

# Creative Structures: Beyond the 5PE

Penny Kittle, NCTE 2017

The 5PE has advantages. We want students to organize their thinking and to support their ideas with reasons and evidence. Unfortunately, it also has important limitations: it is a form that is easy to master, so not challenging for most students after middle school; a form not accepted in most colleges; a formula that organizes thinking for students instead of asking them to do the hard work of organizing their ideas independently.

Let us instead return to the work of Donald Murray, a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist who spent decades as a freshman composition instructor at the University of New Hampshire, and is the author of many books used by writers and writing teachers throughout the world: *Crafting a Life*, *Write to Learn*, *Learning by Teaching*, and *Read to Write* to name a few.

Donald Murray defined the Order of Concerns for Writers:

1. **Ideas**—What do I want to say and why does it matter?
2. **Organization**—How should I structure my thinking to best suit my purpose and audience?
3. **Voice**—Have I crafted a voice with credible authority?
4. **Words**—What is the tone of my text? How does my word choice affect a reader's understanding and engagement?
5. **Editing**—Is my writing polished for ease in reading?

Why does this matter? The Five-Paragraph Essay is low-hanging fruit—easy to teach and easy to grade—but also easy to master. It denies students the confidence they gain as writers when they learn to imagine ways to organize their writing from the study of models. It denies students the confidence they gain when allowed to create a structure that best presents their ideas.

Effective ways to expect more from your writers:

1. *The Story of My Thinking: Expository Writing Activities for 13 Teaching Situations* by Gretchen Bernabei & Dottie Hall, Heinemann, is full of nugget structures that students can use as mentors for organizing their thinking.
2. Help students work with storyboards to structure work in essay, research, and story with Post-It notes or index cards to encourage flexible thinking. Encourage students to talk through their writing with others so they can hear how the transitions will work *before* they begin writing. (See *Visual Tools for Differentiating Reading and Writing Instruction* by Essley, Rief, and Rocci, Scholastic).
3. Share examples across genres to read, study, and collect understandings. (see the Movingwriters.org Mentor Text Dropbox for lots of examples!) Ask students to search for structures (or additional examples of texts that follow a structure studied in class) as they read.

Here's a short list of some of the texts I've used in class:

a. **THE LIST:**

- i. in poetry: "21" by Patrick Roche and "10 Responses to the Phrase Man Up" by Guante.
- ii. in essays: "10 Reasons Why I Can't Stop Reading Children's and Young Adult Literature" by Emily Meixner, "Gamers to the End" by Rick Reilly, "Some Harsh Sentences Prove Unjust" by Leonard Pitts, Jr.
- iii. in reviews: "The Eagles Greatest Hit" by Bill Simmons, *Grantland* (has some strong language); "All 115 of Taylor Swift's Songs Ranked" by Rob Sheffield, *Rolling Stone*; "The Many Sides of Bob Dylan: a Nobel Laureate in Six Songs" by Jay Michaelson, *The Daily Beast*; oral commentary on ESPN every time they discuss team rankings with a list of evidence.
- iv. as a story: "27 Records" by Quest Love, *New York* magazine

b. **STORY:**

- i. Chronology: "All Parents are Cowards" by Michael Christie, *New York Times*.
- ii. Scenes that move forward and backward in time: "Untitled" by Taylor Nausbaum, pennykittle.net.
- iii. Multiple perspectives (multiple viewpoints that contribute to the same story): "Three Miles" on *This American Life* (2015) or "625: Essay B" from *This American Life* podcast, 2017.
- iv. One moment in time to illustrate a point: "The Flags Of Our Sons" by Billy Shore, *New York Times*, 2006.

c. **POETIC COMMENTARY:**

- i. Use of poetic tools like organizing around a repeating line: "Cruel As It Is, We Somehow Go On," by Leonard Pitts, Jr., "I have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.

d. **PROFILES:**

- i. A place: "S-Town" podcast from *Serial* and *This American Life*
- ii. A person: "Tom Brady's Most Dangerous Game" by Tom Junod and Seth Wickersham, *ESPN*, Nov. 13, 2017; "The Problem with Rupi Kaur's Poetry" by Chiara Giovanni, *BuzzFeed News*, August, 2017; "You by the Numbers" by H. James Wilson, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2012.

e. **DIGITAL COMPOSITION:**

- i. Google Map Tours (like the BU freshman composition assignment to map out the best places to write in Boston)—see "Creating Tours with Google Maps" on youtube.com.
- ii. Public Service Announcements: an argument made in 60 seconds
- iii. Campaign ads (The Art of Concealment)
- iv. Digital documentaries like the "Unsung Heroes Project" from Georgetown University (see attached checklist of skills for my classroom's current project)

# Digital Storytelling Competencies

The Art of Story, Mrs. Kittle's classes

## SKILLS

- Create a title slide that is not a label, but instead engages readers with a big idea
  - use a font that is easy to read
  - include all important information
- Insert a photo and focus it
- Adjust lighting and/or boundaries on a photo for best viewing
- Overlay a title on a photo to provide information for viewers
- Use transitions effectively between big ideas so that ideas are clear to viewers
- Add music to your movie
  - Adjust volume of music to a comfortable listening level
  - Adjust volume of music to highlight voices when speaking
- Grab video footage from the Internet using Clipgrab or other
  - Edit video footage to removing boring parts and emphasize what is important
- Bring your digital story to a close with images, music, quotes or a voice over—a recognized closing to viewers
- Save the movie as a file
- Share your movie with Mrs. Kittle

