

*Amiri
or Baraka*

VISIONARY VOICE

'If a visionary is someone who can sometimes get a feel for things, who can understand more ways of knowing than one, if a visionary is one who believes that other ways of knowing are valid, then I would presume to say perhaps I am,' says Lucille Clifton. Those who admire this acclaimed poet's work would presume to agree.

by Rose Dean

SHE WAS recently nominated a second time for a Pulitzer prize in poetry, has won numerous awards and honorary degrees from universities across the country, and has published seven books of poetry.

Renowned poet and writer Adrienne Rich has characterized her work as "artful, intense ... made with an unerring ear and a burning mind." She is a master storyteller, with more than 20 children's books published. A full professor at UCSC, she judges the most prestigious poetry contests across the country. On top of all this, she is the mother of six children, grandmother of two.

Still, Lucille Clifton is a modest woman, not one to brag about her achievements.

"I'm shy," she said, explaining why she had declined interviews with *GOOD TIMES* twice in the past. "Someone once told me that they didn't know any poets that weren't shy."

And Clifton doesn't act like a towering intellectual. On the contrary, she is warm and amiable, and her ease and comfort with herself and her world is obvious.

"Lucille would never seek the spotlight," said friend and fellow poet Maude Meehan, author of the collection of poems, "Chipping Bone."

"But the brilliance of her own light has made it inevitable that she should be acclaimed," Meehan said.

Despite the acclaim, Clifton is sure to point out that writing represents just one facet of her life. In this status-seeking and career-oriented age, Clifton remains unpretentious.

"Poetry is not my life. My life is

my life. Poetry is very big in my life, and if poetry was gone from it, there would be space I don't know how I would fill. But if what you do is your life, that's tricky," Clifton said.

"In the bigger scheme of things, the universe is not asking us to *do* something, the universe is asking us to *be* something. And that's a whole different thing."

Clifton came to Santa Cruz to teach at the university four years ago. With her she brought a life full of personal triumphs, yet not untouched by tragedy.

Born in the small town of Depew near Buffalo, N.Y., Clifton was reared by parents proud of their African heritage who encouraged their daughter to reach her highest dreams. Although her parents never finished their elementary school educations, Clifton characterized them as individuals with innate and self-taught wisdom.

"My family is a big influence on me — you can see it in my work, especially my mother. We were a verbal family. I think the greatest influence was their belief that I could do anything I wanted and the world and all possibilities were open to me," Clifton said.

"I was also influenced by hearing language, the sound of reading and language, because my mother wrote poetry. My mother wrote iambic pentameter verse," Clifton said.

"I learned something about caring about language, caring about words, sounds of words, and poetry."

To this day Clifton can recite the poems her mother spoke so often. When Thelma Sayles died at the age of 44, the memory never left Clifton.

"Next," one of the two books of poems nominated for a Pulitzer in



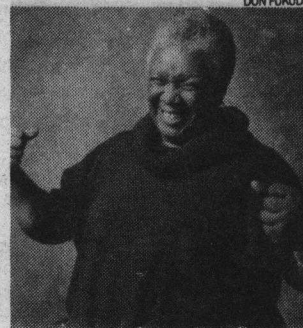
She's a poet twice nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, a professor, an author and mother — but Lucille Clifton has never sought the spotlight, says friends.

1987, reflects her mother's influence, with the poem "morning mirror" being the most indicative of their relations:

*my mother her sad eyes worn as bark
faces me in the mirror. my mother
whose only sin was dying, whose
only
enemy was time, frowns in the
glass
once again she has surprised me
in an echo of her life but
my mother refuses to be reflected;
thelma whose only strength was
love,
warns away the glint of likeness,
the woman is loosened in the mir-
ror
and thelma lucille begins her day.*

Her father, Samuel, she characterizes as an "extremely wise man." He would tell her, "You can do what you want, because you are from Dahomey women." Clifton also sprinkles her work with tribute to her African heritage.

"Dahomey was the land that had the wonderful Amazon army," she said. "The strong women in the African continent — women who were warriors and who were women of substance. My father's family is



from Dahomey. Dahomey was a place to be proud of."

From her father, Clifton gained her sense of responsibility and acceptance over events and circumstances in her life. "His saying was, 'Everywhere you are, you are supposed to be there or you wouldn't be there,'" she said.

Clifton has been writing and reading since she was a little girl. She was the first person from her church to go to college, but she didn't complete her degree. Although she left Howard University after two years, she has no regrets, and the friends she made there are now some of the most prominent black Americans in the country.

"I was at Howard at a very good time. Roberta Flack and I won the talent show the first year I was there. I

was in the first production of James Baldwin's 'Amen Corner.' Amiri (Baraka, the taken name of poet and writer Leroi Jones) was there," she said.

"Just because I left Howard doesn't mean I stopped learning," Clifton continued. "You never know why things are or what they are about."

"I never did the standard route and I wonder about the helpfulness of (advanced degrees.) The mistake we make in schools and in parenting is believing that people only learn what we teach them. And that's a great mistake."

