

Writing Giants, Columbine, and the Queen of Route 16

I was a second-year teacher and I was going down fast. In every subject, I was barely keeping ahead of my students, and despair was creeping up behind me like the advance of water across the sand. Teaching writing was particularly difficult. I had waded in with pattern books and passion, inspiring my fifth graders to write volumes while piano music tinkled from my school-issue cassette recorder, but I soon found myself drowning in a sea of stories.

I would sit at my desk long after the kids had gone home for the day, staring past the schoolyard to the evergreen woods beyond and watch for deer. There was too much to grade, and I had nothing to say. I was stunned at the errors littering the pages before me. Their plots were cartoonish. Their characters had no life. I didn't know where to start. I felt I didn't know enough to lead 23 children with differing strengths and needs. We continued to publish, churning out hand-sewn wallpaper or cloth-covered books illustrated by my student authors while filling the mustardy yellow classroom walls with poems and stories. I knew I was hiding my shortcomings behind volume. Distract them with frenzied activity: it is actually a pretty effective new-teacher strategy. If I was going down, I was at least going to make a pretty big splash. But it nagged at me that the problems surfaced in each story and were seldom solved. I wanted to be a better teacher.

One afternoon, a colleague from down the hall put two books into my hand: Don Graves's *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* and *Lessons from a Child* by Lucy Calkins. She was from the primary wing and had this odd little sign by her door, "a whole language classroom," so naturally I was suspicious. I hadn't the courage to ask her what it meant. I'm not sure I even wanted to know; I was on information overload. I flipped the book over and Don's photo did me in. He looked like a grandfather saying, "Come here, let me tell you a story." And what a story. Then Lucy pulled her chair alongside one writer and took very careful notes. I wondered what my students would do with the freedom to uncover their own writing processes as she had described. I devoured those books and began my first writing workshop that spring. It was a shaky start, even with Don and Lucy never far from my hands, but they had invited me into a community of professionals and a way of thinking about teaching that continues to inspire me today.

My next paperback mentor was Nancie Atwell. I read *In the Middle* at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, in 1988. I picked it up out of curiosity, but soon, Nancie had me. I loved her no-nonsense approach and that compelling voice in her writing that says, "You can do this." I believed her. Over the next nine years, I wandered from state to state and grade to grade, teaching writing in a workshop and experimenting with many of the strategies I found in that book. I read the work of other mentors: Linda Rief, William Glasser, John Goodlad, and the mighty Don Murray, to name a few.

We followed my husband's work from Oregon to Washington, from Cincinnati to Detroit, until

that day in 1997 when we moved to the land of the giants. I became a resident of the White Mountains in New Hampshire, only a 90-minute drive down route 16 to the University of New Hampshire. I could feel the greatness just looking at a map. Paul Bunyan has nothing on these guys: Tom Newkirk, Jane Hansen, Don Murray, and Donald Graves at one university. Maybe it's in the water.

I began teaching eighth grade language arts at a 7–12 school in Conway and received the second edition of *In the Middle* from my principal. I was ready for a second read, to revisit my work in a new light, to reflect and change. I couldn't believe it. Atwell round two was even better than I had remembered it. But something new grabbed me this time: the teacher as writer. And that is where this piece really begins.

At first, I avoided it. I pretended I didn't read her quite correctly, and I even kind of swore at her when she included pieces of her own writing that she had shared with her students. I mean, come on Nancie, we'd all be writing if we could write like you! But it kept haunting me as I launched into my writing workshops. I would journal with my classes and often share my unfinished little pieces if they were clever enough, but I wasn't risking much. I wasn't using *my* writing process as a model, because the truth was I didn't have one. I know it's a sin. I was a writing teacher who didn't write. I was quite happy barking commands at the other swimmers from the safety of my lawn chair. I didn't want to jump into that pool of uncertainty and try it myself. Let's face it, writing teachers are quite comfortable *telling*, but *showing* involves something else entirely.

We began a study of editorial writing, and I needed a good model. I used multiple Mitch Albom (*The Detroit Free Press*) columns and my favorite writers from *The Boston Globe*, but I suddenly knew that somehow I needed to write one myself. I scribbled a few lines on topics I cared little about and didn't finish anything. I was floundering, barely treading water.

That spring vacation, I woke up in a Boston hotel room to a newspaper headline that was too awful to believe. It was Columbine. We had missed

the whole thing the day before while shopping and enjoying the art museum, but I caught up quickly as I scanned the copy. The anguished cries repeated, "Who were these monsters? How could the parents not know? How do families lose such complete track of their children?" And I knew.

I wrote the story of my nephew Casey the next night. I wanted to answer the world. My nephew is no monster, he's a wonderful kid, but somehow we lost track of him in that perilous time between childhood and high school and he hasn't come back. I'm not sure he ever will. It's no one's fault and it's everyone's fault. It happened in a loving family who tried to do the right thing because raising teenagers is not at all easy or predictable.

The writing was difficult. Monstrously so. I soon discovered that the real work of writing is like laps in a pool, back and forth across the same territory. Not the pretty form gliding effortlessly through sparkling water, rather the gasping 40-year-old willing her flabby arms to make progress. The words were barriers for me, and I couldn't make them line up in precision. My nephew lay flat on the page, and I struggled to give him life. I drafted and redrafted. I needed to tell this story. His and mine. I was writing to figure out what I had to say.

I was on about the tenth draft when I took it to my classes. As I sat in the author's chair, my students gleefully surrounding me with their chairs, I felt very small behind that single sheet of paper. I read slowly a story that was as familiar now as breathing. It was easy to recite, but painful to share.