## WRITING PROCESS

- **Study** digital stories on Vimeo and other sites linked on Google Classroom—don't just watch them, study how they work as a writer, looking for techniques you can use in your digital story
- Create a plan for your digital story using a storyboard
- Identify the audience for your digital story
- Write a nugget outline of your project that focuses your big idea for an audience and includes sub-topics
- Meet deadlines
- Think about your digital story when you are not in front of a computer because rehearsing writing is part of the essential away-from-the-desk writing work at the heart of all big projects
- View your digital story like a writer, analyzing what is working and where the movie falls short
- Share your digital story with at least two people and record notes on their feedback in your notebook so you won't forget their wise advice
- Use feedback from others to revise and improve your movie
- Reflect on your process of creating this digital story and consider ways you can improve it for the future

## The Top 10 Reasons Why I Can't Stop Reading Children's & Young Adult Literature by Emily Meixner

For the past ten years, I have been teaching college courses on children's and young adult literature. Even after a decade, it's still a thrill, and every semester I look forward to new books and new students. Occasionally, usually around mid-semester, a student will ask why I love *these* texts so much:

"Don't you want to read something else?" he or she will say. I'll pretend to think for a moment. "What's not to love?" I'll then respond, adding, "Why would anyone want to read anything else?"

I'll say the same thing to curious colleagues and friends and to anyone else who might inquire.

But lately (can I blame this on the Polar Vortex, too?), I've felt the need to be more precise, more honest about my affection for – no, my obsession with – children's and young adult literature. So, to all of my students, colleagues, friends, and Nerdy Book Club kin, here goes. Here are the top ten reasons why I love children's and young adult literature and why I can't stop reading it.

**10: Because it cultivates curiosity.** Last November, while trolling the exhibit hall at NCTE (the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English), I was handed a copy of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. I wasn't particularly taken with the golden helmet on the cover and I was a little dubious about all of the Greek names (Peleus? Patroclus? Chiron? Thetis?), but the "Winner of the Orange Prize" sticker was promising, so I gave it a go. It was **fascinating**. I had no idea I was interested in the Trojan War, but apparently I am because I sought out additional information on events and characters every time I stopped reading. I even found myself sitting on the floor at the local Barnes & Noble, digging into several children's books on Greek Mythology with my son because he asked me what I was reading and became curious, too. Right now we're both making our way through every single "Who was...?" series book. As a result, we're listening to Elvis on the drive to school, lingering over a Monet at the local art museum, and excitedly recognizing almost all of the historical figures in both *The Lego Movie* and *Mr. Peabody and Sherman*. Reading children's and young adult literature reminds me that learning is fun, and makes me more curious about everything: sitting-on-the-floor surrounded by books curious.

**9: Because it compels me to seek out new authors – literally.** Another NCTE story: The year before I was handed *The Song of Achilles*, I was given a copy of Benjamin Alire Saenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by another NCTE bookseller. "He'll be speaking later this afternoon, if you're interested," I was told. I was interested. That afternoon, as I listened to Saenz discuss his writing – how it saved his life and how he writes for young men because he "wants them to understand that we see them," I was reminded how important it is to read beyond authors whose work I already love. Had I not attended that session, I would have missed Saenz's powerful message, and the heads up that Bill Konigsberg (another author I hadn't met) would be previewing his newest book, *Openly Straight*, the following day. I now teach both books in two different classes.

**8: Because I usually learn something unexpected and valuable.** Sometimes what I learn is poignant, yet whimsical, and appeals to my inner-child: that flamingos can be selfless and make excellent friends (Peter Brown's *You WILL Be My Friend*), for example, or that befriending a poetry-writing squirrel would be **awesome** (Kate DiCamillo's *Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures*). Other times, such as when I finish reading Laurie Halse Anderson's *The Impossible Knife of Memory*, what I learn about veterans and children of veterans who both struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, I carry with me in my heart and it reconfigures my understanding of the world in powerful ways. Books such as

Brown's and DiCamillo's make my heart sing. Anderson's work makes me wiser and more empathetic.

**7:Because it makes for excellent mentor texts.** So far this semester in the writing methods course I teach, I have used work by Walter Dean Myers, William Steig, E.L. Konigsberg, Jennifer Lou, and Jenny Han to examine characterization, voice, punctuation, pacing, and diction. Without Steig's *Amos & Boris*, my students wouldn't be playing constantly with the word phosphorescent. Without Konigsberg's *The View From Saturday*, they wouldn't be considering how listing and semicolons can characterize. Just last week, the copy of Naomi Shihab Nye's *There Is No Long Distance Now: Very Short Stories* I ordered arrived and I can't wait to share several stories from the collection with my class when we get to our week on fiction. My current college-aged writers connect immediately with these texts as do the high school and middle school students with whom I've worked, and, perhaps bolstered by the accessibility of the writing, they become interested in what authors of children's and young adult literature are doing. One short concrete poem from Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, can keep us not only talking about author's craft (diction, voice, imagery, use of dialogue, placement, length, sound, pacing), but also **writing** for a remarkably long time.

**6:Because I am constantly blown away by the writing I encounter.** This may seem obvious, given the previous paragraph, but it bears repeating. Some of the most risky, innovative, affecting writing available to readers of all ages can be found in children's and young adult literature. When I finished Rebecca Stead's *When You Reach Me*, I was astonished by the sophistication of the storytelling and the depth of her characterization of Miranda, the 6th grade protagonist. I feel the same astonished appreciation every time I read Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Indian* and whenever I open up any of Jacqueline Woodson's books. These authors, like most children's and young adult authors, refuse to condescend to their readers; they understand that children and teens experience the world in complex ways – they feel passionately, they question constantly, they understand inequity, and they are, thankfully, astonishingly and creatively resilient. The proof is in the writing. (Still don't believe me, check out Eric Gansworth's *If I Ever Get Out of Here*.)

