

# Chapter 2. Writing About Experience and the Experience of Writing

We have an appointment with life in the present moment.

– *Thich Nhat Hanh*, *The Path of Emancipation*

The act of writing is located inside an ever-shifting context of a present moment.

– *Alexandria Peary*, *Prolific Moment*

It is the morning of the second day of 2022, and I am writing, as I try to do most mornings. Usually, after finishing my coffee, I turn on my laptop, check my email, review my schedule for the next few days, and then set to work writing for a few hours. This morning I have followed that same basic routine. But I am not at my desk in my home in upstate New York. Instead, I am sitting in the basement of my in-laws' home in Dickson City, Pennsylvania, the town where I grew up, just a few miles from Madeline's birthplace. This is also where my wife, Cheryl, grew up, and this home is where she was raised and where her mother, Charlotte, eleven years a widow, now lives alone. We are here because Charlotte has been ill for the past few weeks. In early December, she was hospitalized for atrial fibrillation, a condition she has had for many years. She was treated and released after five days but then readmitted two days later with worsening symptoms. She spent the next week and a half in the hospital, where she was treated for pneumonia along with her heart condition. Charlotte has always been a vigorous, active, energetic woman, with a ready smile and a zest for living. She has rarely been so ill, and never for such an extended period of time. Being confined in such a state to a hospital bed, with limited visitation, took a heavy toll on her mood. She is weak and discouraged.

After Charlotte was readmitted to the hospital, Cheryl traveled to Dickson City, where she remained after Charlotte was released from the hospital for the second time, a few days before Christmas. As I write this morning, Charlotte is stable, but her condition has not really improved. She is using supplemental oxygen and remains weak and tired. She is unable to take care of herself and needs more-or-less constant care. For all practical purposes, Cheryl has become a full-time in-home health-care aid. She has been here in Pennsylvania for all but a few days of the past month, taking care of her mom and managing periodic visits from nurses as well as phone conversations with various doctors. Cheryl is exhausted, emotionally and physically. It has not been much of a holiday season for her—or for any of us. As the omicron variant of COVID-19 spreads around the world, we have been in self-imposed quarantine in Charlotte's small home, partly to avoid exposing her to the coronavirus and partly because she simply cannot be left alone.

As I write these words right now, I am in the basement den, while Cheryl is upstairs tending to her mom. It is about 8:30 in the morning. From my seat at my late father-in-law's makeshift bar, which I am using as a desk, I can look out the large floor-to-ceiling basement window to see the Lackawanna River valley extending to the southwest. The small city of Scranton is visible in the middle distance, beyond the large mall and the other big-box retail stores and medical buildings near Charlotte's home. Further beyond the city's small downtown is the section of Scranton known as South Side, and just beyond that is Moosic, where Madeline was born and where she grew up before being sent, at age thirteen, to Mount Alvernia High School in Reading, Pennsylvania, to become a Catholic nun.

I had hoped to do some research for this book while in the Scranton area these past few days, but this morning I am feeling that low-level sense of dread that has been an unwelcome but constant companion since the start of the pandemic in early 2020—nearly two years ago now. As I look out at the valley under a brooding winter sky, however, I am not thinking much about Madeline. I am worrying about Charlotte and Cheryl and thinking about the spring semester that will begin in a few weeks at the university where I work. Since Charlotte came home from the hospital, the days have taken on a dull but tense routine, driven largely by how Charlotte is feeling: whether she can eat, when she needs her medications, whether she can remove the oxygen tube from her nose, how well she slept. Cheryl cannot leave this house to return to our own home unless someone else—most likely her sister, who lives nearby—can stay with Charlotte. I do not want to leave Cheryl here to shoulder this burden alone, but I will have to return home in a few days to prepare for the start of the semester. Nothing seems certain at the moment except that Charlotte cannot take care of herself. Everything else is on hold—except maybe for the pandemic, which, at this moment, is raging once again, with the virus spreading at rates not seen since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, disrupting life again and sending record numbers of patients to hospitals. Nevertheless, this historic pandemic seems like an abstraction at this moment, as Cheryl and I remain in this house and continue to care for Charlotte. And this sense of dread seems to shadow my very being, an almost palpable presence, keeping me on edge.

In this anxious moment, I am imagining a future moment, when Cheryl and I will be in our own home again, living normal lives, whatever that might mean once the pandemic morphs into endemicity, as many public health experts predict. At this moment, I am imagining, too, a more distant moment when you—whoever you are—might be reading these words I am writing right now. These words are, in part, an account of what I am thinking and feeling in this moment right now, on this second day of 2022, while I have been writing in this basement room in a house in Dickson City, Pennsylvania under this gloomy January sky. But this account, such as it is, is partial. It can only be so. What is missing from this text you are reading right now is the embodied experience of writing, the many fleeting thoughts and visceral feelings I have been having as I am writing

these words: of my mother, who lives a few miles away from here in the house where I grew up and whom I will visit in a few hours; of my two adult sons, who live near my home in upstate New York and who right at this moment are doing whatever they are doing, of which I am unaware—something that adds to my sense of dread, because they have given us much to worry about in recent months; of the university writing program I direct, whose classes are scheduled to begin in person in a few weeks, even as the pandemic threatens to disrupt the start of the semester; of my brother, whose son died of a drug overdose last spring at age 26, and who has been suffering terribly this holiday season with an almost unbearable sense of loss; of my cousin Kim, Madeline’s niece, who lives in Moosic and whom I hope to talk to soon about her memories of Madeline. And more.

