

# The university and the power of the poetic

As Florida's universities brace for the impact of new budget cuts, the questions that consume us are urgent and practical: How many STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) graduates do we turn out? How quickly do they move through the "pipeline"? Do they get high-paying jobs?



Elizabeth Bird

All good questions, of course. The university is an engine for economic growth, and we certainly need more scientists and engineers. But as we channel our energies into STEM and the economy, maybe we can also take a moment to contemplate something a little less tangible — the power of the poetic imagination.

April is National Poetry Month, and while it may seem contrived to allow designated "months" to dictate where we focus our thoughts, now is a good moment to remind ourselves that true universities must be more than technical schools. Great cities need intellectual, creative and cultural capital, and universities power that, too.

With that in mind, the University of

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South Florida's Humanities Institute has developed a special celebration for April — "Poetry Matters at USF."

The premise is simple: All of us, whether physicians, scientists, athletes or administrators, need poetry in our lives. We may not study it or attend regular readings, but at some point, we have all been touched by the poetic.

It seemed a bit risky. We sent requests to representatives of the USF community, from the president and the football coach to medical researchers, student leaders, faculty and staff, asking them to pick a poem that meant something to them, and then share that personal connection. I half expected a deathly silence or a slew of reasons not to participate.

Instead, I now have 29 poems, one for each day of April (we actually start Monday with President Judy Genshaft's choice), selected by a diverse group of USF folks. There are poems that bring back warm memories of childhood bedtime, or were read at a loved one's fu-

neral. Or poems that evoke an emotion or a moment that no other form can truly capture.

Poems, it seems, serve as inspirational messages; they guide us to achieve, to love or to be better people. John F. Kennedy once remarked that poetry reminds us of "the richness and diversity of man's existence," and challenges us to see the world in new ways. This point comes through clearly in the selections.

All the choices are showcased on our Poetry Matters website, and we invite you to visit daily this month. The comments of participants, some long and eloquent, others brief but heartfelt, speak to the power of poetry in our lives — not just in classrooms and coffee shops. Many do write that they first encountered their poem in a high school or college class, but that it has stayed with them ever since. And that very point speaks to the need for colleges and universities to cultivate the poetic as well as the practical — to be places where,

young people learn to make a life, as well as earn a living.

In my own life, as the latest higher education debacle unfolded in Tallahassee, I found one poem echoing in my mind: Percy Bysshe Shelley's evocative tale of Ozymandias, "King of Kings." The supreme ruler's massive statue once towered over the desert, with "frown/ And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command." But the statue has fallen, and only the pedestal is visible:

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay*

*Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,*

*The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

The memory of that poem is comforting, telling us that even the most arrogant political rulers will eventually pass. Meanwhile, the power of the poetic will endure, as will the truly great university.

Elizabeth Bird is a professor of anthropology, the faculty representative on the University of South Florida Board of Trustees and director of the USF Humanities Institute. The Poetry Matters at USF project may be viewed at: <http://humanities-institute.usf.edu/events/poetry.aspx>.