**5:Because it connects me to other readers.** Passionate readers of children's and young adult literature talk about what they're reading all the time. They can't help it. I can't help it. As a result, I've found myself deep in conversation in bookstores, of course, and at conventions like NCTE and ALAN (the Assembly for Literature on Adolescents), where such people are everywhere and are drawn to each other like powerful magnets. But I also regularly have unexpected and similar conversations in line at the grocery store, the salon, in Starbucks, food courts, and parking lots, and, now, on Facebook, Goodreads, and Twitter. Just last week I had a brief, but delightful discussion of Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park* and *Fangirl* with a colleague's Facebook friends, none of whom I know personally. We all agreed that both books are excellent. And as I type this, I'm waiting for another friend to post to her Goodreads account that she's finished Katie Cotugno's *How to Love* and is ready to exchange notes. Readers of children's and young adult literature are all about community.

**4:Because it forces me to ask myself hard teacher questions.** Like: what should I be doing in my courses to make sure the future teachers with whom I work are able to put the right picture and young adult books into the hands of kids who need them? Particularly when it comes to LGBTQ-themed texts, which many of my students have never encountered (!), what can I be doing to make them more aware of the amazing children's and young adult literature available to them? Is it enough to read aloud Marcus Ewert's *10,000 Dresses* or Linda de Hann & Stern Nijlan's *King & King*? Should I be assigning Emily Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, James Howe's *The Misfits*, and/or Lauren Myracle's *Shine*? Or maybe I could do one more book pass and include Ken Setterington's *Branded by the Pink Triangle*, Malinda Lo's *Ash*, AND David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing*. Perhaps I should just offer a course entirely on LGBTQ Young Adult literature. (Which I did. I wish I could offer it every

semester.)

**3: Because it brings me closer to the students I teach.** Every semester I marvel at the power of this literature to build bridges between me and my students – students like the young man who disregarded everything I said except for my suggestion that he read *Ender's Game*. That book saved our semester. Or, the young woman who stopped by my office last week and, with a conspiratorial gleam in her eye, asked to borrow my copy of Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*. I can't wait to talk with her about it. She's so smart, but so shy in class. Or, the young man who wasn't even my student, but approached me during a summer advising session to tell me that "we shared a favorite book": David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*. The conversations I have with my students about the books we read are meaningful and on-going. We learn about each other through this literature, and as a teacher (as well as a teacher of teachers), this reciprocal knowledge is invaluable; it allows me and my students to communicate with each other across our many (sometimes seemingly insurmountable) differences. And, the good feelings we share, even as we argue about whether or not the ending of Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* was inevitable, last.

**2: Because it wears its heart on its sleeve.** Whether a story about an African boy's feelings of displacement (Katherine Applegate's *Home of the Brave*) or three friends trying to save their friendship by burying a spooky bone china doll (Holly Black's *Doll Bones*), there's an **earnestness** to children's and young adult literature that is fundamentally unique and, for me at least, essential. Powerful emotional experiences, often powerful firsts (friendships, relationships, loss) are the gravitational center around which these stories are told and, because of this, they resonate. They don't get old, and they remind me, as an adult reader, how momentous first experiences can be – how triumphant and how devastating. These are the moments that shape us into the people we become. These are moments we continue to learn from throughout our lives.

**1: Because children's and young adult literature is for everyone.** I know there may be readers out there who will disagree with me about this, but, well...I'll just say it: I think they're wrong. These stories, real or fictional, are **our stories**, and as such they are for all of us. I return to children's and young adult literature because I am constantly surprised and challenged by it. The hilariously clever *Goldilocks and The Three Dinosaurs* by Mo Willems, I want to read to anyone who will listen. The terrifying first chapter of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, I want to share with anyone brave enough to face it. The magic and longing of David Almond's *Skellig*, I want to savor and contemplate as I consider what grief and hope feel like to a child. And the fantastic world of Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*, I want to visit (well, not really – there's a war going on, but if it ends...).

Children's and young adult literature moves me.

And that's why I can't stop reading it. *Emily Meixner is an Associate Professor of English at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, NJ, where she coordinates the secondary English education program and teaches secondary reading/writing methods and young adult literature courses. Currently, the stack of unread children's and young adult books on her nightstand is almost as tall as she is. You can follow her and hear more about what's she's reading and teaching on Twitter @EsMteach.*

## Gamers To the End

Rick Reilly

You up for a challenge?

I'm going to tell you about five young Americans at the peak of their athletic lives. Your job is to guess how all five lives came together in the past month.

**One.** As usual, Elizabeth Loncki is acting very unladylike, just the way she likes it. It's 2001, she's 18 and she's challenging her dad to do a push-up contest. He just did 50, but now Elizabeth's hitting 51.

He could've done 100, and she would've done 101. That's how she is. A 5'5" Energizer Bunny, she's the furnace that heats the volleyball team at Padua Academy in Wilmington, Del. She's the darling of the weight room wherever she works out, spotting guys twice her size.

She also reads to shut-ins and runs errands for seniors. And seems like twice a week, she'll get up early so she can get balloons for somebody at school. Just don't try calling her "sweet."

**Two.** Brian (Cap'n) Freeman is about to become one of the best in the world at something he never thought he'd even *try*--bobsledding.

