

**Pamela Harrison, Board of Contributors ~the *Valley News*, 9/19/2010**

## **"Politics, Plato, Poets—and My Mother"**

It's election time again, and as the airwaves sizzle with incendiary language thrown from both sides of the aisle, I think of my mother's careful use of words—and her example reminds me that, as a poet, I have a serious bone to pick with Plato.

Let me tell you first a bit about my mother. An Oklahoma farm girl who in the hot and dusty summers of her youth wore no shoes except on Sunday, Vera Alice Pritchett proved an intelligent and independent thinker. Small and feisty, ever all of 90 pounds, as the middle child of seven, she could hold her own. Against that era's prevailing gap in gender privilege, for some years she refused any name but "Jimmy" and routinely stole her older brothers' clothes so she, too, could pick cotton.

Listening on the radio to baseball from St. Louis and big bands from Chicago, she soon trained herself out of the limiting confines of her native twang to speak standard Midwestern American English. During the dire dislocations of the Dust Bowl years, the *New American Dictionary* became a major agent in her mental liberation from poverty, ignorance and social prejudice. Graduating valedictorian at the age of 16 from high school in Sparks, Okla., Vera waited tables until she was old enough and had money enough to seek a wider range of possibility by entering nursing school. Somewhere along the way she learned her given name meant "true."

I have always thought, in the way that names so often point a path, that "true" became my mother's deep and abiding measure of real worth. I couldn't count the number of times she dropped whatever she was doing to clarify a word's exact meanings in her dictionary.

When I was a child, there were three summers in which my brother and I were put in the care of my father's relatives in Colorado. There, my paternal grandmother, a recent convert to a new church, stained my childish understanding with racial slurs and rumors that Catholics and Jews were going to "take over the world." Upon our return home, it took my mother mere hours to set my thinking straight. Raised a Southern Baptist, Mother had reasoned as a teenager that smoking, dancing and playing cards harbored no real contradiction to the Christian injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself." Without a bigoted bone in her body, a victim herself of casual and malign social and economic exclusions, Mother believed every human being was a child of God, and she expected her children's language and attitudes to respect that fact.

I think Mother's abiding faith that right language could be an arbiter of what is humanly true and valuable underwrote my own subsequent ambition to become a poet. And this brings me to my argument with Plato.

Founder of the Academy in Athens and author of *Dialogues* that are the foundation of Western philosophy, Plato famously banished poets from his ideal Republic because he was suspicious of those skilled in rhetoric—the art of speaking or writing effectively,

the art of persuasion. A teacher of mathematics and law, Plato was very aware of the clouds of connotation that hover around our words emitting emotional vibrations that can convey many unspoken ideas that bypass conscious thought to arouse unexamined feelings. And feelings, particularly those of prejudice, anger and hatred, are a dangerous threat to reason and the commonwealth he sought to promote.

Today, we see how degraded our national dialogue has become under the onslaughts of demagogues and fear-mongers who cynically misuse the language for their own ends. Rabble-rousers can be very capable wordsmiths. Hyperbole is their tool and hysteria their aim.

A demagogue's rhetoric, clever at packing a twisted message in a pithy phrase, is vitally different from a poet's, however. Those who seek power often persuade by the urgings of our lowest emotions—our fears, angers, resentments and greed. But poetry is engaged with very different work. Its long tradition predates philosophy by centuries and stands as an imperishable archive of our species' consciousness, "what it feels like to be alive," in the words of poet Stanley Kunitz.

In the practice of poetry, the search for a right word becomes a selfless effort to articulate an inner truth. And, at their best, through the miracle of our innately shared humanity, poetry's very particular, carefully chosen and well-ordered words come to speak to and for us all. Over centuries and across cultures, poetry's eternal themes—the Good and the Beautiful, Love and Loss, Hope and Death—resonate with our most deeply and honestly felt experience. It's where the true meanings are. Instead of excluding others and diminishing us, the art of great poets refines and burnishes our sensibilities, widens our understanding and sympathies, and educates our moral imaginations. Refusing clichés, knee-jerk simplifications and gross generalizations that seek to exploit our differences, poets desire with every precision in their power to validate our shared humanity.

I believe as Mother did that careful words can be a saving bridge between differing people and cultures; that fear-mongering, stereotyping and lazy generalizations can be amended by an open mind, a good dictionary, and honest attention to the particular. I work at poetry, that art of most carefully chosen words, because, speaking with the small, still voice of our inner awareness, honest words illuminate our deepest values and counterbalance the conniving and divisive lies of demagogues.

Socrates claimed that "the unexamined life is not worth living." I believe that writing and reading poetry fulfill exactly that essential work—and not merely with our minds, but with our whole selves—our senses, our spirits and our hearts.

It's election time again, and amid all the hysteria and hyperbole, as a person and a poet, I choose with Vera Alice Pritchett to celebrate our common human aspirations. Here's to our commonweal, to our health and happiness and the opportunity for every American to enjoy them. Here's to Vera and the true.