I cannot include in this text I am writing right now all of what I have been thinking and feeling and experiencing in the hour or so that I have been writing this morning. In other words, the text you are reading right now and the experience I am having right now as I write this text are not the same thing. And this distinction—between an act of writing and the text that is produced as a result of that act of writing—is significant; it is crucial to my effort to find meaning in Madeline’s story and to understand the relationship between writing such a story and whatever truth it might contain or reveal.

There is, I think, truth of a kind in this text you are reading right now, which, I hope, is composed of true sentences such as Hemingway sought to write. Hemingway believed that a text can contain truth. In that sense, reading a text can be an act of truth-seeking—or truth-finding. His goal as a writer was to produce such “truthful” texts, by writing one true sentence after another. In his famous *Paris Review* interview, he said that in his writing he “tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become a part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened” (Plimpton 84). It is in this “experience” where truth resides. As I understand Hemingway, he strove to capture human experience by writing one true sentence after another, and if he was successful, his writing—the texts he produced—conveyed the truth of that experience to his readers:

From things that have happened and from things as they exist and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive. (Plimpton 88-89)

His stories—the texts he produced—were the result of his effort to construct a truth “truer than anything true and alive.”

Whether stories such as Hemingway’s do contain such truth is for each of us to decide, I suppose. As a young writer, I embraced this conventional idea that writing can be a form of truth *telling*, that Great Writers like Hemingway communicated truth through their literary art. As a high school student and, later, a

college English major, I believed that to be a writer, a true Writer, was to produce such literary art, and I aspired to do so—so much so that when I first began writing and publishing (and being paid for) non-fiction magazine and newspaper articles while I was still in college, I didn't consider it "real" writing. It was serious writing, and it was often about subjects that mattered: infant mortality, the absence of health care in rural regions, the energy crisis, nuclear power (which was a topic of intense controversy in the late 1970s when I was writing those articles). But it wasn't art. At least not in the naïve way I defined it then. And therefore it couldn't convey the important truths about human life that a novelist like Hemingway could bring to us through his work.

And so as I was beginning to build a career as a writer, enjoying minor successes in securing article assignments from editors of what seemed to me to be important periodicals, such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I continued to work on my poetry and I began a novel. My professors at Penn State University, where I was studying, encouraged this, especially my most important mentor, Jim Rambeau, a Henry James scholar who became my undergraduate advisor. Mr. Rambeau, as I called him then, would become my most trusted early guide after I graduated from Penn State and continued to write newspaper and magazine articles and then decided to pursue a graduate degree in English. It was Jim Rambeau, more than anyone else, who is responsible for my early decision to pursue an academic career. He showed me possibilities and intellectual horizons I could never have seen myself—that no one else had opened up for me. And he encouraged me to keep writing.

But like most of my professors in those days, Jim also encouraged me to pursue a career as a "real" writer, as a novelist or poet. He always congratulated me in those days whenever I would secure a magazine assignment or publish a newspaper article, but he seemed more enthusiastic to see early drafts of a novel I was trying to write. And I was desperate for that encouragement, because I wanted to be that Writer whose literary art contained truth. I wanted to produce novels in which, like Hemingway's, readers found truth. Like just about everyone else I knew who knew anything about writing or literature, I believed great literature *was* truth, and I wanted to write a novel that met Hemingway's standard, a novel that was "a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive."

But there is also truth, I think, in the experience of *writing* the story. There is truth to be found—or constructed—in this experience I am having right now as I write this story about Madeline, and this text you are reading right now does not—indeed, *cannot*—contain the whole of whatever *that* truth might be, because you, as a reader of this text, cannot share in this experience that I, the writer, am having at this moment as I am writing, no matter how truthful this text you are reading right now might be. I am trying to understand that dynamic, for reasons that I hope this chapter will make clear, and I think the path to that understanding is to keep writing.

And so I will.

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While working on this book in the early weeks of 2022, I learned of a longstanding effort to have Dorothy Day, the famed political activist and co-founder of the Catholic Workers Movement in the 1930s, canonized as a Catholic saint.<sup>2</sup> Day was a well-known muck-raking journalist and outspoken pacifist who lived a notorious bohemian lifestyle before finding her way to Catholicism. After numerous affairs and an abortion in her early twenties, she gave birth to a daughter in 1926, at a time when she was becoming interested in the Catholic faith. Although she had been raised as an Episcopalian, she was not an active member of that church and had never been religious. Her interest in Catholicism emerged through her contacts with Catholic activists who worked alongside her in New York City's slums. But the birth of her daughter seemed to intensify her interest in Catholicism, and she began to study catechism under the tutelage of a Catholic nun she had met. A year after giving birth, Day had her child baptized in the Catholic Church, and a few months later, in December 1927, Day herself was baptized, at the age of 30.

