

Sarah Kay: If I should have a daughter ...



1. If I should have a daughter, instead of "Mom," she's gonna call me "Point B," because that way she knows that no matter what happens, at least she can always find her way to me. And I'm going to paint solar systems on the backs of her hands so she has to learn the entire universe before she can say, "Oh, I know that like the back of my hand." And she's going to learn that this life will hit you hard in the face, wait for you to get back up just so it can kick you in the stomach. But getting the wind knocked out of you is the only way to remind your lungs how much they like the taste of air. There is hurt, here, that cannot be fixed by Band-Aids or poetry. So the first time she realizes that Wonder Woman isn't coming, I'll make sure she knows she doesn't have to wear the cape all by herself because no matter how wide you stretch your fingers, your hands will always be too small to catch all the pain you want to heal. Believe me, I've tried. "And, baby," I'll tell her, don't keep your nose up in the air like that. I know that trick; I've done it a million times. You're just smelling for smoke so you can follow the trail back to a burning house, so you can find the boy who lost everything in the fire to see if you can save him. Or else find the boy who lit the fire in the first place, to see if you can change him." But I know she will anyway, so instead I'll always keep an extra supply of chocolate and rain boots nearby, because there is no heartbreak that chocolate can't fix. Okay, there's a few heartbreaks that chocolate can't fix. But that's what the rain boots are for, because rain will wash away everything, if you let it. I want her to look at the world through the underside of a glass-bottom boat, to look through a microscope at the galaxies that exist on the pinpoint of a human mind, because that's the way my mom taught me. That there'll be days like this. 🎵 There'll be days like this, my momma said. 🎵 When you open your hands to catch and wind up with only blisters and bruises; when you step out of the phone booth and try to fly and the very people you want to save are the ones standing on your cape; when your boots will fill with rain, and you'll be up to your knees in disappointment. And those are the very days you have all the more reason to say thank you. Because there's nothing more beautiful than the way the ocean refuses to stop kissing the shoreline, no matter how many times it's sent away. You will put the wind in winsome, lose some. You will put the star in starting over, and over. And no matter how many land mines erupt in a minute, be sure your mind lands on the beauty of this funny place called life. And yes, on a scale from one to over-trusting, I am pretty damn naive. But I want her to know that this world is made out of sugar. It can crumble so easily, but don't be afraid to stick your tongue out and taste it. "Baby," I'll tell her, "remember, your momma is a worrier, and your poppa is a warrior, and you are the girl with small hands and big eyes who never stops asking for more." Remember that good things come in threes and so do bad things. And always apologize when you've done something wrong, but don't you ever apologize for the way your eyes refuse to stop shining. Your voice is small, but don't ever stop singing. And when they finally hand you heartache, when they slip war and hatred under your door and offer you handouts on street-corners of

cynicism and defeat, you tell them that they really ought to meet your mother.

Thank you. Thank you.(Applause) Thank you.(Applause) Thanks.(Applause) Thank you.(Applause)

2. All right, so I want you to take a moment, and I want you to think of three things that you know to be true. They can be about whatever you want -- technology, entertainment, design, your family, what you had for breakfast. The only rule is don't think too hard. Okay, ready? Go. Okay.
3. So here are three things I know to be true. I know that Jean-Luc Godard was right when he said that, "a good story has a beginning, a middle and an end, although not necessarily in that order." I know that I'm incredibly nervous and excited to be up here, which is greatly inhibiting my ability to keep it cool. (Laughter) And I know that I have been waiting all week to tell this joke. (Laughter) Why was the scarecrow invited to TED? Because he was out standing in his field. (Laughter) I'm sorry. Okay, so these are three things I know to be true. But there are plenty of things I have trouble understanding. So I write poems to figure things out. Sometimes the only way I know how to work through something is by writing a poem. And sometimes I get to the end of the poem and look back and go, "Oh, that's what this is all about," and sometimes I get to the end of the poem and haven't solved anything, but at least I have a new poem out of it.
4. Spoken word poetry is the art of performance poetry. I tell people it involves creating poetry that doesn't just want to sit on paper, that something about it demands it be heard out loud or witnessed in person. When I was a freshman in high school, I was a live wire of nervous hormones. And I was underdeveloped and over-excitable. And despite my fear of ever being looked at for too long, I was fascinated by the idea of spoken word poetry. I felt that my two secret loves, poetry and theatre, had come together, had a baby, a baby I needed to get to know. So I decided to give it a try. My first spoken word poem, packed with all the wisdom of a 14-year-old, was about the injustice of being seen as unfeminine. The poem was very indignant, and mainly exaggerated, but the only spoken word poetry that I had seen up until that point was mainly indignant, so I thought that that's what was expected of me. The first time that I performed, the audience of teenagers hooted and hollered their sympathy, and when I came off the stage I was shaking. I felt this tap on my shoulder, and I turned around to see this giant girl in a hoodie sweatshirt emerge from the crowd. She was maybe eight feet tall and looked like she could beat me up with one hand, but instead she just nodded at me and said, "Hey, I really felt that. Thanks." And lightning struck. I was hooked.
5. I discovered this bar on Manhattan's Lower East Side that hosted a weekly poetry open mic, and my bewildered, but supportive, parents took me to soak in every ounce of spoken word that I could. I was the youngest by at least a decade, but somehow the poets at the Bowery Poetry Club didn't seem bothered by the 14-year-old wandering about -- in fact, they welcomed me. And it was here, listening to these poets share their stories, that I learned that spoken word poetry didn't have to be indignant, it could

