**Paper Mache for 2-7-25 by David Read**

I’ve been thinking a lot about poetry this week. Last Saturday, I sat in the Sutter Theater Center for the Arts and listened to 25 high school students recite from memory poems they’d chosen from a list of 1,000 as part of our annual Poetry Out Loud competition. As emcee of the event, I talked about the everlasting value of poetry and its relevance to every aspect of our lives with its heightened language and deliberate choice of words covering themes of birth, death, love, loss, joy, nature and many more. A few days before the Poetry Out Loud event, I watched in horror the news reports about the jet and helicopter collision. While living in Washington, DC, I flew into and out of Reagan National Airport countless times. This tragedy prompted me to recall President Reagan’s speech following the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster in 1986 when the shuttle exploded not long after lift off and all seven astronauts perished including Christa McAuliffe, the first teacher to fly in space. Here is part of President Reagan’s address to the nation following the explosion of the Challenger on January 28, 1986.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I'd planned to speak to you tonight to report on the state of the Union, but the events of earlier today have led me to change those plans. Today is a day for mourning and remembering. Nancy and I know we share this pain with the people of our country. This is truly a national loss. The crew of the Challenger honored us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and ``slipped the surly bonds of earth'' to ``touch the face of God.''

As Consoler-in-Chief, he certainly rose to the occasion as every President should in times of tragedy thanks in no small part to his speechwriter, Peggy Noonan, who obviously had a touch of the poet in her. Then I got to thinking about the source of the famous phrases, “surly bonds of earth,” and “face of God” and looked them up. Turns out they are from a poem called “High Flight” written by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

Oh! I have *slipped the surly bonds of Earth*

And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;

Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth

of sun-split clouds,—and done a hundred things

You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung

High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,

I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung

My eager craft through footless halls of air ....

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue

I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace

Where never lark, or even eagle flew—

And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod

The high untrespassed sanctity of space,

Put out my hand and *touched the face of God*.

Magee was born in China to missionary parents. His father was American, and his mother was British. Magee moved to England in the early 1930s to attend Rugby School, where he won a poetry prize. Not long after joining the Royal Canadian Air Force he died in a mid-air collision during training having never seen combat. Magee’s poem, “High Flight” was inspired by a high-altitude test flight. He had sent a copy of the poem to his parents, who published it after his death. What an incredible story! Who knew? Poetry is truly a “balm for hurt minds,” especially in times of tragedy. We need to add speech writing to the other celebrated literary art forms since some speeches can transcend the politics of the day.