By the early 1930s, Day was deeply involved in social activism on behalf of immigrants and those living in poverty. Frustrated by the seeming indifference of the mainstream Catholic Church to the suffering of so many millions of people at the height of the Great Depression, she helped establish *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper that took an unabashedly partisan stance in advocating for social justice and opposing violence, especially state-supported violence. Her opposition to the Spanish Civil War and her refusal to endorse the Catholic Church's support of General Francisco Franco, who was aided by Nazi Germany in his revolt against the left-leaning Republican government of Spain, were controversial and resulted in diminished support for her newspaper and the Catholic Worker movement. Nevertheless, her lifelong activism and pacifism seem to have been intensified by her adopted Catholic faith and, in particular, by her progressive views on Catholic theology that often diverged from the more conservative interpretations of the mainstream Church.

Very soon after her death in 1980, advocates within the Catholic Church initiated a movement to have Day canonized as a saint. Given Day's wild lifestyle in her early years—and, in particular, the fact that she had had an abortion—it is not surprising that the prospect of her canonization has been controversial. But there can be little doubt about Day's faith and her unwavering devotion to a vision of social justice deeply shaped by her Catholic beliefs. The bid to have Day declared a saint became formalized within the Catholic Church in 2002. By the time I

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2. This account of Dorothy Day's activism and conversion to Catholicism was constructed from information in the following sources: Allaire, "Dorothy Day: The Road to Canonization"; Cep, "Dorothy Day's Radical Faith"; "Dorothy Day," *Wikipedia*; "Dorothy Day, Oblate"; Dulle, "An Inside Look"; Krupa, "An Introduction to Dorothy Day"; "Process of Canonization"; Stack, "Was Dorothy Day Too Left-Leaning to Be a Catholic Saint."

began writing this book twenty years later, the process still had not been completed. As part of this process, Day was formally declared a “Servant of God” in 2005, and her case for canonization entered a new phase, during which a review would take place to determine whether any documented miracles could be attributed to Day. That determination was still pending in 2026.

Reading about the controversy surrounding Day’s sainthood, I could not help but think of Madeline. Day was a complicated and compelling figure who led a very different life from Madeline’s, especially in her early years. Yet there are striking similarities in their stories. Both women devoted their lives to serving others in need, and both those lives were characterized by a profound belief in God. Intriguingly, both were also connected to specific religious organizations within the Catholic Church: Madeline was a Bernardine nun (Sister Mary Marlene), and Day became an Oblate of the Benedictine Order of Monks some years after her conversion to Catholicism. Both women also espoused left-leaning political views and had strong beliefs about social justice and racial equality (though I do not believe Madeline would have embraced Day’s socialist and even anarchist political ideology). But whereas Day became a convert to Catholicism at age 30, after living an areligious life of sin—according to Catholic doctrine—to that point, Madeline was a devout Catholic from childhood, having given herself to the Church as an adolescent in order to be trained as a nun (to the extent that an adolescent can knowingly make such a choice). And although Madeline never left the Catholic Church, she did leave the convent after twenty years, even if her life of service—and devotion—continued. And both women battled overt sexism not only in pursuing their respective fights for social justice but also in their personal lives: Day was a single mother at time when societal norms and sexist attitudes dramatically exacerbated the challenges for a woman trying to raise a child alone; Madeline pursued a career as a teacher, one the few career paths without significant obstacles to women at the time, after abandoning the only pathway for women to be a formal part of the institution of the Catholic Church.

Learning about Dorothy Day’s lifelong activism and her conversion to Catholicism prompted me rethink Madeline’s decision to leave the convent. Day’s formal embrace of Catholicism seemed to solidify the moral values that informed her social activism in the service of those she believed needed help, but those moral values seemed to have been present all along, even as she lived a seemingly sinful life and before she formally converted to Catholicism. Perhaps Catholic theology gave substance to her existing values, or verified them. Catholicism was an institutional superstructure that was—in theory, at least—built on the foundation of those values of love for and service to others, all driven by a belief in God and in Jesus as divine (despite the systemic sexism of Church policy and doctrine). Madeline, on the other hand, had been part of that superstructure for most of her life until she left the convent in her late thirties. Is it possible that she left because that superstructure no longer provided the support, moral as well as practical, that she needed to serve others in the way she believed was

consistent with the values of the Catholic faith? Did she leave the convent so that she could continue to pursue what she believed was the right path of service to others, a path that reflected Christ's message of love but one that was, ironically enough, being denied to her by her superiors in the Church, as I understood her story? Had the convent itself, through which she was part of the institution of the Church, become an obstacle to that life of service? In other words, did she believe that she had to leave the convent, which she had entered in a profound and seemingly selfless act of devotion to her Catholic faith, in order to continue to be true to that faith?

That is the story I would like to tell.

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In this moment right now, this part of the story I am writing about Madeline—her decision to leave the convent after two decades of service—feels true. But it may be that this experience I am having as I try to write Madeline's story is itself the source of that truth—or some kind of truth. In other words, there may be some truth emerging from this experience I am having as I try to write a true story about Madeline, a story that gets at some truth about her decision to leave the convent. And for me, at this moment, the question becomes, What is the relationship among these truths: the truth about Madeline's decision to leave the convent, the truth of this story I am writing about that decision, the truth I am realizing or identifying in this moment as I am writing?