be fun or painful or serious or silly. The Bowery Poetry Club became my classroom and my home, and the poets who performed encouraged me to share my stories as well. Never mind the fact that I was 14 -- they told me, "Write about being 14." So I did and stood amazed every week when these brilliant, grown-up poets laughed with me and groaned their sympathy and clapped and told me, "Hey, I really felt that too."

6. Now I can divide my spoken word journey into three steps. Step one was the moment I said, "I can. I can do this." And that was thanks to a girl in a hoodie. Step two was the moment I said, "I will. I will continue. I love spoken word. I will keep coming back week after week." And step three began when I realized that I didn't have to write poems that were indignant, if that's not what I was. There were things that were specific to me, and the more that I focused on those things, the weirder my poetry got, but the more that it felt like mine. It's not just the adage "write what you know." It's about gathering up all of the knowledge and experience you've collected up to now to help you dive into the things you don't know. I use poetry to help me work through what I don't understand, but I show up to each new poem with a backpack full of everywhere else that I've been.
7. When I got to university, I met a fellow poet who shared my belief in the magic of spoken word poetry. And actually, Phil Kaye and I coincidentally also share the same last name. When I was in high school I had created Project V.O.I.C.E. as a way to encourage my friends to do spoken word with me. But Phil and I decided to reinvent Project V.O.I.C.E. -- this time changing the mission to using spoken word poetry as a way to entertain, educate and inspire. We stayed full-time students, but in between we traveled, performing and teaching nine-year-olds to MFA candidates, from California to Indiana to India to a public high school just up the street from campus.
8. And we saw over and over the way that spoken word poetry cracks open locks. But it turns out sometimes, poetry can be really scary. Turns out sometimes, you have to trick teenagers into writing poetry. So I came up with lists. Everyone can write lists. And the first list that I assign is "10 Things I Know to be True." And here's what happens, and here's what you would discover too if we all started sharing our lists out loud. At a certain point, you would realize that someone has the exact same thing, or one thing very similar, to something on your list. And then someone else has something the complete opposite of yours. Third, someone has something you've never even heard of before. And fourth, someone has something you thought you knew everything about, but they're introducing a new angle of looking at it. And I tell people that this is where great stories start from -- these four intersections of what you're passionate about and what others might be invested in.
9. And most people respond really well to this exercise. But one of my students, a freshman named Charlotte, was not convinced. Charlotte was very good at writing lists, but she refused to write any poems. "Miss," she'd say, "I'm just not interesting. I don't have anything interesting to say." So I assigned

her list after list, and one day I assigned the list "10 Things I Should Have Learned by Now." Number three on Charlotte's list was, "I should have learned not to crush on guys three times my age." I asked her what that meant, and she said, "Miss, it's kind of a long story." And I said, "Charlotte, it sounds pretty interesting to me." And so she wrote her first poem, a love poem unlike any I had ever heard before. And the poem began, "Anderson Cooper is a gorgeous man." (Laughter) "Did you see him on 60 Minutes, racing Michael Phelps in a pool -- nothing but swim trunks on -- diving in the water, determined to beat this swimming champion? After the race, he tossed his wet, cloud-white hair and said, 'You're a god.' No, Anderson, you're the god."(Laughter)(Applause)

