by Anthony S. Abbott

My name is Tony Abbott. I have lived in North Carolina since 1964, when I came with my family to Davidson College as Assistant Professor of English. My field of special interest was modern drama. I taught plays, I acted in plays, I directed plays. But I did not write poetry. As a poet I am a very late starter. My first poems were published in the 1970s, and my first collection of poetry, *The Girl in the Yellow Raincoat* , did not appear until 1989, when I was fifty-four years old. By then I had been teaching poetry and fiction writing at Davidson for about ten years. I had gone to the Breadloaf Writers Conference at Middlebury College twice, and it was here that I learned a good deal about how to teach poetry and how NOT to teach poetry. I learned to avoid the egotistical cruelty of some of the teachers I met in Vermont, and most of all I learned the importance of building a class into a community, where each class member contributes to the welfare of the whole, where class members trust one another, and learn to see their own work more objectively.

I taught creative writing at Davidson for more than thirty years, and retired in 2001, after publishing my second collection, *A Small Thing Like a Breath* , in 1993, and my third, *The Search for Wonder in the Cradle of the World* , in 2000. Now that I was retired, I had more time, and I went back to work on a novel I had started in the 1970s and revised in the 1980s. That novel became *Leaving Maggie Hope* , which won the Novello Award in 2003, and prompted me to write a sequel, *The Three Great Secret Things* , published in 2007. Writing fiction was good for my poetry. It made me more conscious of both narrative and of character. Your poems are like little stories, people have told me. I liked that, and wrote a whole book of “little stories” called *The Man Who* (2005), each poem about a different man who had a story to tell.

When my *New and Selected Poems: 1989-2009* was published by Lorimer Press in Davidson, I began a fairly rigorous schedule of readings, and I was anxious to do something to make the readings more interesting, more lively, more fresh….And so I began reciting poems. By 2011 I was reciting more poems than I was reading, and I loved it. I found that the poem I was reciting became new each time I spoke the words. The words were not always the same, not always spoken with the same emphasis. Sometimes I had to search for the words, and that made it seem to me as if I had just found the words for the first time. I began reciting poems by other poets (Mary Oliver , Galway Kinnel l, James Wright , as well as Yeats , Keats , Shakespeare and Milton)….People enjoyed it, and when I became President of the NC Poetry Society in May of 2009, I began the practice of opening each meeting with a recitation. And now I begin all my programs—lectures as well as readings—with a recitation.

And so I thought, why not do a workshop on memorization and recitation—a practice that has been so good to me, a practice that has infused new life into this seventy-six-year-old body? Why not help other people do the same thing? And I thought, as I contemplated this workshop, that not only was the practice helpful to me as I wrote and performed my own poems, but it was a means of discovering what the poem was actually saying. That is, the practice of memorization and recitation may be, in some particular ways, more important than analysis in getting at the heart of a poem—the soul of the poem, if you will. My new book, *If Words Could Save Us* , is due for publication by Lorimer Press in October. It will contain a CD of me reading twenty of the poems in the book. For years, people have asked me if I have recording my poems. And I always said no….Now I can say yes. I hope participation in this workshop may lead you toward the creation of your own CDs and the use of your own voice to make poetry live.

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ANTHONY S. ABBOTT is the author of two novels and six books of poetry, including the Pulitzer-nominated *The Girl in the Yellow Raincoat* . His awards include the Novello Literary Award for *Leaving Maggie Hope* (2003),

and the Oscar Arnold Young Award for
The Man Who
(2005). A native of San Francisco, Abbott was educated at the Fay School in Southborough, Massachusetts, and Kent School in Kent, Connecticut. He received his A.B. from Princeton University, and his AM and Ph.D from Harvard University. He is the Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of English at Davidson College in Davidson, where he lives with his wife Susan.

He will lead a poetry workshop at the 2011 Fall Conference. Registration is now open .