A burly brakeman from the virtually snowless town of Temecula, Calif., Freeman digs in, grunts and pushes the U.S. to a bronze medal at the 2002 America's Cup in Lake Placid, N.Y. But Freeman isn't just the piston for his sled team, he's also the soul of it--willing to push for drivers other than his own, just to give them a chance to develop with a few more runs. "A total team guy," says Steven Holcomb, the current World Cup bobsled points leader. "I wouldn't be where I am today without Brian."

**Three.** If you'd been there when Shawn Falter was a toddler, with those massive braces on both legs, you wouldn't believe what you're seeing now, as the senior leads his 1998-99 Homer (N.Y.) High basketball team. No longer pigeon-toed, he's blocking shots, rebounding like a man on a caffeine drip, scoring when it's needed and setting up teammates the rest of the time.

That's nothing. You should see him on the football field, scoring TDs at tight end and trying to decapitate receivers at safety. And all the while being skinnier than a one-iron.

"All heart," marvels Jeff Tabel, who was his hoops coach. "Born to lead."

**Four.** Luis Castillo isn't just a good wrestler, he's the captain of the 2003-04 team at Mattawan (Mich.) High. Wait! He's not just the captain, he's the winner of the team's leadership award.

And wrestling is only where it starts. He's a break-dancing, bungee-jumping, joke-telling machine in a crew cut. "The all-American kid," the grown-ups call him. And it makes you wonder: How many people know he was born in Mexico?

**Five.** It's 2000, and 17-year-old Jason Corbett takes his mark at the ancient Panathenaic Stadium in Athens. The timer is ready and--bang!--Corbett's off. Of course, there is no official time for his run because there's nobody in the stands and it's his buddy holding the watch.

He's not in a track meet, he's on a trip with some Casper, Wyo., high school classmates. But, hey, that's not going to stop Corbett from running or having a good time. Nothing stops Corbett. He swallows life whole--track, snowboarding, fly-fishing and hunting. The kids has all the warning signs of a thrillaholic and loves anything to do with the outdoors. Maybe that's why he ended up in the only place big enough for him: Alaska.

So what do these five athletes have in common? They were all killed in Iraq during a two-week period in January.

Air Force Senior Airman Loncki, 23, was killed by a car bomb near Al-Mahmudiya.

Army Captain Freeman, 31, was killed by insurgents disguised as American soldiers in Karbala.

Army Private First Class Falter, 25, died as a result of that same ambush.

Marine Lance Corporal Castillo, 20, died from wounds suffered while on patrol in Al Anbar province.

Army Specialist Corbett, 23, died on injuries from small-arms fire suffered while on patrol in Karmah.

Five athletes. Five futures. All gone.

Five of 84 Americans killed from New Year's Day through Sunday. Five of 3,084 Americans killed since the war began.

Athletes love teams, and when they run out of sports teams they sometimes join bigger teams, ones with Humvees for huddles and tombstones for trophies and coaches they've never met sending them into a hell they never imagined.

And they throw their whole selves into it anyway, because they are brave and disciplined and will chew through concrete to win the game.

But what if the game can't be won?

February 12, 2007

## **Some Harsh Sentences Prove Unjust**

By Leonard Pitts Jr. [lpitts@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:lpitts@MiamiHerald.com)

So the people got sick of it, all those criminals being coddled by all those bleeding heart liberal judges with all their soft-headed concern for rights and rehabilitation.

And a wave swept this country in the Reagan years, a wave ridden by pundits and politicians seeking power, a wave that said, no mercy, no more.

From now on, judges would be severely limited in the sentences they could hand down for certain crimes, required to impose certain punishments whether or not they thought those punishments fit the circumstances at hand. From now on, there was a new mantra in American justice. From now on, we would be “tough on crime.”

We got tough on Jerry DeWayne Williams, a small-time criminal who stole a slice of pizza from a group of children. He got 25 years.

We got tough on Duane Silva, a guy with an IQ of 71 who stole a VCR and a coin collection. He got 30 to life.

We got tough on Dixie Shanahan, who shot and killed the husband who had beaten her for three days straight, punching her in the face, pounding her in the stomach, dragging her by the hair, because she refused to have an abortion. She got 50 years.

We got tough on Jeff Berryhill, who got drunk one night, kicked in an apartment door and punched a guy who was inside with Berryhill’s girlfriend. He got 25 years.

Now, we have gotten tough on Marissa Alexander. She is the Jacksonville woman who said her husband flew into a violent rage and tried to strangle her when he found text messages to her first husband on her phone. She said she fled to her car, but in her haste, forgot her keys. She took a pistol from the garage and returned to the house for them. When her husband came after her again, she fired — into the ceiling. The warning shot made him back off. No one was hurt.

Like Shanahan before her, Alexander was offered a plea bargain. Like Shanahan, she declined, reasoning that no one would convict her under the circumstances. Like Shanahan, she was wrong.

Earlier this month, Alexander got 20 years for aggravated assault. And like Shanahan, like Berryhill, Williams, Silva and Lord only knows how many others, she received that outlandish sentence not because the judge had a heart like Simon LeGree's, but because he was constrained by so-called "mandatory-minimum" sentencing guidelines that tie judges' hands, allow them no leeway for consideration, compassion, context or common sense. In other words, they prohibit judges from judging.

Charles Smith, the judge who sent Shanahan away, put it best. He said the sentence he was required to impose "may be legal, but it is wrong." Amen.

The Eighth Amendment prohibits "cruel and unusual punishment." In a nation where we execute people based on no evidence save eyewitness testimony, it is hard to imagine what meaning that prohibition still holds. But assuming it means anything, surely it means you can't draw a 20-year sentence for shooting a ceiling.

