

NCTE speech, 11-20-09
CEE Luncheon, James N. Britton Award Acceptance Speech
Penny Kittle

Risk, Voice, and Clarity in Teaching

Thank you to the committee for choosing my book for this honor. I am grateful and exhilarated by your support, and I want you to know that when I received word that I had won there was some mighty fine dancing at my house.

Thank you to editor, Lisa Leudeke, who helped me think and rethink until I could make sense. And thanks to my first editor, Lois Bridges, who made me believe I could write. All writers work at times in stormy seas. The water is coming in and bailing isn't helping. Editors steer through; eyes on the shoreline. Lisa and Lois are captains, o' captains! I sailed because of their vision and faith.

I thank Don Murray, who read my work and talked me through it. His phone conferences were critical in helping me see where I was in the way of my stories. Don Graves has been such a generous, warm cheerleader of all I do; I always wanted to be the Penny he thought I was. Tom Romano is a treasured friend. His writing is filled with rich images and surprising, delightful words. I want to write just like him, so I work harder. And Tom Newkirk is just so dang smart. He's generous and kind, but it's his intellect that keeps me spinning. These four mentors have shaped my thinking and writing through their kindness and friendship, but mostly because each has lived a passion for this work that I follow.

I thank my writing group at Kennett High School in North Conway, New Hampshire, who read many truly horrid first drafts with kindness.

My husband Pat, who is here today, is my lifeline and my best friend. He sings, he cooks, he makes me laugh, but most importantly, he listens and tells me my ideas are worth writing about.

And lastly, I would not be here without the unfailing support of Heinemann. I have such respect for everyone there. They are a most inspiring group of people.

I am blessed.

In my writer's notebook last month I pasted in a quote I found in a comment on a *New York Times* essay. Kaylie Jones said, "I believe many writers become writers because they feel alienated as children within their families or communities, and thus become silent watchers." I pasted it in because it was ME. I was a silent, watchful child. I grew up almost believing my sister's story that I was sold to our family by gypsies because no one in our history was a natural blonde.

Jones's words made me realize why I hang onto this color still, even though now I must pay for it: I embrace my alienation. I like to be outside looking in. Perhaps I am an orphan, I would silently steam to my sister, but if that's true, then I'm free. Then I don't belong to any of you.

But that voice only appeared on the good days, the strong days, the Song of Myself days, and those were rare. Months and even years blew between them. I see myself today in my library in the early morning with the whole house asleep and my Corgi snoring beside my chair as I work in my notebook. I glance back to my past: a scrawny young girl clinging to the side of her house amidst chaos-- a child afraid to speak. But that childhood made me a writer.

I didn't know it for years. I wanted to write books like the ones I read--wanted to live in imaginary neighborhoods with *Harriet the Spy* or *The Mouse on the Motorcycle*. Encyclopedia Brown and I would have been best friends. I dreamed I'd walk out back to the Hundred Acre Woods or have pigtails that stuck straight out from my head and be called Pipi by an eccentric and attentive father. Those imaginary places saved me. I longed for well-ordered houses on quiet streets where the biggest problems involved missing lunch boxes. But I didn't know that life and I couldn't write it.

I dreamed of being an author, but I was also afraid of words. In my house, truth was discouraged. Silence was preferred. If you pretended my father wasn't drinking, then perhaps he wasn't. Stories were malleable; what I saw and believed and remembered changed if it revealed too much about our family. I listened as my mom rewrote moments I had lived and learned to repeat her fictions. Mom created stories in our house with broad brush strokes like impressionist paintings to obscure objects once you got up close. I imitated her, so I didn't learn the power of telling the truth, a **saving** power, and an essential tool for any writer.

I didn't know writing was for digging into thoughts and observations, for bold statements of belief, for sketching what defined you. I didn't know stories could help me understand my life as a teacher: the risks I was taking; the questions I wrestled with; the impossibility and the **possibility** of this work day after day.

And then I read Don Murray and Lucy Calkins and Nancie Atwell, and I could see each of them revealed in their stories of teaching, as if the words themselves created contour to people I didn't expect to ever meet. They told hard truths about our work, and in that, they made me want to be better.

I wrote back to them in observations of my students scribbled into one notebook and the next, finding my way towards true stories--stories I wasn't supposed to tell about classroom life, but I placed them boldly on the pages of my notebook and lived better--taught better--as the words helped me think.

As John Updike said, “What art offers is space--a certain breathing room for the spirit.”

Writing has always been impossibly hard for me. I can't make words line up with the images in my head. I see my mother in her kitchen with her crossword puzzle and her coffee and my dad's old magnifying glasses fallen to the end of her nose. I hear the silence in the house now that my dad is gone--and I want you to see all that I see as I hover over her--but words do not behave. As I write that scene again and again, I can't find the balance between her grief and her determination to live and my guilt that I miss my father more than words can hold. He drifts silently between our suffering and we remain alone in our grief. Writing is that hard, but as I struggle, it seduces me into a dance with words.

When I began writing about my students, I wanted to dignify their lives, to bring voice to their experiences. Because *it may have been this way for decades*, but isn't *right* that children who've spent all night listening to their parents fight and haven't eaten breakfast are given an assignment in writing that will simply fill time instead of giving them breathing room for their spirits.

And it isn't right that a teenager who could find some hope amidst the terror of living alone in a local campground in the winter must instead write a five-paragraph thesis on *Huck Finn*, an assignment that is unlikely to bind the students in that classroom together through a shared understanding of this hard living, an assignment that won't help her craft a vision for an empowered life, an assignment that smothers teaching **and** literature.

