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COMMENT | *posted September 19, 2005 (October 10, 2005 issue)*

Open Letter to Laura Bush

SHARON OLDS

For reasons spelled out below, the poet Sharon Olds has declined to attend the National Book Festival in Washington, which, coincidentally or not, takes place September 24, the day of an antiwar mobilization in the capital. Olds, winner of a National Book Critics Circle Award and professor of creative writing at New York University, was invited along with a number of other writers by First Lady Laura Bush to read from their works. Three years ago artist Jules Feiffer declined to attend the festival's White House breakfast as a protest against the Iraq War ("Mr. Feiffer Regrets," November 11, 2002). We suggest that invitees to this year's event consider following their example.--The Editors

Laura Bush

First Lady

The White House

Dear Mrs. Bush,

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I am writing to let you know why I am not able to accept your kind invitation to give a presentation at the National Book Festival on September 24, or to attend your dinner at the Library of Congress or the breakfast at the White House.

In one way, it's a very appealing invitation. The idea of speaking at a festival attended by 85,000 people is inspiring! The possibility of finding new readers is exciting for a poet in personal terms, and in terms of the desire that poetry serve its constituents--all of us who need the pleasure, and the inner and outer news, it delivers.

And the concept of a community of readers and writers has long been dear to my heart. As a professor of creative writing in the graduate school of a major university, I have had the chance to be a part of some magnificent outreach writing workshops in which our students have become teachers. Over the years, they have taught in a variety of settings: a women's prison, several New York City public high schools, an oncology ward for children. Our initial program, at a 900-bed state hospital for the severely physically challenged, has been running now for twenty years, creating along the way lasting friendships between young MFA candidates and their students--long-term residents at the hospital who, in their humor, courage and wisdom, become our teachers.

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When you have witnessed someone nonspeaking and almost nonmoving spell out, with a toe, on a big plastic alphabet chart, letter by letter, his new poem, you have experienced, close up, the passion and essentialness of writing. When you have held up a small cardboard alphabet card for a writer who is completely nonspeaking and nonmoving (except for the eyes), and pointed first to the A, then the B, then C, then D, until you get to the first letter of the first word of the first line of the poem she has been composing in her head all week, and she lifts her eyes when that letter is touched to say yes, you feel with a fresh immediacy the human drive for creation, self-expression, accuracy, honesty and wit-- and the importance of writing, which celebrates the value of each person's unique story and song.

So the prospect of a festival of books seemed wonderful to me. I thought of the opportunity to talk about how to start up an outreach program. I thought of the chance to sell some books, sign some books and meet some of the citizens of Washington, DC. I thought that I could try to find a way, even as your guest, with respect, to speak about my deep feeling that we should not have invaded Iraq, and to declare my belief that the wish to invade another culture and another country--with the resultant loss of life and limb for our brave soldiers, and for the noncombatants in their home terrain--did not come out of our democracy but was instead a decision made "at the top" and forced on the people by distorted language, and by untruths. I hoped to express the fear that we have begun to live in the shadows of tyranny and religious chauvinism--the opposites of the liberty, tolerance and diversity our nation aspires to.

I tried to see my way clear to attend the festival in order to bear witness--as an American who loves her country and its principles and its writing--against this undeclared and devastating war.

But I could not face the idea of breaking bread with you. I knew that if I sat down to eat with you, it would feel to me as if I were condoning what I see to be the wild, highhanded actions of the Bush Administration.

What kept coming to the fore of my mind was that I would be taking food from the hand of the First Lady who represents the Administration that unleashed this war and that wills its continuation, even to the extent of permitting "extraordinary rendition": flying people to other countries where they will be tortured for us.

So many Americans who had felt pride in our country now feel anguish and shame, for the current regime of blood, wounds and fire. I thought of the clean linens at your table, the shining knives and the flames of the candles, and I could not stomach it.

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