Except that Alexander just did. In restricting judges from judging, we have instituted a one-size-fits-all version of justice that bears little resemblance to the real thing. It proceeds from the same misguided thinking that produced the absurd "zero tolerance" school drug policies that get children suspended for bringing aspirin and Midol to class. In both cases, there is this silly idea that by requiring robotic adherence to inflexible rules we will produce desirable results.

By now, it should be obvious how wrongheaded and costly that reasoning was — and how urgently we need to roll back the wave that swept over us in the Reagan years. It is understandable that the nation wanted to get tough on crime. But we have been rather hard on justice, too.

**August 4, 2006**  
**OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR**  
**The Flags of Our Sons**

**By BILLY SHORE**  
Washington

WHEN you fly as often as I do you learn to mind your own business as soon as you take your seat. But that wasn't possible once I saw the military honor guard boarding US Airways' 1:45 p.m. flight from Boston to Washington earlier this week.

I was heading through the gate when I first noticed Senator Ted Kennedy, walking down the concourse and arriving fashionably late, not an uncommon sight on this route. I stepped aside and followed him down the ramp.

As we got to the arched entrance of the plane, the members of a Marine honor guard in their dress blues were coming up that outside staircase usually used for stowing strollers and allowing mechanics on board. The marine in charge held in both hands a flag that had been folded into a triangle as if it had been previously draping a coffin, which it had.

Senator Kennedy extended his hand to the marine and said, "Thank you for your service."

"Thank you, sir," replied the marine.

"Are you escorting remains?" asked Senator Kennedy.

"Yes, sir, a marine."

"And the funeral is at Arlington Cemetery?"

"Yes, sir, on Wednesday."

"Thank you, I'll try to get out there."

The marine went back to sit in coach, but a man in the last row of the first-class cabin went over to him, shook hands and offered his seat. The marine reluctantly accepted. Half the passengers broke into applause.

The rest of the flight was uneventful, though quieter than usual. When we landed, the marine took his white gloves from where he'd stowed them inside his hat, put them on, and again gripped with both hands the precious cargo of the folded flag.

Then he went over to two people quietly sitting in first class — the parents of the fallen marine. None of us had known they were there.

He escorted them off the plane and into the terminal. Because of the afternoon's oppressive heat and humidity, he had persuaded them to wait inside instead of on the tarmac.

The father looked as if he might have once been a marine himself, a handsome man of perfect posture, with bristly silver hair, dressed smartly in a blue blazer and gray slacks. The mother, blond, wore light-colored pants and an orange jacket. Her glasses made her eyes seem bigger than they were. They both looked calm, if a little lost, and gave off an aura of deep quiet. As she walked by me she noticed that a tie had fallen as I was removing something from my carry-on bag and she stopped and pointed. "I think you dropped something," she said softly.

They stood at the window between Gates 43 and 45 and watched as a full Marine honor guard marched up the tarmac, coming to attention between the plane and a silver military hearse. The unloading of their son's coffin from the cargo hold was very slow, and every time someone inside the terminal noticed and stopped to stare, someone else noticed and did the same, and this kept happening until about 20 people stood in silence watching out the window.

The mom leaned her elbows on the window ledge, supporting her chin and cheeks with both hands. She remained perfectly still. She stared for 10 or 15 long minutes and never moved. The father stood nearby, rocking from foot to foot and pacing a bit. They did not touch; they did not say a word to each other. Neither wore a wedding band. Perhaps they were divorced, or simply isolated in their pain.

Standing nearby was a man wearing the T-shirt of a suburban fire and rescue department that he may have earned 20 years and 35 pounds ago. He went over to the parents to chat, not knowing who they were, just one curious spectator to another.

But whatever he said to the mother caused her to turn and look at him in disbelief. Her lips didn't move, which only encouraged him to repeat it. Her eyes widened and her chin tilted upward like a boxer who had taken a blow. She stared at him and then looked back outside toward her son. Down on the tarmac the white gloves of eight marines snapped their final salute as the doors of the hearse closed.

The P.A. system announced flights for Atlanta and Chicago. Travelers rushed to business meetings or summer vacations. The line for Auntie Anne's pretzels was as long as ever.

Except for a handful of us standing frozen at a respectful distance from the window, the war and its carnage might as well have been on another planet. The disconnect between those who serve and those of us who are beneficiaries of their service has always felt great to me, but never greater than at that moment.

The mom and dad stepped away from the man in the T-shirt and to another window, still not touching, their movement synchronized by grief. They waited until the marine in charge came back up from the runway to escort them to a government vehicle. I went to my car and drove to work with no ambition for the day other than to be worthy.

*Billy Shore is the founder of Share Our Strength, an antihunger organization.*

# All Parents Are Cowards

By **MICHAEL CHRISTIE**

FEBRUARY 12, 2015

GALIANO ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA — I have broken my wrists, fingers, a tibia, a fibula, chipped a handful of teeth, cracked a vertebra and snapped a collarbone. I have concussed myself in Tallahassee, Fla., and Portland, Ore. I've skittered across the sooty hoods of New York cabs and bombed down many of San Francisco's steepest avenues.

For many years I was a professional skateboarder. I first stepped on a skateboard at 11. The nomenclature — switch-stance frontside tailslide, kickflip to nose manual — was the language of my first friendships, with wild, strange boys who were as ill-suited for school and team sports as I was. They were from broken homes. Poor homes. Group homes. We were like little cement mixers, keeping ourselves in constant motion, our skateboard's movement the only thing preventing us from hardening into blocks of pure rage.

It was through those friends that I first realized the oddity of my own home. Skateboarding gave my mother panic attacks. She bought me helmets and pads (which I never wore), and gasped at my scars and bruises. She would have forbidden me to skateboard at all if she believed for a second that I would comply.

