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For poet Rita Dove, 'poetry is about life'

By Anne Bromley

Imagine a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet saying, "I decided to forget about poetry for awhile." In the aftermath and upheaval of a disastrous 1998 house fire, Rita Dove, too distracted to work on poems as she routinely did, turned her attention toward learning something new. Her new focus helped her overcome the devastation she felt inside and eventually return to poetry.

The disaster that struck the Commonwealth Professor of English came in the form of lightning, which struck her house, which caught on fire, which resulted in some irretrievable loss — but not loss of life itself.

"Everything was blasted," including her writing rituals, said Dove, who joined the U.Va. faculty in 1989, two years after winning the Pulitzer.

But life went on. Not long after the fire, she and her husband, German author Fred Viebahn, found themselves dancing in the face of disaster, literally, when they attended a benefit ballroom dance at the urging of friends.

Taking to the dance floor "was completely serendipitous," Dove said. "I didn't know where it would lead me. Ballroom dancing seemed frivolous, but I discovered how intensely physical it is and grew to have great respect for the dancers, because the moves are quite precise and you need to have control."

A formally trained opera singer, as well as a writer who loves bringing together different artistic forms, Dove said dancing wasn't something she'd gravitated toward before. Being the female dancing partner, as Ginger Rogers pointed out, means you have to do everything that Fred Astaire did, but backwards and in high heels. Dove's husband told her she's a hard person to lead, but they both were so captivated, they kept at it by taking lessons. The couple now dances a varied repertoire on a regular basis.

Although the ordeal of the house fire disrupted her life, dancing gave it new patterns and renewed her belief that life holds an abundance of goodness. After turning her attention to the other joys of life, poetry came back to her. New poems came slowly, she said. They came of their own bidding, they came in bits and fragments. Some of them were about dancing or inspired by dances, but not all.

Dove's latest poetry collection, "American Smooth," includes dancing poems spaced throughout the book. The title poem not only refers to a specific American style of ballroom dancing, but also "an attitude, a way of finessing your life, of being with style," she said.

Other poems offer additional qualities: a different view of paradise, stories about African-American soldiers in World War I based on research she began in the 1980s, a five-part poem about learning to shoot guns and a section called "Twelve Chairs," poems written in the voices of the 12 members of a jury.

She stressed that inspiration is always a matter of being ready and receptive, which is why the fire affected her so much. With the routines she had created for writing daily gone, she had to figure out a different way of being receptive again.

"Poetry is about life. It can tell us something about what a human being is like," she said. In balance, you've got to live in order to write, and seek inspiration in other things besides writing poetry and teaching in a university, she added.

Dove said she has learned to trust that things that interest one person can mean something else and be interesting to others as well — thus, poetry can involve nearly any subject. It's one of the ideas she imparts to her students. As a teacher, she preaches what she practices. She encourages her students immerse themselves in other activities.

She likes to shake up their notions about writing by giving each of them a "wild card" — an individualized creative writing exercise where they have to do something different in their writing. For someone whose poetry focuses on personal experience, she might suggest researching related history or culture. For someone who concentrates on more intellectual ideas, she might prescribe a nature poem.

As much as poetry writing is a private activity — her poetic soul stirring awake in the darkest hours to write — Dove has devoted a substantial amount of time to bringing poetry into the public arena, through collaborative projects with other artists and media and by taking on positions such as her latest: Poet Laureate of Virginia.

Appointed by Gov. Mark Warner this summer and sworn in to the state office Sept. 20, Dove will serve for two years. She is no stranger to this type of public service and acclaim, having been the U.S. Poet Laureate from 1993 to 1995. Besides making public appearances, Dove has the freedom to come up with her own ideas about how to

promote poetry within the state.

"It's a way of giving back," she said.

Whether she is giving a public speech or leading a poetry workshop with children, Dove will have a strong lesson in mind. What she learned from the fire and healing afterwards was something she has been showing and telling her students for years: "If something happens that unsettles you, that shakes you up, you learn that you always come down. Look around at where you've landed and what's around you."

You might just end up on a dance floor. You might just write about it.

Fox Trot Fridays

Thank the stars there's a day
each week to tuck in

the grief, lift your pearls, and
stride brush stride

quick-quick with a
heel-ball-toe. Smooth

as Nat King Cole's
slow satin smile,

easy as taking
one day at a time:

one man and
one woman,

rib to rib,
with no heartbreak in sight —

just the sweep of Paradise
and the space of a song

to count all the wonders in it.

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