Right now I wonder about the extent to which these words I am writing will—can—convey whatever this truth is that might be emerging in this moment. I wonder, too, what will become of these words I am writing right now—what will happen to them after they are transformed into the text that you are reading right now. At the same time, I feel a sense of wonder, because my forty-years of professional experience have taught me that this experience I am having right now as I write these words will lead to something unexpected, maybe something useful, maybe even something good. Something *true*. There is a kind of magic and mystery in this process of communicating with you, a reader whom I do not know and will likely never meet and who is (I hope) reading this text sometime in my future. That future moment—your present—is somehow contained in this present moment when I am writing these words, which is in your past as you read this text. This moment in which I am writing contains all these other moments, and in that regard my experience of writing is, as it were, outside of time. "Writing," says education researcher Janet Emig, "connects the three major tenses of our experience" (127): past, present, and future. My own experiences as a writer tell me that Emig is right. This text you are reading right now contains some record of this experience I am having right now as I write it—a *now* that is in your past—but that record (this text) is distinct from this experience I am having at this moment. And your experience of reading this text at some moment in my future is

somehow connected to this experience I am having right now in this moment as I am writing, but your experience as reader and mine as writer, though inextricably and profoundly connected, are not the same.

It is in this sense that writing is unique as a “linguaging act,” as Emig describes it. And it is uniquely powerful, both the act of writing-in-the-moment and the text produced by that act. We tend to associate the power of writing with the text—with the capacity of the text to communicate ideas and information across time and space. But the experience of writing that text—an experience that intensifies the present moment even as it transcends this moment, an experience that is at once physical and metaphysical, an experience that is separate from yet inseparable from the text—can be a source of power as well. When fully focused on the writing itself, when thoroughly engaged in writing-in-the-moment, without worrying about the text but being present in the *act* of writing, the writer writing can experience a sense of release, akin to the experience of meditation: a feeling of timelessness in time, of *being* in the moment, of momentary *well-being*, even when the subject of the writing is painful, complicated, unsettling, even traumatic. The written words themselves become almost irrelevant. I know I will return to them later, because as a writer I will eventually want you to read them. That part of my understanding of writing, that motivation to write, remains intact from my earliest years as a writer, even as my conception of writing and my practice of writing have changed. So at some point I will revise these words I am writing right now and transform them into this text you are reading right now. But right now, at *this* moment while I am writing, I don’t worry too much exactly what these words might mean when you read them. Because there is some sort of truth in this experience I am having as I am writing in this moment. I will try to capture that truth and convey it to you through the text that I will eventually create from this writing in this moment, and I hope that in this way, this writing—both this act of writing in which I am engaged right now and the resulting text that you are reading right now—connects us, you and me. But whatever I am able to communicate to you through these words that will become the text that you will read later will not invalidate this experience I am having in this moment as I am writing, which has its own truth.

Ultimately, I know that the significance, the meaning, of Madeline’s life—the truth of her life—will never be fully captured in these words you are reading right now. It might be that the real truth of her life is contained in the experience I am having as I write about her, as I experience revelations about her and see connections in her life to mine and to others, connections that seem to emerge from the act of writing itself or perhaps become visible in or through this act of writing, as I try to tell you a story that matters to me and (I hope) to you. You cannot share in the truth of *these* moments as I am writing. But this account—this story you are reading—can, I hope, convey to you something of the transformative power of writing as an act of truth-seeking, a power that is transforming me, as I write, in ways that I only vaguely understand in this moment of writing. I wish to tell you

something of *how* I have written Madeline's story, I wish to describe the experience of writing it, so that you might appreciate the importance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment—and so that, together, we might learn how to seek truth through and in and by writing.

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Understanding this experience of writing and its capacity to transform our sense of being in the world has been my professional project for nearly two decades now. As a scholar who studies writing, I have investigated different aspects of writing, including factors that affect how students revise their texts, the errors student writers tend to make, and the role of digital tools in the production of a text. I have also studied writing theory, linguistics, literacy research, cultural theory, anthropology, cognitive psychology, and the philosophy of language to better understand how writing can shape our sense of identity, our perceptions of the world around us, and our sense of who we are as beings in relation to others who share the world with us. For most of my career, these efforts to understand writing were really about learning how to make better texts: figuring out how to help students to write more effectively, to harness the power of writing to communicate ideas and move readers. Eventually, however, I became less interested in the quality of the texts that student writers produce and more interested in what happens as students are writing—that is, what is happening in the moment as they engage in an act of writing. Even this interest in understanding the experience of writing-in-the-moment was initially motivated by my desire to identify more effective ways to teach writing so that students could learn to produce more effective texts, according to conventional standards for textual quality. But as I pursued that utilitarian goal, I began to notice that something else was happening each time my students graciously accepted my invitations to work hard at their writing in an effort to become better writers—that is, to learn to write better texts. Something important was happening to them as they engaged in writing as a genuine act of inquiry into pressing matters in their own lives. And what was happening to them as they were writing seemed distinct from the texts they produced or from their developing skills in written communication. In other words, I began to see in my students' experiences the importance of the distinction between the writer's writing and the writer *writing*, between the text and the act or experience of writing itself. I saw that students could realize some significant benefit by engaging in specific acts of writing regardless of the quality of the texts they produced and regardless of whether those texts were intended for readers other than the writers themselves. Time and again, I would see the powerful impact of these experiences on my students, so many of whom were struggling to find a path through life's challenges. And I realized that I needed to understand that impact of the experience of writing, because in some cases it seemed to matter more to my students than the writing skills they might be developing, the

knowledge they were gaining as writers and readers, or the academic success they might be achieving.