After leaving Howard, Lucille Sayles met Fred Clifton, married and started a family. Lucille and Fred — a professor, black activist and self-described "mystic" — had six children between 1959 and 1965. She jokes that during the civil rights movement of the '60s, she was only peripherally involved, as she had four babies in diapers.

Her poetry was first published in 1969 and in the last 20 years her work has been prolific, her success enviable. She is known mostly for her children's books, which she says are written with "respect" for children, but as a poet she is almost universally revered by her peers.

Santa Cruz poet Francisco Alarcon, whose published works include the books "Tattoos" and "Ya Vas Carnal," said he admires Clifton's poetry because it is accessible to more than just a literary audience.

"She discovers everyday life through poems. It's poetry that anybody can relate to. She's not just a poet's poet, She's a people's poet. The voice is very direct and clear," Alarcon said.

Indeed, Clifton is one of six prominent poets currently involved with a project called "Street Fair Journal" where each poet has a poem displayed in municipal buses in 12 major cities across the country.

Clifton's poem displayed, called "why people be mad at me sometimes," displays her sense of self and her belief in her experiences and her culture:

*they ask me to remember
but they want me to remember
their memories
and i keep on remembering
mine*

"Ten million people see these poems," Clifton said, "and they are not people who generally read poems, which I like."

Meehan said if there were a role model in her life, it is Clifton.

"I think Lucille bears the role of witness, not only to her own and her family's life, but of all human experience," said Meehan. "Her seemingly infinite capacity for love never blurs the painful awareness of the human estate. Her life and work resonate with insight, passion, anger, humor, and always with compassion."

Clifton does not feel she is a sage, although she agreed her works are of a visionary nature.

"I know that I am a spiritual person. I have been called a religious poet although I don't think I am," she said.

"If a visionary is someone who can sometimes get a feel for things, who can understand more ways of knowing than one, if a visionary is one who believes that other ways of knowing are valid, then I would presume to say perhaps I am.

"It's a mixed blessing to be able to emphasize, to feel, to feel your way into another's life. I fortunately — sometimes unfortunately — am able to do it."

While Clifton's work is influenced by events in her own life, such as her parent's deaths and her husband's bout with and eventual death from cancer in 1984, other more transcendental things often guide her.

"Crazy Horse, the Lakotah chief, is a great hero of mine. He's a mystic," Clifton said. "I always tell people that I understand signs and I like Crazy Horse because he was married to a woman named Black Shawl and the great love of his life was a woman named Black Buffalo Woman. And I'm from Buffalo, so you see ... The connection is there."

Her most recently published work, a collection of poems called "Ten Oxherding Pictures," is based on a series of pictures used to train Buddhist priests, although she only saw the pictures after she wrote the poems.

"I was reading an interview on an

author and she had the 10 oxherding pictures in her house, the interview said. And it gave the names of the pictures," she said.

"I read the names of the pictures and when I saw the last one, 'Entering the city with bliss bestowing hand,' I knew: poems are here.

"I didn't want to see the pictures. I have seen the pictures after the fact. But I think my poems are in keeping with the pictures. The poems came almost at once. Something in me recognized something in these poems.

"Oxherding' is different, it's a whole different thing. I don't know if I'll ever do anything like it again. It's a gift and I'm grateful for it."

And while writing comes naturally to her, it is not some simple task. She works and reworks her poems.

"I revise a lot," she said. "Even a little poem takes a lot of work. Every word, every space, every thing matters."

As a professor, Clifton insists on teaching only small classes, without the use of teaching assistants. Although the university administration would like her to teach large classes, she prefers a more intimate setting to give a "personal" aspect to teaching.

In her classes on creative writing and children's literature, which focuses on institutionalized racism and sexism in children's books, Clifton has more than an academic focus.

"I think my students come out sometimes thinking that it's possible to do more than just scratch for money, that's it's possible to be committed to something in a passionate way, that it's possible to think of more than just oneself," Clifton said. "That there is 'right' and it's possible to strive for it. That being human is a fair, decent, valid thing. And I think that is of real value."

From a woman who defied tradition and shied away from college and a "career" to develop her artistic self on her own terms, it is apt commentary. As someone who gained her knowledge outside of the privilege and insularity of the academic world, Clifton brings an alternative view to her students. Her presence at the University is a "balance" to the conventional approach to education, she said.

"I think a university is probably lucky if they have people who are different from the ordinary. If a person is a professor, they profess a love of something. To have someone who loves it and who was not *taught* to love it is a good thing, it's balance. The university is balanced in one way, and I think I balance it in another," Clifton said.

And as she sat in her office underneath photographs of Winnie Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and others who have defied society in the quest for what is "right," Clifton said her inspiration comes from all those who search for justice, goodness and satisfaction, especially those for who life is a struggle.

"I have a lot of heroes," Clifton said. "I think I recognize good when I see it and I think people who try hard against the odds and who remain true to themselves, whatever the outside of things, are heroes." •