This might sound like typical parental anxiety. But with my mother, it was something deeper.

My mother was agoraphobic, which means she was often housebound, terrified of stores, cars and crowds. Vacations were impossible. As were jobs, and simple errands. She cut our hair, made us clothes, prepared us complex meals. Together we painted and drew, watched movies and read. She taught me to build a bookshelf, reattach a button and piece together a quilt. She worried that school stifled my creativity. So she encouraged me to stay home whenever I wanted. Which was often. School couldn't compare with the bright spotlight of her attention, and besides, I knew she needed me close by.

I felt uneasy around other kids until that day when I was 11, and I saw a boy outside my house perform an ollie (that magical, clacking leap by which skateboarders temporarily glue their board to their feet and vault into the air). To my mother's horror, I rushed outside and begged him to let me try. From then on, I realized I needed to be skateboarding in the streets as much as she needed to be safe in the house. I stopped coming home except to shower and sleep.

At 17, I left for good, and spent a decade and a half on the other edge of the continent. I seldom called her. When we talked it felt as if she was trying to siphon something vital from my cells, so I parried her inquiries about my welfare with sharp, monosyllabic replies. It was a time of great anger and resentment, a time I'm not proud of.

But in 2008, when I was 32, my mother got sick with Stage 4 lung cancer. I went home to care for her during a last-ditch chemotherapy regime, and found her in the process of throwing away everything she owned. To prevent some artifact of our family history from being accidentally lofted into the trash, I presented her with boxes and three options: keep, donate or trash. There was plenty of clutter to sort. Mostly it was liquor boxes of paperbacks and her artwork and crafts — the accumulation of a life lived predominantly indoors.

Eventually I dragged a box from her closet and found it was stuffed with skateboard magazines, bookmarks peeking out from their pages. I leafed through one and discovered a picture of myself, five years younger, atop a skateboard mid-tailslide on a wooden handrail, my mouth open and my eyes fixed wide with both terror and joy.

“I didn’t think you could look at these,” I said.

“I took out subscriptions,” she said, avoiding my eyes. “You never sent any photos over the years. These were the only ones of you I could get.” Then she sighed, “Keep.”

A few weeks after her chemotherapy ended and I returned to Vancouver, I woke late one night to a call from my father. My mother had died. I remember sitting at my kitchen table, weeping, clutching my stomach. I had to get outside. I grabbed my skateboard and rolled for hours in the orange streetlights, aimlessly ollieing manholes and weaving between parked cars. Fresh-faced people were power-walking to work by the time I got home.

Five months later, my first son was born. My love for him was instant, soul-flooding. I had trouble taking my eyes off him. We went on long walks while my wife slept. Out with his stroller in the midday traffic, I found that I had suddenly become attuned to the world’s menace, to the human being’s naked vulnerability in the face of it. The city throbbed with dangers that I’d long been insensate to: veering cars, potential kidnappers, toxic exhausts, carelessly discarded needles. It was as though the world had turned double agent and become my enemy.

I developed a Border collie-like attentiveness when it came to my son’s safety. When he stood at the coffee table like a cute little drunk bellying up to a bar, I’d be hovering there, his personal safety net. After my long acquaintance with the physics of crashing, I knew exactly what whap his forehead would make if it hit the lamp, what thunk his cerebellum would issue on the hardwood if he tipped back.

Or perhaps, I worried, it was because of my mother. My inherited brain chemistry, my angst-ridden genes taking over.

Things got worse. I kicked a dog at the park that looked as if it was going to bite him. I complained to my wife that his day care workers were inattentive. If my son choked on something at the table, even momentarily, it would take me an hour and a few drinks to smooth out my nerves. Sleep became impossible.

I never imagined that parenthood meant learning to live with this unrelenting, impaling fear. With the question of when to catch your children and when to let them fall. To date I've watched my son's precious body bounce off concrete, wood and brick. We had another son last year, this one more fearless than his brother. Someday I may be forced to hear their bones snap and see their blood gush. And then, after all that growing and falling, they might move away, far beyond my protective reach. My mother was ill, but she was also right: It is terrifying to be a parent.

It is a cliché to say children teach us about ourselves and about our parents, but it's true. My sons are teaching me to calm down. I've seen pain shape them for the better. I've watched a trip to the ground leave them incrementally stronger. I even recently bought them both skateboards, which have yet to interest them.

I'm learning to forgive my mother, for her life lived inside, for her inability to cope. My mother was afraid of everything, yet she was brave. I used to fear nothing, but parenthood has rendered me a coward. I wish I could tell her that now.

But when I picture her leafing through those skateboard magazines she'd collected over the years, skipping over the interviews and advertisements, searching for her reckless, angry son, only to find me falling from the sky in some place she couldn't follow, I'm certain she understood how I felt then, how I'd feel now.

A skateboard is the most basic ambulatory machine. It has no gears, offers no assistance. It will protect you from nothing. It is a tool for falling. For failure. But also for freedom. For living. On a skateboard you must stay balanced in a tempest of forces beyond your control. The key is to be brave, get low, stay up and keep rolling.

~Michael Christie is the author of the novel "If I Fall, If I Die."

The studio doors had never stood so intimidating before. As I drew closer, the hallway seemed to harass me. I wished that the floor would just fall out from under me already. My reflection on the glass door grew larger and larger with every step. Before my hand reached the handle I pondered possible excuses to not audition today, anything to not step through those doors that I had stepped through so many times before. *Would it be wrong to fake an illness? I could just go home, turn around right now and call to pretend that my stomach was in knots. Which wouldn't be a lie.* My hand turned the knob, though in defiance of what I really wanted. It felt like I was walking into a trap. Jeanne was going to give me the cold shoulder, colder than it had ever been before. I knew field hockey and dance were not supposed to mix on her watch, at least not with me.

