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Better Citizens through Poetry

State poet Rick Benjamin shares how poetry teaches us about citizenship as part of the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center: Talking in the Library Series



September 17, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – As a catalyst to instill a sense of obligation to community and the environment, poetry is not the first medium that comes to mind – but Rhode Island state poet [Rick Benjamin](#) is on a mission to change that perception.

His [appointment as state poet in 2012](#) by Governor Lincoln Chafee has imparted in him a duty to elucidate Rhode Island's history through the lens of poetry, said Benjamin, author of "Passing Love: Poems" and "Floating World: Poems," and an educator in the arts, humanities and environmental studies at universities around New England.

"[Poetry] teaches us about the obligations of citizenship in a small state, and not just any small state – a state that has always set a very high bar for tolerance, freedom, difference," Benjamin told an overflowing audience at RWU's Mary Tefft White Cultural Center: Talking in the Library Series on September 10.

As Rhode Island celebrates the 350th anniversary of its 1663 Colonial Charter, which established Rhode Island as the first state to permit true religious freedom and the separation of religion from citizenship, "we must live up to these standards and not just pay lip service to them," Benjamin said:

"And I'm taking seriously my charge [as state poet] to talk about poetry as a medium which instructs us always how to be better citizens to each other, to the places where we find ourselves and also among other sentient life on the planet."

Benjamin cited as an example the targeting of a Sikh man as a "suspected terrorist" by Providence police on the day following the September 11, 2001, attacks. Sher J.B. Singh was among [four men removed from an Amtrak train](#) in Providence because of racial profiling and the hysteria that many parts of the country experienced following the worst terrorist attack in history on American soil, Benjamin said.

While watching on television as onlookers at the train station hurled at Singh “hateful things based on ethnicity,” it was a Naomi Shihab Nye poem that reminded him of “how we should treat each other.” From memory (as he did with all of the poems in his lecture), he recited “Red Brocade”:

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then, you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Raised in diverse – and sometimes unsafe – Los Angeles apartment complexes, Benjamin learned from his grandparents' example not to treat others as strangers, contrary to his parents' missives. His grandmother, a nurse, would attend to the child of a concerned parent at any time of the night, while his grandfather lent his mechanic skills for free to a neighbor's busted vehicle. The idea that difference in people should be feared “didn't serve me,” he said. Instead, “the idea that you should always reach out to strangers, and that you have an obligation to do so, really held true” – a generosity of spirit taught to him by his grandparents that he hopes he passed on to his children.

Benjamin also emphasized the importance of cultivating a sense of stewardship for nature and the environment in which we live. For nearly a decade, he directed the Rhode Island River of Words, an ecological program that educated public schoolchildren about their place through poetry. During the program, a high school boy shared his view that the Woonasquatucket River is “a dump.” The mission of the program shifted to helping the students consider the Ocean State's most-regarded resource vis-à-vis Rhode Island's numerous rivers, with the intent that fostering pride of place in the youth would mobilize a generation to begin “taking back their neighborhoods.”

“You have to reverse your own thinking, you have to return to a different sense of place, which is both restorative and life-affirming,” said Benjamin. “And when you start to do that, you really start to care about where you live.”

Expanding on his idea that poetry illustrates every citizen's responsibility to each other and the world, Benjamin said, “I believe in poetry as a wisdom medium ... Ideally, poetry is circulating instructions all the time, and we would be wise to listen up.”

To demonstrate his point, he shared Mary Oliver's “In Blackwater Woods,” in which she offers three insights into life:

Look, the trees

are turning

their own bodies

into pillars

of light,

are giving off the rich

fragrance of cinnamon

and fulfillment,

the long tapers

of cattails

are bursting and floating away over

the blue shoulders

of the ponds,

and every pond,

no matter what its

name is, is

nameless now.

Every year

everything

I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.