These revelations about the potential power of the experience of writing-in-the-moment led to a shift in my professional focus. As I have already noted, like other scholars trained in writing research, for most of my career I tended to focus my inquiry on understanding writing in order to improve writing instruction, and that focus coincides with broader societal expectations when it comes to what scholars in education ought to spend their time doing. Despite the necessity of theoretical inquiry—in *all* academic fields—prevailing conceptions of higher education in the United States are shaped by a widespread belief that academic research should have practical value, that it should have some concrete utility in the world—in this case, in schools and classrooms. Understandably, many of us who do this kind of work (most of us, I think it's fair to say) assume that what we learn through our research can in some way help make the teaching of writing, and education more generally, better (whatever that might mean), even if we are not studying teaching itself. My early studies of revision, for example, which I began as a doctoral student in the late 1980s and then pursued as a new assistant professor in the 1990s, were intended in large part to help teachers understand how students revise their academic papers so that they (the teachers) could develop more effective methods of helping their students learn to revise in ways that resulted in “better” writing (whatever that might mean).

This process is far more complicated than it might appear to people outside academe, and there is a great deal to say about the ways in which any academic research is embedded in complex historical, cultural, economic, political, disciplinary, and institutional contexts. Moreover, the relationship between academic research and the expectations of the broader society within which those institutions exist is vexed and contested. For a recent example, consider the political controversy about so-called Critical Race Theory (CRT). By the time CRT became a hot-button political issue in the U.S. in 2020, it had already been a well-established theoretical movement in education research and legal theory, among other academic fields, stretching back nearly three decades into the early 1990s. But the application of CRT in K-12 schools in the U.S., at a particularly fraught historical moment characterized by extreme political polarization and in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, sparked intense controversies in local school districts that led some state legislatures to pass measures restricting the teaching of CRT in public schools (Schwarz). A similar dynamic is evident in past controversies about education-related subjects such as Ebonics, bilingual education, and the Whole Language movement, among others. Such controversies illustrate the complicated and often uneasy relationships among academic research, institutionalized education, and the larger society.

I vividly recall a moment when that truth became real for me as a young scholar. In the early 1990s, just a year or two after earning my doctorate and accepting my first academic appointment as a new assistant professor in English Education

at Purdue University, a colleague and I were invited to do a series of professional development workshops for teachers in a small school district in Montana. I don't recall the specific professional connections that led to that invitation, but my colleague and I accepted and, some weeks later, traveled to Montana to conduct the workshops over a period of two or three days for the district's middle and high school English teachers. Our focus was helping these teachers develop effective techniques to teach their students greater awareness of the writing process. In other words, we were teaching the teachers methods to help their students learn to develop ideas for their essays and to refine their drafts through specific kinds of invention and revision techniques. It seemed straightforward enough, but when we met with the superintendent to discuss our plans, he cautioned us about our terminology. We had planned to spend some time with the teachers reviewing some of the research and theory on which our recommended teaching techniques were based—including some research associated with the Whole Language movement. The superintendent explained to us that Whole Language was a controversial topic in his school district, having been vigorously opposed by some parents who wanted a more traditional phonics-based and grammar-focused method of instruction (the effectiveness of which, my colleague and I believed, had been called into question by numerous studies). Whole Language, he told us, was a term we should avoid in our presentations—even though some of the techniques we would share with the teachers were based explicitly on Whole Language principles. Sharing these techniques with his teachers was OK, he said, just don't say "Whole Language." It was one of the first times in my academic career when politics directly affected my own work. It would not be the last.

All of this is to say that even seemingly uncontroversial research, such as research intended to help improve students' writing skills, is never exempt from politics and ideology. Nevertheless, as I pursued tenure and tried to establish myself as a scholar, the studies I conducted of how students revise seemed to me to have obvious practical implications in the larger project of improving education, a goal that I embraced and one that I—naively—assumed might seem apolitical and uncontroversial to those outside the scholarly communities in which I was working. My decisions about my research were not simply career-driven and self-serving, however: I was genuinely interested in gaining a better understanding of the complexities of writing, and I believed that what I was learning through my research would help me become a more effective teacher of writing; I also believed I was contributing to my scholarly field and to literacy education research in general. Although the specific focus of my research evolved over time, the studies I conducted were always motivated by this fundamental goal of helping to improve writing instruction and schooling in general. All the professional writing I did was in the service of this goal. And it's worth noting that although my scholarly work led me to examine the deeply problematic nature of formal schooling in the U.S. and expose the social, cultural, and political complexities of literacy, I was slow to appreciate what

the scholar Elspeth Stuckey has described as “the violence of literacy,” and I never seriously questioned the idea that institutionalized education in the U.S. is a fundamental good, that despite its serious shortcomings, formal education ultimately benefits individuals and the society at large.