10. Now I know that the number one rule to being cool is to seem unfazed, to never admit that anything scares you or impresses you or excites you. Somebody once told me it's like walking through life like this. You protect yourself from all the unexpected miseries or hurt that might show up. But I try to walk through life like this. And yes, that means catching all of those miseries and hurt, but it also means that when beautiful, amazing things just fall out of the sky, I'm ready to catch them. I use spoken word to help my students rediscover wonder, to fight their instincts to be cool and unfazed and, instead, actively pursue being engaged with what goes on around them, so that they can reinterpret and create something from it.
11. It's not that I think that spoken word poetry is the ideal art form. I'm always trying to find the best way to tell each story. I write musicals; I make short films alongside my poems. But I teach spoken word poetry because it's accessible. Not everyone can read music or owns a camera, but everyone can communicate in some way, and everyone has stories that the rest of us can learn from. Plus, spoken word poetry allows for immediate connections. It's not uncommon for people to feel like they're alone or that nobody understands them, but spoken word teaches that if you have the ability to express yourself and the courage to present those stories and opinions, you could be rewarded with a room full of your peers, or your community, who will listen. And maybe even a giant girl in a hoodie will connect with what you've shared. And that is an amazing realization to have, especially when you're 14. Plus, now with YouTube, that connection's not even limited to the room we're in. I'm so lucky that there's this archive of performances that I can share with my students. It allows for even more opportunities for them to find a poet or a poem that they connect to.
12. It is tempting -- once you've figured this out -- it is tempting to keep writing the same poem, or keep telling the same story, over and over, once you've figured out that it will gain you applause. It's not enough to just teach that you can express yourself. You have to grow and explore and take risks and challenge yourself. And that is step three: infusing the work you're doing with the specific things that make you you, even while those things are always changing. Because step three never ends. But you don't get to start on step three, until you take step one first: I can.

13. I travel a lot while I'm teaching, and I don't always get to watch all of my students reach their step three, but I was very lucky with Charlotte, that I got to watch her journey unfold the way it did. I watched her realize that, by putting the things that she knows to be true into the work she's doing, she can create poems that only Charlotte can write -- about eyeballs and elevators and Dora the Explorer. And I'm trying to tell stories only I can tell -- like this story. I spent a lot of time thinking about the best way to tell this story, and I wondered if the best way was going to be a PowerPoint or a short film -- and where exactly was the beginning or the middle or the end? And I wondered whether I'd get to the end of this talk and finally have figured it all out, or not.

14. And I always thought that my beginning was at the Bowery Poetry Club, but it's possible that it was much earlier. In preparing for TED, I discovered this diary page in an old journal. I think December 54th was probably supposed to be 24th. It's clear that when I was a child, I definitely walked through life like this. I think that we all did. I would like to help others rediscover that wonder -- to want to engage with it, to want to learn, to want to share what they've learned, what they've figured out to be true and what they're still figuring out.

15. So I'd like to close with this poem.

When they bombed Hiroshima, the explosion formed a mini-supernova so every living animal, human or plant that received direct contact with the rays from that sun was instantly turned to ash. And what was left of the city soon followed. The long-lasting damage of nuclear radiation caused an entire city and its population to turn into powder. When I was born, my mom says I looked around the whole hospital room with a stare that said, "This? I've done this before." She says I have old eyes. When my Grandpa Genji died, I was only five years old, but I took my mom by the hand and told her, "Don't worry, he'll come back as a baby." And yet, for someone who's apparently done this already, I still haven't figured anything out yet. My knees still buckle every time I get on a stage. My self-confidence can be measured out in teaspoons mixed into my poetry, and it still always tastes funny in my mouth. But in Hiroshima, some people were wiped clean away, leaving only a wristwatch or a diary page. So no matter that I have inhibitions to fill all my pockets, I keep trying, hoping that one day I'll write a poem I can be proud to let sit in a museum exhibit as the only proof I existed. My parents named me Sarah, which is a biblical name. In the original story, God told Sarah she could do something impossible and she laughed, because the first Sarah, she didn't know what to do with impossible. And me? Well, neither do I, but I see the impossible every day. Impossible is trying to connect in this world, trying to hold onto others while things are blowing up around you, knowing that while you're speaking, they aren't just waiting for their turn to talk -- they hear you. They feel exactly what you feel at the same time that you feel it. It's what I strive for every time I open my mouth -- that impossible connection. There's this piece of wall in Hiroshima that was completely burnt black by the radiation. But on the front step, a person who was sitting there blocked the rays from hitting the stone. The only thing left now is a permanent shadow of positive light. After the A-bomb, specialists said it would take 75 years for the radiation-damaged soil of

Hiroshima City to ever grow anything again. But that spring, there were new buds popping up from the earth. When I meet you, in that moment, I'm no longer a part of your future. I start quickly becoming part of your past. But in that instant, I get to share your present. And you, you get to share mine. And that is the greatest present of all. So if you tell me I can do the impossible, I'll probably laugh at you. I don't know if I can change the world yet, because I don't know that much about it -- and I don't know that much about reincarnation either, but if you make me laugh hard enough, sometimes I forget what century I'm in. This isn't my first time here. This isn't my last time here. These aren't the last words I'll share. But just in case, I'm trying my hardest to get it right this time around.

Thank you.(Applause) Thank you.(Applause) Thank you.(Applause)