

PROJECT SCHOLAR'S STATEMENT

WHO ARE WE?

Kent Jacobson / July 8, 2018

*What we choose to fight is so tiny!
And what fights with us is so great!*
Rainer Maria Rilke

WHO ARE WE? would like to use poems and stories again this fall to attend to the human face of medicine.

In past years we have probed matters of identity, empathy, perception, love, self-destruction, the good life, prejudice, and our struggles with perfection. None of these are ordinary subjects, our responses complicated, contradictory, and many times unresolved. And I usually begin the sessions with a buyer's beware: Stories and poems are always about problems, problems, problems, I say. Always. I tell participants about a young mother who stood in one of my classes and objected that I'd assigned too many poems about dead or dying babies (I hadn't realized), and the reading, on the whole, was *depressing*.

Reading literature can be, and often is, just as Latisha said – *depressing*. Poems or stories can be a slog if you prefer sun over darkness -- and most of us do -- though I know that people who gather for **WHO ARE WE?** wouldn't have come unless they believed that literature, however bleak, can turn up the lights.

I also say, mainly to reassure, that reading poems and stories is like reading people. There is very little difference. Details matter. And what's said directly is never the complete story; you have to read between the lines – the white spaces as well as the black – just like with people.

For texts I favor ones that trigger tension, because I assume like Socrates that if we stay open we can learn as much from across the room as we can from peering into our own mirror. I have used Kim Addonizio's *What Do Women Want?* (with its allusion to Freud), and her poem opens this way:

*I want a red dress.
I want it flimsy and cheap,
I want it too tight, I want to wear it
until someone tears it off me.
I want it sleeveless and backless,
this dress, so no one has to guess
what's underneath.*

The class may sit restlessly as I read the poem, the men silent, blank-faced and uncomfortable. I ask the room what their worst fears are about the narrator. A younger woman might say the speaker is *cheap*, *she's loose*, even (one said once) *a whore*. I wait for other responses and ask how they understand the red dress. What's it mean to the speaker? And the conversation can turn. The men still cautious, an older woman (and not always someone older) will venture that the dress represents hunger, the speaker's hunger to be only herself, to be authentic and unmoved by what others think:

*I want that red dress bad.
I want it to confirm
your worst fears about me,
to show how little I care about you
or anything except what
I want.*

Many will like this provocateur, though some still won't. The men might enter the conversation now when I ask what problems people see with the speaker's yearning. Is honesty always the best policy with a co-worker or spouse or patient in the hospital? Are there problems when you wear your (metaphorical) red dress?

We're after greater clarity about the human condition in **WHO ARE WE?** -- clarity and generosity and a larger kindness, a more profound understanding of the daily match we all fight for a life well-lived.