That belief in the value of institutionalized education in the U.S. began to weaken as I looked more closely at students’ experiences with formal writing instruction and with schooling more broadly. Initially, I was interested in finding ways to help students write more effectively under the assumption that good writing skills are necessary for individual success in the American economy and essential for a healthy democracy, an assumption that was baked into my own experiences as a student writer and reinforced by prevailing discourses about education and politics during my formative years as a writer in the 1970s and early 1980s. This is the Jeffersonian ideal, the view that genuine democracy rests on the foundation of an educated and informed citizenry. Like so many American educators I have known, I embraced this ideal, and I saw my job as a scholar and teacher in that light. And in that light, I found it distressing to examine data on the writing abilities of American students. For example, results from the writing component of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), one of the most sophisticated and useful barometers of students’ writing skills, show little progress over time. Although most high school students in the U.S. seem to develop writing ability that NAEP describes as “basic,” very few can write at levels deemed “proficient” or “advanced,” which is roughly equivalent to the level of skill expected by most college-level faculty. NAEP writing scores have not been released since 2011, but those results showed that while 79% of 12th graders achieved a “basic” or better level of competence in writing, only 27% of 12th graders wrote at the “proficient” level or better and just 3% at the “advanced” level (*Nation’s Report Card*). What is striking is how consistent these scores have been over several decades. (NAEP results for reading are equally distressing, showing that 12th graders’ overall reading scores have declined by 7% between 1992 and 2019.) Given the voluminous bodies of research that illuminate the development of writing skill and the demonstrated effectiveness of specific writing pedagogies (e.g., see Graham & Perin), not to mention the billions of dollars spent annually on specialized teacher training and professional development to enhance classroom instruction, I found it more than puzzling that assessments like the NAEP did not show even minor improvements in students’ writing abilities over time.

Investigating why so many students seemed unable to learn to write effectively eventually led to a shift in the focus of my professional inquiry *away* from trying to understand how to enhance the abilities, skills, and motivations of those individual student writers and their teachers and *toward* exploring the role of the institutional and cultural contexts within which those students were writing. In other words, I became less interested in *what* and *how* we teach (pedagogy) and more interested in *why* we teach what and how we teach (purpose). The answers to my questions about the apparent lack of collective progress in students’

writing achievement seemed to lie not in what individual students and teachers were doing but in the larger institutional, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape the policies that in turn circumscribe the decisions of school administrators and teachers about what and how to teach and how students will learn to write. An important part of what I began to learn is that the utilitarian focus of schooling, along with the emphasis in teacher training programs—including the ones I worked in—on *how* to teach, ultimately serves a conservative political function. To put it somewhat differently, mainstream school-based writing instruction helps to maintain the political and economic status quo.

This is old news in some academic circles. In my own fields, scholars had long been illuminating the ways in which formal schooling in general (Freire; Postman and Weingartner) and the teaching of writing in particular (Berlin, Giroux, Ohmann) are implicated in the capitalist status quo and help perpetuate inequities in educational outcomes (Gilyard; hooks, *Talking Back*, see esp. pp. 98-104; see also pp. 55-61, 73-83). Although education in the popular American mind tends to be associated with progress, education researchers and theorists have long been exposing the ways in which formal schooling in the U.S. resists change and can impede social progress, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of American society. Famously, in 1976 sociologists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis published a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between formal schooling and economic inequality and concluded that “parental economic status is passed on to children, in part, by means of unequal educational opportunity, but that the economic advantages of the offspring of higher social-status families go considerably beyond the superior education they receive” (Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* 1-2). In other words, schooling helps perpetuate socio-economic inequalities in American society, a phenomenon they refer to as “intergenerational persistence.” Further, their historical analysis of formal schooling in the U.S. led them to the conclusion that “the evolution of the modern school system is not accounted for by the gradual perfection of a democratic or pedagogical ideal. Rather, it was the product of a series of conflicts arising through the transformation of the social organization of work and the distribution of its rewards” (2). To put it in slightly different terms, the modern school system as we have come to know it does not reflect the pursuit of democratic ideals but rather serves the interests of a capitalist economic system and, in particular, those who hold power within that system. A more recent analysis in 2002 that was based on newer data led Bowles and Gintis to the same conclusions: “In light of the outpouring of quantitative research on schooling and inequality in the intervening years, the statistical claims of the book have held up remarkably well. In particular, recent research by us and others using far better data than were available in the early 1970s has entirely vindicated our once-controversial estimates of high levels of intergenerational persistence of economic status” (Bowles and Gintis, “Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited” 2). Studies from many different quarters of the education research establishment reinforce Bowles

and Gintis's conclusions. David Berliner, for example, reviewed various bodies of data to show that in the U.S. "poverty, particularly among urban minorities, is associated with academic performance that is well below international means on a number of different international assessments" (949). Jean Anyon's famous study of classrooms in "five elementary schools differentiated by social class" (4) documented stark differences in what and how children of different socioeconomic backgrounds are taught and led her to conclude that schools were "reproducing the tensions and conflicts of the larger society" (38) such that students are, in effect, trained to take their places in an existing social and economic hierarchy. In a related kind of inquiry, Henry Giroux has argued that the training of teachers in the U.S. is characterized by what he described as "deskilling," a process whereby teachers learn to deliver predetermined content using canned teaching methods; as a result, teachers function not as pedagogical experts but as technicians whose main tasks are to convey sanctioned knowledge and teach rote cognitive skills rather than critical thinking ("Teachers"). This process helps explain why schools function to preserve the intergenerational persistence that Bowles and Gintis observed. Within the field of English Studies, scholars including James Berlin and Richard Ohmann have examined how conventional skills-based writing instruction is associated with the rise of industrial capitalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and continues to serve the interests of so-called late capitalism today.