They applauded.

They cheered me.

They high-fived me.

Trust me, it doesn't get any better than this. And I'm not even Nancie Atwell.

I shared my process with the class from the beginning idea to my prewriting in the car as we

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drove home from Boston that day. From the first words that wouldn't come, to the parts that flowed faster than I could chase them with the keyboard. I brought my drafts and talked to them about conferring with my husband. And I shared my fear of the author's chair. I joined the classroom community of writers, finally.

Our next genre study was memoir, and I began a piece about setting a fire as a child with my best friend in a nearby park. It evolved into a complicated piece that stood many, many revisions. I was working with a teachers' writing group by then, and Carrie, Eben, and Dow suffered through multiple drafts of the piece as I tried to find the story. This was new to me. I thought writers got an idea, wrote, rewrote, and somehow found a way to make it all work together. In fact, I think I had been telling my students that very thing. "Just write, it will come." But with this piece, I started with one thing and ended with something entirely different. Writing doesn't follow form; it wanders where it will. No matter how much I wanted to tell one story, another emerged.

I began to see much of my advice to students in a new way. "Share your work with a peer today and here's a format for questions you might ask," I would say, quite confident that my form would lead them along. *But what if I'm afraid of what you might say?* I was pretty careful with who got to read my Casey piece at first. To share my first attempts with writing, I have to trust you. It is by no means easy for many students to choose a partner to share drafts with. *What if you cut my work into pieces and I can't pick up my pen again?* I needed to sweat as my friends in writing group read my work to feel this fear. I had been asking my students to do something I didn't understand at all.

"Why don't you share this in the author's chair and get some feedback from the class?" So I sat stripped before them, holding my piece about Casey in my trembling hands. I wanted to flee. I

anxiously looked at the clock, thinking I could stall until classes changed. I had seen my students do this very thing. I no longer wanted any of the feedback they might give because I was going to have to open up a vein and bleed before them to get it. But when I did and they loved it, it made me write more. Now I understood the terror and the power of risking the truth in your writing.

I learned daily as I crafted my memoir. My minilessons became real. I spoke from experience, and we all know there's no more credible teacher than one who does the work. I showed pieces of my story—the parts that worked and the ones I cut. I modeled multiple drafts and the improvement that comes from attention to flow and organization and tone. I gained the respect of my students, and my story gained clarity.

The day I shared the "final" draft of the piece, the room settled into silence. I let them read it along with another model. I wrote in my journal as they read because I was nervous. I watched their faces, trying to read a response. Will turned the page and glanced to see how much remained. I was sure he would abandon it, like he did most of our readings. I held my breath as he scanned the ending, then went back to reading. I gave a silent cheer. This was affirmation enough.

I was feeling pretty heady at this time.

I had unlocked a secret to powerful classroom teaching.

I was on fire.

Dragons lay at my feet.

I was the Queen of route 16.

Until fiction.

I started the study with great confidence. I surveyed the water of this genre in a Speedo and cool blue shades. Fiction was cake. I was a creative writer as a kid. This was nothing compared to memoir. I mean come on, I could just make it all up. Dive in, class, I'm right beside you.

I chose third person, god knows why. This was not a comfortable voice for me, but I had a character named Georgia that I liked very much. A little bit of me, a little of my mother, and a little bit of someone entirely new. I rattled along for

several pages setting the scene and giving her skin, clothes, and a family. I was smokin'. My students were following along, writing in spurts of passion, then stalling in frustration.

I tried to stay a bit ahead and pounded away in the evening on my story. It was already becoming bigger than I had expected, but I hung on. All of those writing gurus say you let the characters get up and walk off the page and just follow along behind taking notes, right? So I tried that. Only problem was, the plot started getting away from me.

The story became something else entirely one night. Georgia's mother was questioned by the police, then accused of murder. That wasn't what I was writing about! What was happening? I tried to fix it, but the squealing tires of the police cruiser kept spinning across the gravel driveway and I had to account for them being there. I felt like I was writing myself into a hole. I rewrote this scene many times, but my interest in the piece was sinking to the bottom of the lake, and I no longer had the energy to fish for it.

I came to class one day and said, "You guys, I write bad fiction. I don't know how to stop. I can't seem to get control of my story." It began a minilesson I won't soon forget. We shared our plots and discussed where we had thought we were going and then the difficulties of getting there. I thought back to my inane comments over the year to "come up with an ending" "tie up these loose ends" and "write to the end" that I'd offered when I conferred with a student about fiction. If anyone said that to me right now, I'd roll my eyes and groan at their ignorance. Hmmm, I've seen that

before, come to think of it.

There is nothing easy about the process of writing, and though we had discussed endings and read great short stories for models, until I wrestled with my own, I simply didn't know what I was asking my students to do. I also learned how different the genres are. The process must change to fit each piece.

Because I'm writing, teaching life has begun again. I'm an 18-year veteran beginner swimming laps in a broken down building in the prettiest little town I know. I write regularly with my classes. I attempt to craft the writing I assign and share my frustrations and my failures, my eureka's and my successes, with my students. We work together in the land of the giants where I may have to shovel my driveway multiple times on a winter day, but Don Graves can be seen jogging along the highway and Thomas Newkirk leaves me phone messages in the main office.

I'm a writer.

Maybe it really is the water.

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Penny Kittle is the K–12 Professional Development Coordinator for the Conway Schools in Conway, NH. She can be reached at pennyk@ncia.net.