As I walked into the waiting room I was immediately overwhelmed by the scene of overflowing extra dance paraphernalia, that everyone knew was unnecessary. However, some of my company members felt it was better to be extra safe than sorry at an audition. I tucked my dance bag in its normal spot, which was under the coat rack. I slipped on my fuzzy socks and entered the studio. I could sense that everyone was nervous, but not really.

We were auditioning for a company we were already apart of, this was just to ensure we still had what it takes to return for this coming year. It was a piece of cake physically, but mentally I was shaken.

When my eyes entered the dance studio most of the dancers were already stretching, however some had yet to even show up. I laid my body against the wooden pillar that separated the studio from the waiting room. I leaned my body far enough over one side of the pillar that just my head was hanging out the side. While scanning the room my sight was interrupted by a small hand shot into the air.

“Tay, you’re here! Come sit,” my best dance friend Chrissy said while smearing the ground next to her, signaling for me to come sit.

“Yup here I am, just the company criminal. In the flesh,” I said under my breath as I plopped down next to her.

“We’re in this together. We *both* missed dance for field hockey,” Chrissy said attempting to reassure my poor attitude. Chrissy was always the type to chirp in pointless optimistic comments whenever she felt it was needed, but in this situation we both knew I was feeling things on a deeper level.

Chrissy and I had danced together at Jeanne’s since we were three years old. We met in the Tumbling Toddler class in 2003, and the studio has been our home ever since. We did everything together when it came to dance, from recitals, car rides, partners for leaps across the floor, and to most importantly the audition for Axis back in sixth grade. We referred to each other as DBFs, “dance best friends.” And it was fitting.

We continued to converse in quiet about our destined fate that lay ahead of us. However, our conversation was cut short when Jeanne walked into the room. Her presence was more intimidating than it ever had been before. And let it be known that she scared the crap out of some people. Her sight was fixed on Chrissy and I, and if it wasn’t for her thick heavy glasses, I swear her eyes would’ve sliced right through us.

The audition went just as I had forecasted, heavy rain with thunder. Each dance was brimmed with handfuls of side glances exchanged with Chrissy from across the room. All morning and into the afternoon, I wished for the day to be over. I wished for a phone call from my mom demanding I come home at once for a family emergency, I wished that I had forgotten my ballet shoes in the car when I was dropped off, I even hoped that one of my pirouettes would end with me on the floor in hope that maybe an injury would send me home. But none of that was necessary anymore once the clock hit two. When the audition was finally over, I had officially grew so sick of myself and my pity party.

The family minivan was awaiting me in the parking lot once I left the studio. I had never been so scared to face my mother before. I knew she was going to want to her all

about the audition, and I knew that she would know right away what went on without me even having to tell her. Her voice played in my head the closer I walked toward the van. *Why couldn't you just perk up and be happy like everyone else in that goddamn room? God, you're so friggin miserable all the time.* I knew what to expect.

"Hey, how'd it go? Was Chris there?" my mother asked me looking up from her phone.

"Um, it was okay." I answered back avoiding eye contact as I stashed my bag under the back seat. My mother's face instantly collapsed into a image of disappointment.

"You couldn't just power through it huh? I bet Chrissy was fine, I bet she didn't let the whole world know what she was feeling. You're so friggin miser-," at this moment I stopped listen to her.

Although I wasn't paying attention, she carried on for the whole ride home. I knew she mentioned how I should've just chose between field hockey and dance at the start of high school. And I'm positive I heard something too about dinner tonight, but I phased that out as well.

Two weeks passed and it was finally the day we were promised our results from the audition. Company results were given in the waiting room closet. Jeanne and Lori on one side of the closet, and the patient dancer on the other. We were given our notes from the audition along with some additional comments. Girls either came out ecstatic and ran to their friends for celebratory hugs, or left the studio in tears.

Result week started off with ballet class was on Monday, and Amy, Mia, Emily, Raven, Cian, Olivia and Maggie, were all informed of their results. Each night I hoped that my name would be called next. But it wasn't until the next Saturday that I was pulled in for my talk, which was probably their plan all along. The closet was cold as usual, and Lori already had a sympathetic look in her eyes. Jeanne walked in after me with my notes in hand. The door shut behind her and she avoided eye contact for a split second before starting. The finally the ice was broken.

“Hello Taylor. Number 24 from the audition. Fourth year company member,” she read from her clipboard.

“Um hi haha,” I answered back shifting in my seat, which was warm from the person before me. Lori reached for my hand as I sat there waiting, she could sense how uneasy I was. I could feel my eyes getting hot and tears starting to form. I looked up toward the ceiling in hope that the drops would drip back down into my sockets. A colorful hand drawn picture caught my eye as I attempted to fight back the tears. The picture was stretched across the top of the doorway. It was framed and stickered with glitter hearts and stars. Across the top, and drawn in purple crayon it read, *Hold your arms wide open to the world!* Under that stood a stick figure ballerina on what looked to be a mountain. A yellow sun filled the background of the scene, and since the sun base was drawn first everything on top of the sun had a green tint to it. At the bottom of the paper written again in purple crayon read, *Thank you for a great 10 years Jeanee!* After only a moment, I realized that the picture was drawn by me. I had given it to her after the 2010 summer recital, my tenth year with her. A feeling of sadness began to take over my stomach as the nervous feeling began slipping away.

