

homerun

Our lives are enriched by the doing. Never forget that.

Tom Romano

That evening at the ball field I was writing the piece in my head as I watched the game. I was fully aware of details, moods, people, and conversations. I kept looking around, thinking, "This is a story." I didn't have a commitment from Heinemann, in fact I hadn't even sent my work to an editor yet. I was just thinking like a writer, building on the work I had done in the teachers' writing group the year before. I knew that a realization of why I value teaching was coming to a head that evening. I wrote the piece as a tribute to summer, to teaching, and to this small town I live in. I really didn't have an audience in mind; I was writing for me.

I sent my draft to baseball fans I know. First, my father. Dad was once a fabulous pitcher. In fact there's a newspaper clipping of him, poised in a windup with the headline, "Ostrem Pitches No-hitter Here." It captures my dad as a young man; it reminds me of what I missed in being born his daughter so many years later. My father was once in command of the field; how I would have loved to have seen that. In fact, the reason I cried at my first viewing of *Field of Dreams*, was because I was suddenly sure of my greatest desire: I wanted to know my father before. Before he quit college, before the loss of my brother, before alcohol...when the world was full of promise and he was waiting to make his mark. My dad loved "about more than baseball", but he loves all my work just because it's mine.

I sent the piece to Don Graves and Don Murray because we share our work as writers through email. I knew they loved baseball and would enjoy the story. And there was this moment when I was wanting to show off a little, too. I liked that story. I'm always apprehensive once I hit send, though. My hand comes off the desk unconsciously as I seek to grasp the draft back from cyberspace. I'm never ready to share what I've written with such impressive, accomplished writers.

That afternoon Don Graves left a message on my machine to say I should check my email for thoughts from Murray. I know a piece is good when Don calls me, his delightful chuckle bursting into my kitchen. Don is full of energy and when he likes something, he pours out praise. Murray's read of the piece stunned me. He gave me a movie of his reading, including these words:

Christ another God damned Little League story with the parents making asses of themselves. A story that needs to be told but has been told many times, even by me.

I pictured him scowling at my draft, then rolling it up like a newspaper to smack me on the nose.

She's good. This moves right along. I am at the game. It looks easy, but it isn't. Strong narrative skills. She can write anything and carry the reader forward.

I want to hear more. My heart is starting to thump a little.

Hey, this isn't a story I've read. It's not a cliché parent story. It's not the cliché anti-sport piece, it is the story of a teacher who knows her kids and cares about them...

Yes, exactly. I feel understood. Thank you.

And I come to the end of the article and am knocked off my feet...In Don Graves' terms, Penny has given me energy. I'm revived.

I sat at my desk reading and rereading his words. It was those daring words at the start that made his praise believable. Readers need to be honest to be credible. Teachers have to be honest. I was buoyed by the Don's support and started thinking about who else could read my story.

When school started again I saw Torin in the hall and rushed to congratulate him, since the win that night sent the team on to the championship where they won again. I told him I had been at the game and written a piece about it. I asked him if he was writing his own story of that day, and he said he'd thought about it. Yes! I pushed him over the next few weeks because I knew he was struggling with his sophomore course work and in particular, his English class. Literary analysis was not inspiring him; his grade was suffering. I wanted him to write for himself, for his own purpose, to remember the writing he was capable of, in hopes it would help him find a path through his class. I was also curious to hear his side of the intensity that night.

Over the course of the next few months I would mention his writing when I saw him, a simple, "Are you going to write that piece?" to remind him he had an anxious audience awaiting his work. There were times when I wondered if this was fair; I wasn't doing this for scores of other kids I saw each day. I think what I've realized in the last few years is I have to seize the chances I find with students, wherever I find them. If I can push a kid a little farther, then I ought to. Even if it means I can't do it for everyone.

One afternoon Torin stopped me in the lunchroom with an envelope.



Mrs. Kittle,

This is the start of the story you've been asking for for some time. I finally got on it and here it is. Feel free to make all the changes you can, because there will be tons. Thanks.

Torin

These are the moments that keep me in teaching. He not only wrote the story, he invited me to help him improve it, although it had nothing to do with a grade. I eagerly opened the envelope and found three typed pages with all of the key events detailed. He took a journalistic stance and wrote like the writer I expect to see in the sports pages some day. He captured every moment, many I hadn't seen. If teachers can inspire their students to write for themselves, the game is over. We all win. I was dancing down the hall that day.

And wait, that was only the beginning, a quick sprint to first base. I sent Torin his piece back with comments and suggestions, encouraging him to finish the story and send it to me again. I also enclosed a copy of “about more than baseball” to show him what I had done. I told him it would be in my book and that the names would be changed, but he’d know who he was. This felt like an Atwell moment. You know how she mentioned her students passing drafts to each other secretly in the halls of their high school? I’d always wanted those students to be mine.

A few days later Torin’s father called me. I’d met Doug the spring before, when he came to class to read from his favorite story, *Lake Wobegon*. I remember his hand trembling a little as he read, my students gathered politely, listening intently. He was the one parent that responded to my invitation and I appreciated it, however much it embarrassed Torin. Even in high school, parents should visit once in a while. Doug called to say he had read my piece and wanted me to know how much he enjoyed it. He said he was going to write his own version of that night, inspired by Torin and I. Suddenly it felt like I’d hit a double. Way cool. I could see that ball moving out of the infield.

And yet there’s more...

Yesterday I was standing at the Xerox machine when a voice said, “This is for you.” It was Torin’s father holding a plain, manila envelope. He told me had been working on the piece and he would appreciate my comments, suggestions, etc. on his work. I told him he should comment on mine as well, and send it back since I always appreciate the suggestions of another reader. Teacher...child...parent: a mini-writing group. That’s a rocket over the head of the outfielder. A triple, at least. I couldn’t have predicted it. It was probably my most meaningful teaching moment of the year and it had nothing to do with school, really. That’s something to think about.

Doug’s piece was great. He knew a lot that I didn’t that night; I saw the game a little differently from his view. Both Doug and Torin used baseball language that I don’t know; their work had a different feel altogether. I’m scratching comments on Doug’s piece this week, so I can return it to him. My own piece showed up in my mail box this morning with Doug’s remarks scribbled in the margins.

Consider what all of this activity has modeled for Torin. Writers share, write and revise in company. We seek supportive feedback and criticism simply to make our writing better. We can span ages and purposes, perspectives and style, but we share a love for language and the need to tell a story well. A baseball game might be seen in several ways, and those differing points of view will change the story. Any story. I’m sure Torin saw the love and support in his father’s story, as I did. Torin will move from adolescence to adulthood and then away from home, but they’ll always be able to look back at that game together, made more real by their writing. When I looked at our three pieces side by side, I saw a father who loves his son and watching him play well, the teacher who loves seeing her students achieve their dreams and the young man who is devoted to the game.

That night last summer, Torin hit the homeruns.

With our writing, we all have.