

**Table of Contents**

1. Poetry Notes .....	2
2. Poetry Script .....	7
3. Poetry Recording .....	14

**Speaking Peace in a World of Discriminatory Hate: A Peek Behind the Process to  
Interpreting Grace Bruenderman's "Why I Tutor at the International Center"**

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Liberty University, Research Week 2023

Oral Presentation: Creative and Artistic Performing Arts

Professor Denise Thomas

Telling stories that matter, one of the unofficial mantras of the Liberty University Forensics Speech and Debate Team, rests at the core of nearly all oral interpretation and performance pieces. Authors write with interwoven themes and hidden messages to fulfill a purpose. The performer must then find, understand, and interpret those themes, messages, and purposes. Grace Bruenderman's (n.d.) "Why I Tutor at the International Center" proved no exception, and only careful extrapolation and preparation led to the messages of racial reconciliation and, briefly, activism, that I deliver within my interpretation.

As with any performance interpretation, the first step involved choosing a poem. For its purpose as a competitive speech piece, I knew I needed to connect with the material on a personal level, and I knew I needed a piece with a strong central thesis. For myself, I wanted a piece with a central thesis of educational advocacy. Access to fair and equal education shifts from country to country, depending on cultural organization and values, and I wanted to address those inequalities. However, none of my searches led to the right piece until Professor Denise Thomas, my sponsor, recommended Grace Bruenderman's (n.d.) poem to me.

In the moment that I saw the title, "Why I Tutor at the International Center," I knew that I had found the personal connection. Since the senior year of my high school career, I have tutored fellow students in both math and English, and I found a passion for helping other individuals tell their stories within the English tutoring. This passion led me to volunteer to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to refugee women from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa during the summer between my first and second years of college. I wanted to give them the tools to tell their stories without necessitating a secondary translator.

Next, as I read Bruenderman's (n.d.) poem for the first time, I recognized the poetry's intricate weave. Her word choice astonished me with its beauty and its visceral nature, and I had

to read the poem once more to realize that Bruenderman utilized her words to convey a story and craft a thesis not unlike the one that fueled my own passion for tutoring and storytelling. In the poem, Bruenderman details the relationship between an ESL student, Abdulghani, and his unnamed native English-speaking tutor. The connection between them transitions from student-teacher to friendship throughout the course of the poem, and the tutor progresses from viewing her position as a mere job to viewing her position as a relationship-oriented mission.

When I reached this realization for myself, I knew that I had to interpret Bruenderman's (n.d.) poem in competition. However, with the competitive time constraints, I had to pick and choose which of Bruenderman's words could stay and which ones had to leave in a process that is referred to as cutting. Aided by two of my coaches on the team, part of this cutting process led me to rearrange Bruenderman's words to make the thesis clearer to my audience, but, as per competitive regulations, her original intent remained. I also drafted an original introduction to summarize the story arc, justify the topic, and deliver the thesis.

Then, with the drafted cut and original introduction in hand, I turned to my coaches for performance and blocking assistance as I began to interpret the piece for competition standards. We worked through a process of trial and error as more time was added to the performance with extra blocking and inflection, resulting in further cuts to the draft. I would submit my performance to asynchronous tournaments, receive feedback from judges, and return to interpretive revision. While I placed a handful of times at the asynchronous tournaments, they were not high placements which pushed me to continue revisions. As I entered the spring semester from Winter Break, I traveled with the poetry cut to a regional tournament and, while it did not place, I received further comments from judges who saw it in-person.

Finally, I had the opportunity to travel with the poetry cut to two regional tournaments

that were also national qualifiers. In the first tournament, I did not place. In the second tournament, however, I placed second. The feedback from both days complemented each other and allowed me to continue fine-tuning the details into the final cut and performance interpretation that I chose to present for research week.

In the end, the second-place tournament win was enjoyable and allowed me to see that others perceived value in the thesis, but it also reminded me that I chose to perform this piece for a reason: to tell a story worth telling. I wanted to tell a piece of my story as a tutor while also advocating for the ESL students with whom I worked without sacrificing the unique nature of their trials and triumphs. Bruenderman's (n.d.) poem gave me the format to tell that story, and the aforementioned detailed process from conception to cut to competition only allowed me to clarify that valuable, multi-faceted story in a way that broad audiences could see and understand.

## References

Bruenderman, G. (n.d.). Why I tutor at the international center. In *SpeechGeek prose/poetry bundle*. SpeechGeek.

**Speaking Peace in a World of Discriminatory Hate: A Poetry Script of Grace**  
**Bruenderman's "Why I Tutor at the International Center"**

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Why I tutor at the international center:

It looks good on a resumé

I look nice for volunteering

I look nice to the hot Russian receptionist  
who sees me volunteering.

I've been practicing so I can say his name.