The closet talk went on for about fifteen minutes, Jeanne did most of the talking while Lori just sat there and looked at me with the same empathetic look. The talk went a little something like “your scores from the audition don’t reflect who you are as a dancer.” and “we feel that your commitment to this company hasn’t been up to our standards.” The whole time I wanted to speak. My mouth came so close to spilling all my feelings that I wanted to put to words. I wanted her to understand that the environment here wasn’t what it used to be for me. However instead of speaking, I just thought these things to myself. Before I left and walked under the arched doorway I looked up at the masterpiece that I had gifted to Jeanne when I was little, and that feeling of sadness began to creep back.

I found Chrissy after I left the closet. The look on her face answered my question on if our fate was the same. The results were not what I had hoped for, but they were what I expected. Jeanne decided that I was going to be a junior company member for

the year, Chrissy as well. Both of us were told that the decision was made by the reflection of our scores, but we knew it was something quite different. As I packed my bag for the end of class and began to head toward the door, I could feel everyone's gazes on me. I was used to being watched by my company members, but this wasn't because I was asked to demonstrate or that I was choreographing a piece. This was because they knew exactly what happened, without even having to be told. I walked down the same hallway I had walked in on my way to the audition one Saturday ago. For some reason something inside me started to feel like this was going to be the last time that I walked through this hallway, into this building, and into this parking lot. I found my mom's minivan and climbed in, and without saying she knew what had happened.

"This is ridiculous. You didn't spend your entire childhood here, your dad and I didn't spend thousands of dollars, and countless hours at this studio for you to be put in the junior company," my mother said in disbelief shaking her head.

"I know mom, and I'm not going to progress as a dancer if I'm stuck with a bunch of newbies. I can't go from a senior company member to a junior company member. This is so embarrassing!" I said holding back tears.

"You need to go back and talk to Jeanne, Tay you have too." my mother said. I sat in silence for a while, just taking in the day and deciding what I was doing to say.

"I think... I think I'm all done? Something inside me wants to be done," I said breaking the silence.

"I'm going to support you in whatever you decide to do Tay," my mother said to me while looking at my dance bag piled with shoes. I could tell she wanted me to stay, she wanted me to keep dancing. But I knew that if I stayed I'd unhappy, and I'd dread going to dance more than I already did. It took only a moment for me to make my decision, I unbuckled in unison with my mom and we headed inside. *Guess that wasn't my last time walking in this hallway.* I thought to myself. I opened the studio door and looked through the window and made eye contact with Jeanne. She nodded and headed toward the waiting room.

"I thought you might come back," Jeanne said while looking at my mother and I.

“Yeah,” I said. *Come on Taylor spit it out.*

“Taylor has some things she’d like to get off her chest. I know this has been hanging over her head for awhile.” my mother said for me. I was never good at getting words out when I am upset. My mom then motioned me with her eyes to speak up.

“I...I just don’t know if I belong here anymore, I don’t look forward to this like I used too.” I said to Jeanne.

“I can tell. I see you looking at the clock in class, waiting for it to be done with. Your body language has been different lately as well.” Jeanne said.

“I know I missed a lot of dance with field hockey season and all, and maybe I do deserve some sort of punishment. But I don’t think junior company is it,” I answered.

“It most certainly is not,” my mother chimed in. I followed her statement with a look of *stop mom*. Though, she continued anyway. “she isn’t just upset because of the recent news with the results, she’s been unhappy for a while now. I can’t tell you how many times I picked her up from class, and asked her how it was just to have her break into tears time and time again.” my mother said starting to tear up herself. “and she’s our dancer, she loves to dance. And to see her so stressed about something she is supposed to love, it hurts us. And it means something is really wrong here.”

“Jeanne, I think I need to take a break from here. I need to do what’s best for me, I’m tired of being sad and anxious,” I said with confidence.

“You need dance, I think you’re going to go crazy without it. I know that you need dance,” she said. *I’m going to go crazy here if I stay.* I thought to myself. “but just know the door is always open whenever you’re ready to come back to us.”

I left the studio that day feeling ten pounds lighter. I knew that as hard as this decision was for me to make, that it was the right one. The car ride home was the hardest part of that day. It had sunk in that I no longer was a dancer, and that hit my mother and I heavily. We sat in silence for the majority of the ride through town, neither of us said anything till we passed the McDonalds near the edge of the strip.

“Are you hungry?” my mother asked.

“Not really. I can eat when I get home,” I answered. She nodded and put on her blinker to turn toward a back road home. “Mom? What am I going to do? I’m your dancer, and now I’m not dancing,” I said trying not to cry for the third time that day.

“Well, that’s up to you, you know you’re always welcome back there Tay. Jeanne said so,” she said in a happier tone. I could tell she was hopeful that I’d find a way to dance again.

I then clicked on the radio and adjusted the volume to a setting that fit the mood. Then I hit the *scan* button and waited for a song I knew. I looked out the window and started to feel tired, the trees fly by my window like a green gust of wind. I felt as if I was going to doze off right there in my seat, I was so mentally and physically tired from the day I had had. Then suddenly my I heard a song I knew come on the radio scan. It was *Wonder* by Natalie Merchant, also known as the warm up song for the Axis Dance Company. This was a sign, and I wasn’t the type who believed in superstitions or fate. But this meant something, it made me feel uneasy for a moment. I thought it was a sign that I made a mistake leaving. But once the song was over it still felt right. So far this day had been a day of *lasts*. Last time walking down the hallway into class, last day stretching with Chrissy, last time having a closet talk, last time hugging Jeanne, and I decided that it was the last time I was going to hear *Wonder* and think of Axis.