

## Reasons to Fish

*“The scheduling of the conversations is artificial, but the tone is natural—two workers at the bench pursuing their craft. We share our victories and defeats, our moods, our problems, our solutions, for we are learning to write together.”*

—Donald Murray

I arrived at his house in Durham late one afternoon in 2004. We settled on the screened porch, looking out at woods and overgrown grasses, green in every direction. A breeze swirled from one window to the next. Don opened my laptop to read what I’d written just hours before, a comparison between teaching and fishing, two loves in my life. I was hoping my words would become an introduction to a collection of stories about teaching. I fidgeted; birds called across the silence; Don read. I wanted his approval, but more, I wanted individual lines turned in his hands like bread dough—punched, folded, kneaded, so I could hear them again.

Don Murray believed in the power of writing every day. He admonished “never a day without a line,” because what you were currently wrestling with was more interesting to him than what had been written. He loved the chase of ideas across the page. He would have liked my work this morning: reaching across time to see his head resting against his hands as he scanned the page, nodding. His wide and welcoming smile. And then a glorious surprise: he doodled on my tablet computer that afternoon. First a sketch of a purple finch, then a few words, his chortling curi-

osity; I’d forgotten that. I nestled in that memory for a moment.

“Just like it is, this is just right.” I remember his words, or I think I do. I exhaled, then waited. “I wouldn’t change a thing,” he said as he passed me the laptop. But I wanted more.

“This part,” I read to him from the screen, “Teaching is about honor and goodness and mercy. It really is. And no one will be watching you most of the time. You either live up to the calling of this profession or you don’t, and most likely no one will ever know but you.’ People will say that’s not what teaching’s about.” (Note: That passage actually made it into my book, *The Greatest Catch: A Life in Teaching* [2005, Heinemann], exactly as written.)

“Yes, they will,” he smiled.

Silence.

Birds and green, a breeze, late afternoon light.

“So?” he asked.

“So . . . I don’t know.” I looked for answers in the woods. What was bothering me about that line?

He said just what I needed then, something about this being *my* story, so I got to tell it and say just what I wanted. Writers declare territory, he reminded me: this is what teaching is to me. And plenty of folks will disagree, some will mock me, others will swoop in with arguments against mine, but Don reminded me that I have a right to my own impressions and conclusions.

Students so often ask, “Is this okay?” when I sit beside them for a conference. We should

all know that hesitation, seated beside someone you believe knows a bit about writing and hoping they'll read your words and help you see what's worth saving and where more work is needed. You'll hope for kindness and attention, a smile beneath warm eyes, perhaps, so that when he shuts the laptop and the conference is over, you want to get back to writing.

Conferring isn't a complicated series of scripts we should have memorized. It isn't pulling the bar on a slot machine: this strategy + this example + this compliment = motivated writer. It's a conversation between two people who want the same thing for the writing between them: clarity. It's an opportunity for one to share thinking, the other to listen, encourage, challenge, prod.

Sometimes I think we can't find time for conferences because we're afraid. We won't know what to say, there'll be too much to say, we can't get to everyone. Yes, yes, and yes. Every day, yes. But I remember Tom Romano's course one summer at the University of New Hampshire. I was waiting for a conference in the lobby of Hamilton-Smith Hall. I couldn't help listening in as he worked with a colleague on her piece. Tom is smart and passionate and kind--so much like his mentor and friend Don Murray. He listened and asked questions and listened and encouraged. He trusted the writer to use what she needed and disregard the rest. No script, just improvisation. And listening, lots of listening.

I thought about my piece as they talked. I tried on the advice he gave her with my own writing, considered the questions he asked in the context of my work because it was irresistible. I scribbled the questions he asked her in the mar-

gins of my notebook to think about later. Now I understand that when I sit beside a student in workshop, I know others at the table are listening. (Just as I know that if a student is hot on a draft, it is easy to tune me out and keep working.) As I nudge one student's thinking about a draft, others are considering their own and learning the language of conferring that I hope they'll use with each other.

I hold memories of Don's laugh and his passion for sketching, writing, and thinking within me. I hold it early in the morning with my coffee still hot in my hands and the wide open possibilities of a blank page in the notebook resting on my lap. I can almost hear him, "What are you writing today?" Don loved words and stories and how difficult it was each day to tease an idea from the chaos of images that pig-pile for our attention. He loved the messiness of writing. He didn't sit beside a writer hoping for the perfectly formed draft--he honored the hunt.

We need Don's vision today. We need to remember the simple power of good teaching. I sit beside a student and I don't know what to say; I'm not sure I can be helpful. "Let's see what you've got so far," I'll offer, and the improvisation begins. *This* is the good stuff.

For more of Don's clear thinking, read *The Essential Don Murray: Lessons from America's Greatest Writing Teacher*, edited by Tom Newkirk and Lisa Miller, Heinemann, 2009.

For information on the summer writing institutes at the University of New Hampshire, go to [www.nhliteracy.unh.edu](http://www.nhliteracy.unh.edu).