



# Compass Rose

Literature and Art Journal

## Interview with Taylor Mali

### Compass Rose:

*What goal do you have when performing slam?*

### Taylor Mali:

Performing slam" is a problematic term because there is spoken poetry and there are slam performances. When first starting out performing in a slam, Mark Smith set out to invent a new term of poetry that makes you find out about yourself. I talk about poetry. My goal in a poetry slam is to win a competition. When performing, my spoken word poetry is with the specific intent that it will be heard before it is read, to instruct or entertain the audience.

### CR:

*Have you ever written a poem and later turned it into a slam poem?*

### Mali:

To me, there's no difference.

### CR:

*Why?*

### Mali:

There's no such thing as slam poetry, there's poetry slams. You write the best poem you can, then if you choose to slam with it you give it the best possible performance that you can. I've written a couple poems that you really have to think about and that I couldn't perform because the audience isn't going to get to read your poem a second time. They're gonna read it once and if they can't enjoy it upon first hearing, even if they don't understand it, then you're wasting everybody's time. Now, I have written poems at the outset thinking this isn't going to be for a slam, but then I think if I present it with the right amount of energy I figure that I can read it in a slam.

### CR:

*What message do you want to get across to younger generations?*

### Mali:

The power of language, not sounding dumber than you actually are, the importance of being articulate, not being afraid to stand up for what you believe in, figuring out what you believe in, taking a stand, having guts. I want to present these messages for every generation. I wrote a poem, "Totally Like Whatever," written for my generation. The default method of communication is to sound as though you don't believe in what you are saying. I also want

to impart the importance about the importance and nobility of teaching.

**CR:**

*What approach do you take when writing?*

**Mali:**

Gosh. I don't have one approach. I sit down and I write what's on my mind.

**CR:**

*What themes do you see appear in your own writing?*

**Mali:**

Love, sex, dogs, ninjas, the usual, and dealing with grief.

**CR:**

*Do you find that you write about grief to deal with it in your own life?*

**Mali:**

Yes, I write about grief in my own life, but just because a poem is therapeutic for you doesn't mean it will be a good poem.

**CR:**

*How have your daily experiences added to your performances?*

**Mali:**

What happens to me during the day I will tell as an anecdote between poems. When I'm giving a reading, not a slam, people often find it hard to tell the difference between when I'm reciting a poem and when I'm just speaking. My daily experiences just talking to people work its way into my performance because when I talk to people it sounds like I'm reciting a poem.

**CR:**

*On your website, you state that, "poetry written for the page and poetry written for the stage," are different. How are they different?*

**Mali:**

This goes back to what I was saying earlier, but T. S. Eliot said that poetry should be difficult. A poem should not reveal itself upon first reading, it should be read several times over, but he wasn't thinking about spoken word. Poetry for the stage needs to be accessible upon first reading. Poetry written to be spoken out loud, you can think to yourself *what are my hands going to do? What are my eyes going to do? How many pauses am I going to take?* You write with the performance in mind.

**CR:**

*Why are you determined to create 1,000 new teachers?*

**Mali:**

I started counting after about the fifteenth person told me that after hearing my work they

would become a teacher. I thought it would be more interesting if I gave myself a goal. I thought I would create 1,000 new teachers by 2006, but I decided that I wanted to keep going. I want to do what I can to make sure that smart, passionate, and dedicated people become teachers.

**CR:**

*How long do you expect it to take, seeing as how you have reached 160 people already?*

**Mali:**

If I could get a big article, a profile written that would outline my project in some big, national paper, if I could get some press about it, I suppose that would help. I suppose that it will take another couple of years.

**CR:**

*Why is this goal significant to you?*

**Mali:**

This goal is significant to me because teaching is the second most important job in society and teachers don't have the respect that they deserve. It gives me a higher purpose to my art.

**CR:**

*Why do you keep writing poetry?*

**Mali:**

I'm going to do that no matter what, that's how I put food on the table.

**CR:**

*Why do you keep performing in slams?*

**Mali:**

I don't really compete that much in slams anymore.

**CR:**

*What advice would you share with aspiring slam poets?*

**Mali:**

This is advice that I myself am struggling to follow: write everyday, read more poetry, join a writing group, go to an open mic and read out loud, view performance as an editing tool and don't be afraid to edit the poem based on what you learned through the performance, drink more water, wash your hands, and go call your mother.