



**Marge Pellegrino**  
Owl & Panther

## **IF THE MANGO TREE COULD SPEAK: INVITING COLLABORATION**

Owl & Panther (O&P) uses collaboration as an easy entrance into poetry. This technique also serves to enhance group experiences by building cohesiveness, and validating feelings and understandings while fostering confidence for English Language Learners (ELL).

According to educator and O&P volunteer Terry Owen,

With collaborative writing, the onus of responsibility is removed from the language learner.... Without worrying overmuch about matters such as spelling or grammar, the ELL writer is able to focus primarily on the content of the ideas being conveyed. For the native speaker, listening carefully to the ideas of fellow writers can help create empathy and understanding.

Owl & Panther's first foray into collaborative poetry engaged intergenerational refugee participants from Central America who viewed the poignant film *If the Mango Tree Could Speak* by Patricia Goudvis. The film documented the stories of youth who, unlike the families participating in O&P, could not flee the violence in Guatemala and El Salvador.

After the film, everyone wrote as many responses as they could think of, in English or in their native tongue, to complete the line starting with "If the mango tree could speak...."

Participants were then invited to copy or rewrite what they considered to be their strongest line on a strip of paper in either language. As they finished, they placed their strip on the floor in the center of the room. Next, participants walked around the growing number of lines—reading, observing, discussing and rearranging until a consensus about their order was reached.

The resulting poem was published in *Writing out of the Darkness: An Anthology of Poetry by Refugees in Transition*, edited by Ann Dernier. It has since been reprinted in blogs, and shared on websites and public radio. Participants have also read the poem at various events in the Tucson community and even to international audiences who applauded their words.

**IF THE MANGO TREE COULD SPEAK**

*a collaborative poem*

*by Owl & Panther*

*inspired by a film of the same name*

If the mango tree could speak,  
it would be honest.  
It would tell us how it feels inside.

It would touch our hearts  
and we would know what is good and bad.

It would talk about my people  
and say how they live.

It would talk about my broken heart of memories,  
My broken heart of my past.  
My broken heart  
hearing people cry for their relatives.

If the mango tree could speak it would weep with the fear of thousands of years.  
It would cry for all the suffering of the people.  
It would say what happened a long time ago.  
It would speak about what has been lost.

It would teach numbers  
by counting how many people  
it has seen killed.

It will tell how the people are suffering.  
It would say that the children are strong.

If the mango tree could speak  
 it would be a storyteller.  
 It would be shy.  
 It would know great and sad stories.

If the mango tree could speak it would say  
 that the people are beautiful  
 and that they have love to give.

It would say "help the poor people."

It would sing  
 "Hope lives on  
 Peace can come  
 Wave its banner in my leaves."

If the mango tree could speak, it would say  
 "Do not cut me, please."

It would say  
 "I love you."

The mango tree would tell the truth.

The simple technique used to create this poem could be expanded with similes and metaphors using an "I am" prompt, or simplified without the pre-writing, with each participant contributing a word or phrase to describe "hope" or "community" as an introduction to an exploration. Literature prompts and interactive experiences with one-line expectations help lower cross-language barriers for O&P's budding writers. For example, O&P participants wrote *I Remember* lines after smelling creosote, tasting rosemary, touching silk and listening to a rasp. Other times, participants contributed lines about what they imagined when they put on crepe-paper wings and pretended to fly, wrote about what was in their own hearts while holding a polished heart-shaped stone, imagining what a painting might say if it had a voice, reflected on a labyrinth walk, a day in the desert, a current event or a dance.

Collaborative poems can allow for a memorable parting from an event or meeting. An ending prompt can be as simple as "TODAY..." to invite participants to observe, reflect and share.

Listening to others' responses can offer new ways of thinking about a shared experience, individual validation and a closure.

Whether the finished product is printed on beautiful paper, sewn into a handmade book, transformed into a digital story, formally published in an anthology, or read just once in the group and released into air, the experience lingers.

O&P alumna Oumou Keita remembers,

Writing one line asked me to be truly introspective. Because I did not have room to write down every little thing that came to mind, I had to look deep into myself to find the essence of the subject and/or how I felt about the topic at hand. After hearing the poem in its entirety, I felt as though I was a part of a mosaic. The collaborative piece was beautiful and unified, but my personal contribution was there, distinct and unchanged. There was a sense of pride after hearing my line, but also a sense of wonder at how everyone else interpreted our focus.

Alumna Patty Barceló feels this writing allowed her to contribute to the group, which in turn helped her feel as though she belonged. Alumna Mayra Bernice, who contributed to *If the Mango Tree Could Speak*, said in addition to helping to strengthen her English, the benefit of this kind of writing was “being able to open our hearts and let them be heard!” All powerful motivators to put pencil to paper.

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**Marge Pellegrino**, teaching artist, has worked with diverse audiences for more than thirty years. She has led writing and art adventures for families of the incarcerated and journal respites for caregivers. She has taught poetry in juvenile detention centers and used creative writing prompts with cancer survivors on retreat. She has conducted residencies and staff trainings in rural and urban communities. For twenty years, she facilitated programming for the Owl & Panther project, which serves refugee youth and families. Her innovative *Word Journeys* program had a twelve-year run at Pima County Public Library and won a White House Coming Up Taller Award for excellence in afterschool programming in 2009. Her children's book *Too Nice* is available in five languages. Her middle-grade novel *Journey of Dreams* was a Smithsonian Notable and Southwest Best Book, and her forthcoming Magination teen book *Neon Words: 10 Brilliant Ways to Light Up Your Writing* inspires others to empower themselves on the page. All proceeds from her book *The Sculpture Speaks: A Refugee's Story of Survival* benefits the Owl & Panther project.

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