Although these critiques of formal education in the U.S. were familiar to me as a young scholar, they did not initially cause me to question my belief in the fundamental value of American education or the Jeffersonian ideal that I believed informed it. But as I witnessed the struggles of my own students, which so often seemed to have little to do with mainstream educational concepts of individual motivation or academic preparedness, these scholarly perspectives began to make more sense to me. Slowly, I began to see my students' struggles as writers as a function of institutionalized ways of defining, teaching, and assessing writing rather than as individual failures. As anti-racist scholar Asao Inoue has written, "Failure is produced by comparisons with a fixed ideal of writing, usually Standardized Edited American Academic English (SEAAE)" (333). The problem, I eventually began to realize, was that fixed ideal, which ultimately is narrow and exclusionary and does not encompass the remarkable complexity and diversity of writing styles, practices, and uses that enrich our world. Slowly, I was beginning to see that my students' "failure" is, as Inoue puts it, "constructed by writing assessments, and is not simply a result of bad or lazy students, teachers, or pedagogies" (333).

At some point in this journey, I returned to the provocative ideas of the influential Brazilian education theorist Paulo Freire, whose work I initially encountered as a new graduate student in the early 1980s. Freire's classic critique of institutionalized education, which is widely referred to as "the banking concept" of education and which he articulates in his famous treatise *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, helped explain what I was seeing in my students' experiences with formal schooling. To my mind, Freire's analysis provides a persuasive theoretical explanation for the

phenomenon that Bowles and Gintis observed in their research. More specifically, Freire's analysis exposes the ways in which mainstream education places students in the role of "receptacles," into which sanctioned knowledge is "deposited" by their teachers. Conventional instructional practices, such as lecturing, which facilitate the delivery of predetermined content to students, along with standard assessments and rules governing behavioral norms in schools, ultimately train students to be passive learners who are taught to accept the status quo:

The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them [by teachers], the less they develop the critical consciousness which would form their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 73)

In this way, what students really learn, regardless of the content of the curriculum, is to accept the reality that is being described to them and, significantly, their usually powerless place within it. Formal schooling, according to this critique, teaches the student a way of understanding the self in relation to reality. Students learn a passive way of being in the world. They learn to accept as the status quo a worldview that serves the powerful who control that status quo.

Freire's theories, which he first advanced in the late 1960s, energized a broad progressive reform movement in education and became a key part of the philosophical basis of the critical literacy, or critical pedagogy, movement. His ideas about the ideological thrust and profound social and political implications of conventional schooling are consistent with other important theories and reform movements in education and, more specifically, literacy education. And they grew in their influence at a time when adherents to these movements were pushing for change in American schools. For example, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's pointed critique of American schooling, *Teaching as a Subversive Act* (1971), shares Freire's basic view of the influence that conventional (and seemingly reasonable and innocuous) educational practices and teaching strategies—including lecturing, the reliance on traditional textbooks, and standardized testing—have on the way students think and how they come to understand themselves as (passive) beings in the world. That view was in tandem with broader social movements at the time, such as the antiwar movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the Civil Rights Movement, which helped give rise to developments in literacy education, notably the Whole Language movement, bilingual education, and the writing process movement. What all these developments had in common were an emphasis on the active role of the student in literacy learning; the centrality of meaning-making as opposed to rote learning in the development of writing and reading skills; and the inherently social, cultural, and ideological nature of literacy and education.

None of this was new in the early 2000s, when I was trying to make sense of what I perceived to be the collective failure of literacy instruction in mainstream education in the context of my role as a university teacher educator charged with preparing new teachers for secondary school classrooms. But much of it was new to me. And its impact on my own thinking about education and writing instruction was profound. When I first encountered the idea of “the writing process” as a new graduate student and beginning writing teacher in the early 1980s, I saw this pedagogical approach simply as a better way to teach writing than the traditional skill-and-drill instruction to which I had been subjected in the Catholic schools I had attended as a child and adolescent. I did not see until much later the subversive nature of these pedagogies and the profound implications they could have, not only for students’ development as writers but also for challenging the educational status quo (see Yagelski, “Radical”). The seemingly simple shift in focus from the form and quality of the finished text, which is what traditional mainstream schooling emphasizes, to the complex and recursive process of inquiry by which the student writer creates that text can have a significant impact on how that student is positioned as a writer, thinker, and knower—and on the student’s own sense of self as a being in the world. To state it somewhat differently, the writing process approach assigns agency to students within an institutional context that effectively denies that agency.

This kind of pedagogy represents a real, if limited, threat to the status quo. For me, in the early 2000s, in the wake of the widespread challenges to civil liberties—to which most Americans seemed to acquiesce—and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, revisiting the process-oriented pedagogies that I had been trained to use in the early 1980s opened up unsettling new ways to think about my scholarly work, its focus and purpose, and the ways in which it might be implicated in a status quo that, increasingly, I came to see as fundamentally unjust and unfair. I began to reconsider the purposes of my work in terms of the broader social and political changes that I believed needed to be made to create a more just, equitable, humane, and sustainable society. Freire’s theories helped me understand that need and provided a powerful framework for exploring ways to reconceptualize my scholarship and teaching. They also underscore the importance of language and literacy in how we understand the world around us. But more to the point of this text you are reading right now, his theories eventually helped refocus my attention on the *experience* of writing as the locus of the potential power of writing to facilitate change—both individual and collective.

