning how to make capital "G".
So friend,
don't be scared walking through this dark
 tunnel.
Don't stop moving toward your goals
'Cause you find it kind of hard.
Be proud of what you can do now –
For I'm still hunting for my spirit, friend.
I'm still moving on,
And learning for me ain't been no beautiful
 walk in the woods.



The writers were students at the Read/Write/Now program in Springfield, MA.

You try it

Use the "Mad Lib"-style sheet on the next page to create your own poem imitating Langston Hughes' structure.

Developed by Janet Kaplan-Bucciarelli

Title: _____ to _____

Well, _____, I'll tell you:
(1 - the name of the person you are writing to)

Learning to read for me ain't been no _____.
(2 - image of a beautiful place)

It's had _____,
(3 - image which takes away from the beauty of that place)

And _____,
(4 - image which takes away from the beauty of the place)

And _____,
(5 - image which takes away from the beauty of the place)

And _____ --
(6 - another image which takes away from the beauty of the place!)
_____.
(7 - one single word to describe the ugly place)

But all the time I've been _____,
(8 - an action you'd take in your beautiful place)

And _____,
(9 - an action you'd take in your beautiful place)

And _____,
(10 - an action you'd take in your beautiful place)

And sometimes _____.
(11 - a difficult action you'd take in your beautiful place)

So _____, don't you _____.
(use the name from #1 again!) (12 - image of giving up)

Don't you _____,
(13 - image of giving up)

'Cause you find it's kind of hard.

Don't you _____ now —
(14 - another image of giving up!)

For I'm still _____,
(15 - an action you'd take in your beautiful place) (use the name from #1 again)

I'm still _____.
(16 - another action you'd take in your beautiful place)

And learning to read for me ain't been no _____.
(17 - use same beautiful image from #2 again)