Consider what art offers Lauren, a student in my class this semester.

In our early work in notebooks we responded to a poem by Billy Collins called “Days” that I'd like to share with you.

Each one is a gift,
mysteriously placed in your waking hand,
or set upon your forehead
moments before you open your eyes.

Today begins cold and bright,
the ground heavy with snow
and the thick masonry of ice,
the sun glinting off the turrets of clouds.

Through the calm eye of the window
everything is in its place
but so precariously

this day might be resting somehow

on the one before it,
all the days of the past stacked high
like the impossible tower of dishes
entertainers used to build on stage.

No wonder you find yourself
perched on the top of a tall ladder
hoping to add one more.
Just another Wednesday

you whisper,
then holding your breath,
place this cup on yesterday's saucer
without the slightest clink.

I asked students to recall any day and Lauren wrote, "I can't think of an exact day I would relive, but I know of a time. Any day before April of 1999 would be acceptable for me. Back when my mother was alive and well and our family was not strewn across the country. When I could sit in Mommy's lap and she would read me a story, or bring me to the Jackson Falls to swim. Then we would all eat dinner and I would always order the same thing: chocolate milk and a cheese pizza. These are days I can hardly remember, but days I would give anything to relive."

At our writing conference I asked if there was a story thumping inside her, waiting to be written, and she said, "I want to write memories of my mother because they're already fading and I don't want to lose her completely."

Can we say that those next two weeks as she crafted those memories into vivid scenes of twirling her mother's hair in one hand while she turned the pages of *Goodnight Moon* with the other, or crouched in the cemetery last Mother's Day with her father singing a remembered lullaby --are somehow less worthy of time in my classroom because she wasn't writing in response to literature? Would we argue she is less prepared for college because she formed a memoir from her greatest loss instead of creating a poster on the plot of *Hamlet*?

Can't we make room for both art and analysis in high school writing?

I say we had better make room. The greatest light in this work is knowing our students and reaching out to them. Adolescence is frightening. We can offer hope, vision, **and** challenge. Students who find life in school do not join the 7,000 teenagers who drop out each day.

When a recent study found that 27% of Americans had not read a book last year and nearly 50% more had read perhaps one, I felt some culpability in that. We **all** must. If students do not leave our classrooms wanting to read and write more, we have failed.

I first wrote my own revolution to defy the hauntings of a childhood I could not change, but I refused to let define me. Then I wrote to capture the wonder of a life with a man I still adore 25 years later and children so generous and thoughtful, I can't believe they're mine. When I began writing about students, I felt my world expand--that I could reach out beyond the mountains of New Hampshire to colleagues in California and my home state of Oregon and to friends in Denver to say, let me tell you about a child, and please help me figure out how best to teach him. I wrote to ease my own despair that for all my efforts, sometimes I feel I've missed my chance with a student.

And in all of that writing, I became a better teacher. In the risk to speak the truth, I found my voice and brought clarity to my work.

So in this time of tests that mean so little and can do such damage, let us reach for what is more difficult but can heal. Let us write the stories of our lives. Let us declare our territory in essay, poem, and song. Let us teach students a writer's craft so they feel their own power in words, images, rants, letters. But let us write beside them, revealing when our sentences won't stack up and a day and a half of scrambling finally leads us to one line that shows us what we want to say. Let us open our writing notebooks and say, "Look, this is what I'm working on."

Let us live a life where words hum inside of us--*joining* literature--crafting beside the great writers of the past, not as critics who watch, observe, and dissect, but never play. Literacy is a magnetic attraction--the force is **our** passion. If we read and write with joy, students will follow.

This is still great work: teaching English. We are surrounded by good people. But outside the doors of our schools are those who press for the minimum--who reduce argument to five paragraphs and craft decisions to multiple choice. We must reach for what is harder, but lasting. We must show students the challenge of finding what they have to say, taking a risk to say it, and then using every tool we can show them to make those words sing.

We take risks in order to reach our students--to offer that book that we know has scenes some will disapprove of--but might envelop a kid in a story and keep him turning the pages by his own will and interest, improving fluency and passion for reading.

We take risks of faith--like writing an editorial that challenges the way things are in our schools or when we call on a reluctant student who we know has a lot to say. But now is the time for **bigger** risks because too many of us have remained silent while test-prep curriculum has crowded out poems, short stories, and the soul of teaching.

Now is the time to raise our voices for our students, our colleagues, and for our love of this work.

We must challenge the ignorance that says a class of 35 or 45 is reasonable; we must question why some public schools crumble while acres of groomed lawns surround others. We must demand access to books for all children. In cities where public libraries have closed and school libraries are barely funded, we should rise up as caretakers of children and demand that the stories of our past be passed on.

We are greater than test scores, data, standards, and mandates. WE ARE TEACHERS.

We must write for the lost brilliance of the students who crowd our classrooms and the thousands who drop out each day. They seek our guidance. They are watching for our courage.

We have seen a steady erosion of what matters in this work, and we have been waiting for someone else's sense in a conversation that has none. We know some classrooms do not have books or drawing paper, that ceilings drop plaster on small heads, and our colleagues are asked to meet the violence and despair in students' lives with a., b., and c., but these are not **our** choices and **we should not be silent**.

Despite the political motivations that lead our schools toward mediocrity, we are, as Dan Beatty would say, "still here, still alive, still teaching, with the power to change this world one little boy and girl at a time."

Colleagues, it's time to write. Write us a revolution.

Thank you.