

BURIED TREASURE

Harvey Taylor

Artreach–Milwaukee

I've long been fascinated by 'special populations,' people who, for various reasons, live apart from 'the mainstream.' I've worked in schools & prisons, volunteered in day care centers & nursing homes, & am now exploring the realms of 'disability,' leading music & visual art workshops with groups of 'developmentally disabled' adults. I'm discovering that curiosity, inventiveness, humor, & wonder are widespread human qualities, that the basic creative spark seems to reside in nearly everyone, & only needs skillful encouragement to flare up. Seeing many of these 'special' people uncover their 'buried treasure' gives me an inkling of the hidden potential of us all.

It's powerfully inspirational to be around people, of whatever 'category,' who are developing their talents. I have tremendous respect for the courage with which many of those I've been privileged to work with are challenging themselves, confronting, & sometimes transcending their supposed limitations. The following poems, which are part of a collection called *Buried Treasure*, are a peek through the keyhole into a fascinating universe parallel to the world of 'normality'; it's a tribute to my students, who are really my teachers; it's an appreciation of the angels in the institutions that care for them; & also a thank-you to my supportive co-workers, the staff of Artreach–Milwaukee.

“Oh, if it wasn't for love,
I believe this big old world
would come to an end.
But I want you to remember:
this world's gonna stand forever.”

Lightnin' Hopkins

The Real Me

Gary sits in his wheelchair,
 legs pretzled, arms rigid,
 twisted hands intermittently jerking,
 saliva dribbling down his grizzled chin.

When I say "Hi, Gary,"
 & softly touch his shoulder,
 his jumbled tongue responds
 with a sort of "Yeah,"
 as he holds my gaze with a look that asks,
 "Can you see through the bars of this cage?
 Can you see
 the Real Me?"

The Heartbeat of a World

Chuck is led into the room by someone's arm,
 then his hand is guided to a chair.
 I tell him I'm glad he's here for music class;
 he replies, "OK."
 As he's given instruments, he plays methodically,
 a scientist of sound, a connoisseur of vibrations,
 investigating subtleties that others may not perceive;
 a triangle, for example, might tingle the skin of someone
 whose exquisite listening skills are a matter of survival.

After our weekly session of acoustic experiments,
 I take Chuck out to the hallway, where he feels
 for the wall he'll follow to the dining room,
 moving his hands along a beautiful mural depicting Milwaukee,
 with people in front of the Center for Independence,
 some in wheelchairs, some with canes, some with sunglasses on:
 he passes by them all, & those watching from skyscraper windows,
 & others walking into the Mitchell Park Domes,
 & children on a see-saw and birds flying in between clouds—

Buried Treasure

Mildred,
 Betty,
 Henry,
 Charlotte,
 Erna,
 Mary,
 Vic –

One by one, they arrive, in the nursing home lounge,
 wheelchairs gathering around a table...
 when the group is assembled, Sue begins reading the poems
 that surfaced yesterday, as she took down their stories:

Betty remembered walking near the train tracks
 with her four brothers, picking wild strawberries.
 Were they good? "You're damn right!"

Henry closed his eyes, & was back in a tree,
 way up near the top, with Robert, his best friend,
 dropping surprises on their pals below.

We go around the circle, uncovering memory's buried treasure,
 &, all too soon, the hour is gone.

As I leave the building, and cross the street,
 a school playground resounds with the laughter of
 next century's elderly,
 enthusiastically burying treasures of their own

Pieces of Loretta's Mind

Class begins, we circulate an instrument,
 ("my mother told me to take a shower every day")
 I make an occasional comment,
 ("he likes to tease all the girls")
 or a suggestion, as do others,
 ("I'm catching a cold")

we clap along when someone establishes a steady rhythm,
 ("I had eggs for breakfast")
 & after we're warmed up,
 ("you have to dry off really good, or you get sick")
 we start exploring ensemble possibilities,
 ("my friend gave me this necklace")
 then we practice our special song,
 as Loretta continues creating the soundtrack
 for a movie no one else can see,
 bizarrely irrelevant to music class,
 but fascinating in its own way,
 & though I encourage her to put this energy
 into her perfunctory playing,
 at times, I'd rather just be quiet,
 & listen to Loretta

Condensing The Dictionary

He'll never design a new kind of bomb,
 or make a killing in the stock market,
 or pilot an oil tanker onto a reef,
 or vivisect animals for the cosmetics industry:
 Vinnie is 'developmentally disabled,'
 what used to be called 'retarded.'

But, along with the things he can't do,
 he has a genius for enjoyment:
 I've seen him paint, with bright concentration,
 & once, when Craig & I played music,
 he danced ecstatically.

Of special interest to me is that
 Vinnie's vocabulary eliminates big words,
 & little words, dispensing with monumental nouns,
 hyperactive verbs, & ornate modifiers,
 condensing the dictionary
 into a single, all-purpose, wholehearted exclamation:
 "Yeah!"