

An Inspirational Message from Susanna Cerrato

2021 Burroughs Wellcome Fund Western Region Teacher of the Year



Prior to beginning my teaching career, I wrote and studied poetry. I spent years seeing and interpreting the world, both inside and outside of myself, through words and verse and images and metaphor. What better way to celebrate the launch of National Poetry Month than by grounding my message to you today in one of my favorite poems by one of my favorite poets.

In her (possibly most famous) poem *The Summer Day*, Mary Oliver ends with:

*“Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”*

This quote is most often used as a charge to take risks, to be bold, to do things you had not ever imagined doing, so as not to waste your brief moment on the planet. But what we ignore are the beautiful and careful lines that precede this audacious ending. Leading up to this final question (which is actually quite personal and contemplative) Mary Oliver depicts the watching of a grasshopper existing in the grass. It’s a small and simple moment, one that brings attention to the power of paying attention--to all that one can learn and consider when one slows down and observes.

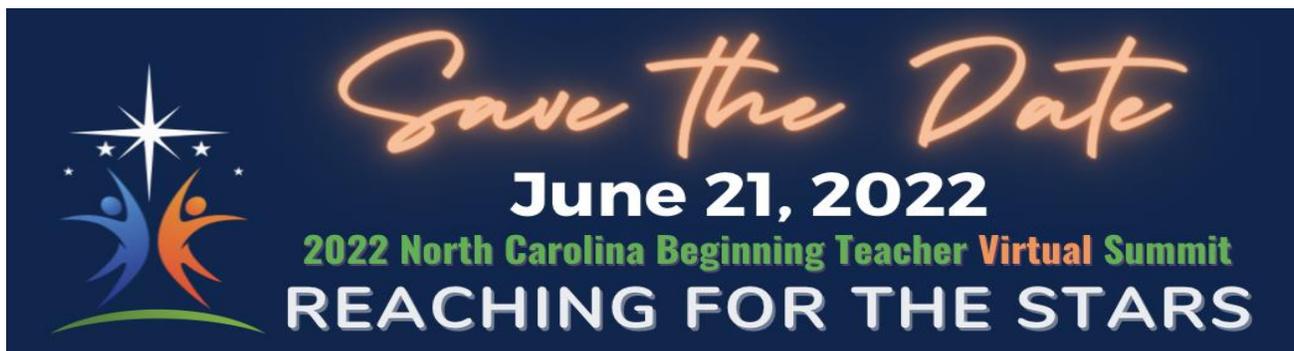
*This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.*

I can think of no better encouragement to pass along to you, who are beginning your journey as an educator, than to slow down and pay attention. Often as educators, we are asked to fly above ourselves--and our students--and think of things from ten thousand feet up. *What curriculum best serves all students? How can we effectively assess all students? In what ways can we evaluate educators and their outcomes to ensure we close opportunity gaps?* Educators are asked to generalize about what works for all, then asked to make sure it works for each individual student. The dissonance can drive you mad. So I implore you to ground yourself in the simple act of **observation**. Regardless of what curriculum you are using, what assessment you are asked to give or how you manage the room, remember that the most insightful tool you have is your ability to observe.

Each student comes to school with his/her own story, needs, abilities, fears, imaginations, cultures, identities, aspirations, questions, interests and curiosity and the only way we will ever figure out how to reach “all” is to take the time to study “each.” Create time in your room to connect and learn about each student. Use **empathy maps** to pose questions and allow students to share their answers in writing; **observe** students--even in disruptive times--to decipher what their behavior is communicating, why they move their “jaws back and forth instead of up and down;” lead daily **community meetings** (at all ages) to build that sense of safety and trust so students show you their “enormous and complicated eyes;” **conference** with students to set individual goals and support them in snapping open their wings so they can fly.

Despite the pushes you feel to fit it all in and push on through to cover all of your content, I encourage you to slow down, fall into the grass as Mary did and pay attention.

I want to share with you my deep and unwavering gratitude for each and every one of you for choosing this as the way you spend your “one wild and precious life.” Thank you for your commitment to elevating the students of North Carolina and for desiring to be a heartfelt guide to children and families. I do not want to applaud your heroism, but rather revel in your humanism and heart for giving yourself to one of the most important professions around. I hope you can find patience with yourself and your students. Trust your students and their families. Trust your colleagues and your school community. Most importantly, trust yourself and your gifts. Know that no matter how hard this first year may be, how empty your classroom may start, how few terms you may know or how little authority you may have, through this trust and patience what started out as empty will be full to the brim. Trust yourself and the power of building relationships with your students.



The 2022 NC Beginning Teacher Virtual Summit is a state-wide FREE professional development opportunity specifically designed to address the needs of novice teachers. The past few years have both challenged us and taught us the importance of being flexible, maximizing our resources, and practicing reflection.

Therefore, this year’s virtual summit will feature sixteen amazing, pre-recorded sessions from last year’s summit that statistically align with the most common needs of BTs across the state. Participants choose from topics on classroom management, equity/diversity, tech tools and tips, differentiation, social/emotional/self-care, teacher leadership, professionalism, and parent communication.

Through a blend of live opening and closing sessions, live Teacher of the Year Panels, and pre-recorded breakout sessions, beginning teachers will be able to self-select sessions on key instructional practices to positively impact student learning.

****Please note that CEU credits for the live and pre-recorded breakout sessions may be given at the discretion of your Public School Unit (PSU) or non-Public School Unit.***

*****[Click here to get reminder texts on information about this summer’s summit!](#)*****