It sounds like Bak Bak,

bakvar-ack

(so I can learn to pronounce  
said Russian guy's name)

I tutor at the International Center

Because I have forgotten how  
important words are lately.

I have forgotten the thrown out drug out  
shiny spiny quality of the way words hold  
on to the rungs of my tongue, how English  
knocks itself together with its click clacks and  
talk backs so stiff it is as if my Ps and Qs have



learned to walk on stilts and crawl  
into the International  
Center tutoring room.

Because here I sit, trying to spit English  
to a man whose writing looks like circle circle  
dot swirl, swiggity-swirlin'  
round like a whirling dervish  
on paper to me, while he explains to me  
that the letter A to he  
really just looks like a triangle with a tightrope  
in the middle, and don't get him started on B.

And his language, Arabic, just looks like  
fancy sticks that have learned to dance so very  
flexibly to me

But...

after weeks we learn to speak  
words like mother father niece nephew  
learn just enough for him to spew,  
"I miss my family. I miss my niece.

I miss my m-o-t-h-e-r, moth-mouth-moth  
Muuuuther.

He tells me that the Arabic language is like  
water, like the ocean. It is wide and it is flowing and he  
can pull whatever he wants from it, sail his  
words like boats on it, and I tell him  
he could be a poet.

“You’re a poet and you don’t even know it,”  
but instead of laughing he kind of stops and asks  
“What’s poet?”

You are a poet, Abdulghani. When you rub noses  
to greet me, take the time to fry rhymes in  
your fresh baked bread sweetly and neatly  
when you  
remember that your daughter has your grandmother’s face  
when you tell me you rescued that mutt that’s been hanging  
around outside your place from those evil American dog catcher faces  
you are a poet.  
I have taught him rivers of

have has had was were will all the chewed up  
 verbiage from the “Marta and her dog” book series  
 the queries on why he thinks our coffee tastes like crap  
 how the p-h is a “f” sound, and  
 how “c” is just one crazy letter on the wrong side of town  
 that goes “c” and goes “sss” and goes “ch” but now  
 I frown and tell him to put his Arabic-English dictionary down  
 because:

“You are a poet, Abdulghani.”

When you tell me you want to put English in jars,  
 when you want to pickle “onomotopeia” and “pi-men-to” just for their flow,  
  
 you are a poet.

And we have come so far from a “My name is Grace”

“The dog is brown”

“The cat is yellow”

“How much does that cost?”’s and

“I live on the corner of 1312 Chestnut St.”

you are a poet, Abdulghani.

But even before he could call a jar a jar  
before he could say “the ocean really goes that far?”  
we both knew that we were friends.

Before he knew what words to send sails  
across his Arabic ocean, I could see  
things were changing up there, down here, that  
he was changing me. And I feel so  
freaking hopeful if I vomited  
it would probably come up as candy hearts.

It is Tuesday when I tutor  
and Abdulghani is not here,  
but I hear from another teacher  
some college boys got to him.

They told him to go home  
back track to his own country,  
get rid of his beard, and called him  
a little somethin’ somethin’  
they thought was funny  
like towel-head or Aladdin

but he didn't understand them,  
at least not the words, not the verbs  
they threw at him. But he saw their  
faces, and sometimes, that is enough.  
Sometimes, a look can tell hate well enough.  
Sometimes, a look can tell ignorance well enough.

And I bet he didn't have the words  
to respond to them, because after  
22 years, I still don't have  
the words to respond  
to people like them.

I haven't given him  
those words, and in fact,  
I'd like to keep them from him.

When he comes back on Thursday  
I'm worried, I'm worried...  
that he will ask me to teach  
him hate. To teach him to hatch verbal  
landmines for those sick slick ignorant  
bent backwards kids to find when they step

just one step behind him, so they  
can see in his eyes then, that his words  
may be a river, but he is an ocean, a poet,  
a one-time peace maker now broken.

I want to preach peace and teach him  
more about how to plant his vegetable garden  
plant forgiveness and pardons to those  
who don't understand the world.

I want to ask him more about water and his mother  
and daughters.

And if I just teach him the attractive things  
to sing from word mountains, will that change  
anything in the long scheme of counting on  
Americans for more than spelling lessons?  
I will give you peace lessons with words,  
let you decide if you will take verbs and  
put them into action with your eyes or with your  
fists, learn despise on your own my friend.

because you will learn scowl on the streets

meet every kind of devil you think you can see  
but you will also learn wide-eyed and gentle and kind,  
and keep searching for that one, keep coming back to  
this one, because you are why, Abdulghani.

You are why I tutor at the International Center every Tuesday and  
Wednesday morning, forget the hot Russian guy

it is you my friend  
you and your ocean

and I hope that tomorrow when I return to teach preach  
to watch “poetry in motion”

I will not have to teach myself goodbye.

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Unlisted YouTube Link to Poetry Recording:

<https://youtu.be/H2N-eLOF0Mo>