To live in this world

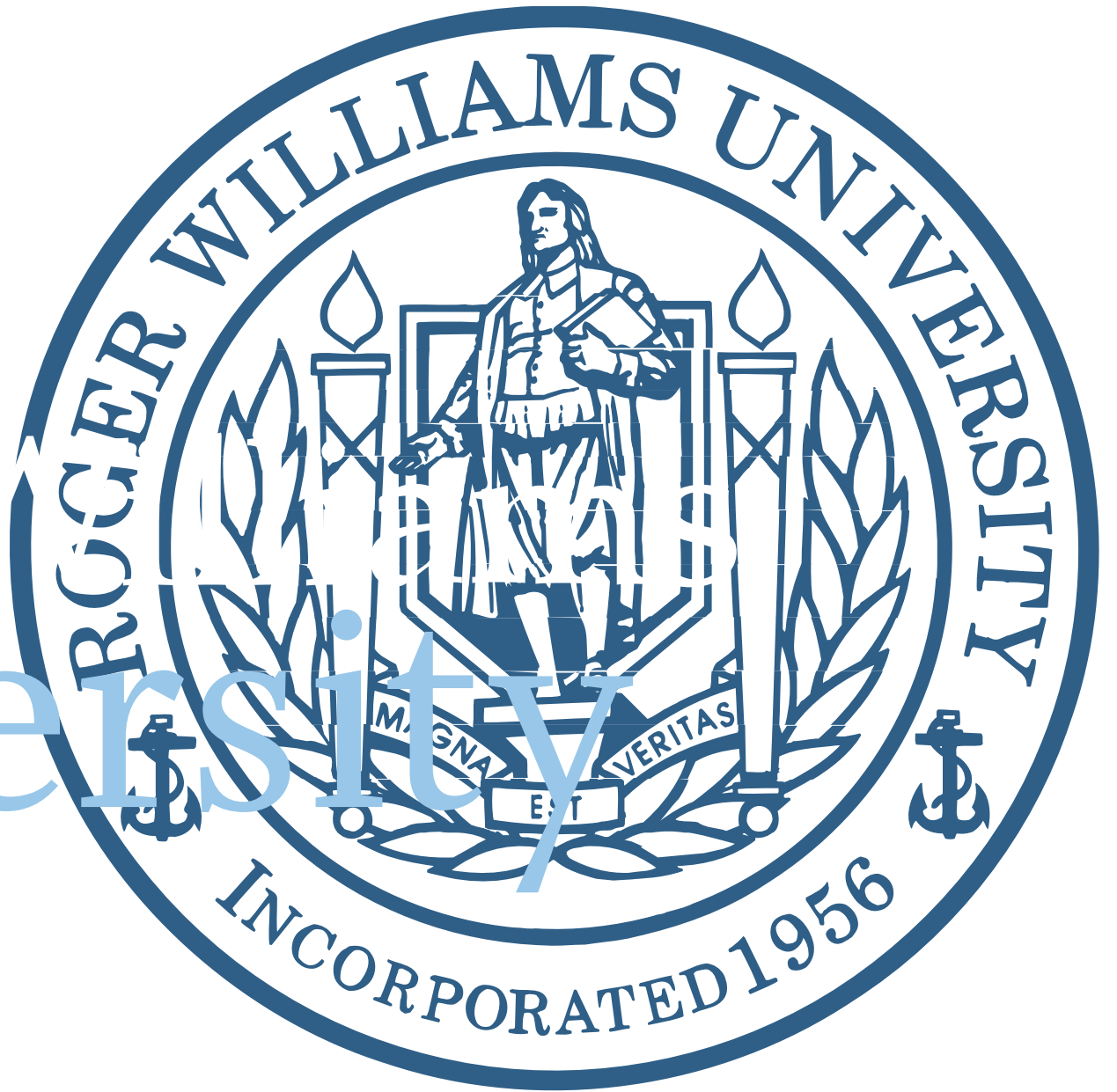
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

The Talking in the Library series at the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center is part of an annual lecture series that brings local, national and international thought-leaders to Roger Williams University for the vibrant exchange of thoughts and ideas.

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