The key to Freire’s argument for a liberatory pedagogy—that is, a pedagogy that enables students to learn to resist an oppressive and unjust status quo—is the idea that human beings actively construct the world, not only by their actions but also—and crucially—through reconceiving who they are in relation to that world. In other words, how we perceive the world matters and can have material consequences in how we interact to transform that world. In Freire’s formulation,

the world—reality—is not static; it is a function of our perceptions and actions, and therefore it can be changed. Significantly, it can be changed in ways that move toward justice and liberty. But that change can happen only if human beings conceive of themselves as capable of fostering change. In this regard, human beings have the capacity to change themselves and the world itself, and they can do so—they can claim agency for changing the world—by gaining an understanding of their own nature as beings who have such agency. Conventional schooling denies this agency, according to Freire, by presenting the world as static and defining students as passive inhabitants of that world, inhabitants who are taught to accept the status quo—and their places within it—as fixed. In this way, Freire argues, conventional education is dehumanizing.

Because the world is not static, Freire asserts, human beings need not accept a status quo that dehumanizes them: “[D]ehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 44; emphasis in original). Rather, “reality is a process, undergoing constant transformation” (75), and human beings have the capacity to participate directly in that process, to change the world, to make it more just and humane. To do so requires reconceiving “men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (84). This reconception of human *being* is a crucial part of the process of *conscientização*, which is often translated in English as “critical consciousness.” Freire’s translator defined *conscientização* as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality” (35), but Freire’s analysis throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* makes it clear that the kind of critical consciousness he seeks is more complex than the capacity to perceive a problematic world in a certain way—for example, to be able to recognize the oppressive ways in which mainstream schooling teaches students not only what to think but also *how* to think. Critical consciousness, in Freire’s framework, is a fundamental reconceptualizing of human *being* and reality more broadly, and it is essential for genuine liberation. In other words, the capacity for the kind of transformation of the world that results in liberation and thus true humanization resides not merely in perception of the “contradictions” of the status quo, which provides a basis for action, but, first, in how we conceive of ourselves as beings who are capable of action in the world.

As Freire routinely reminds us, this kind of change is a challenging process, and it is dialectical in two senses. First, there is an ongoing dialectic between humans and the world they perceive and co-create. Human beings, who are always in the process of becoming, interact with a world that in turn is always evolving, a process in which humans have the capacity to participate and intervene. Second, there is a dialectical relationship between thought and action. In Freire’s formulation, there is no possibility of one without the other. This relationship is central to true liberation, according to Freire: “Authentic liberation—the process of humanization— ... is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women

upon their world in order to transform it.” (79). According to Freire, action—true liberatory action that can transform the world—is not possible without genuine critical reflection that results in a conception of the self as always in the process of becoming in relation to a world that is always in the process of becoming. “In dialectical thought,” Freire writes, “world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection” (53).

Given this analysis (which I have oversimplified here), it becomes evident why education—and in particular, literacy instruction—is central to Freire’s vision for a more just and humane world. Liberation, of both individuals and the societies in which they live, is possible only if we learn to see ourselves differently and embrace our own agency to intervene in the reality we perceive and help construct through our thoughts, words, and actions. Education can be, in Freire’s oft-quoted phrase, the practice of freedom by creating a framework within which this kind of learning is possible. Moreover, language is integral to this learning because it is an essential part of the process by which we come to know ourselves as beings in the world; it is thus central to the development of a genuine critical consciousness. Language learning, then, can be a vehicle for true change.

In a famous passage, Freire explains the role of reflection—of reconceptualizing our very being in the world—in his version of a liberatory educational process:

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that humans are abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from humans. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without men and women, but men and women in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it. (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 81)

This kind of educational project focuses on helping students see themselves anew as beings in an ever-changing world so that they can realize a different way of being in that world. Through Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy, students “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (83). This is the basis of Freire’s idea of *praxis*: “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (79). And, significantly, this *praxis* is a linguistic process. To put it differently, language is necessary for *praxis*.

But if language is to serve this liberatory function, it must be *true*.

According to Freire, “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action. . . . There is no true word that is not at the same time a *praxis*. Thus, *to speak a true word is to transform the world*” (87; emphasis added). In this analysis,

a *true* word arises from reflection; it is a function of *conscientização*. Without the emergence of this critical consciousness, the word becomes empty, inauthentic, false. Language, then, in both its oral and written forms, becomes a necessary component of and vehicle for *conscientização* and an indispensable tool for change and liberation:

To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (88)

In this analysis, Freire is drawing upon centuries of philosophical inquiry into the relationships among thought, language, and being. He offers his revolutionary take on the age-old problem of the role of language in how we constitute reality. For him, without *praxis*, which requires language, the possibilities for liberatory change cease to exist. Language education, and literacy instruction in particular, are absolutely crucial to his vision for a better world.

What makes Freire's analysis so compelling to me is that he conceives of literacy as both epistemic and ontological. In other words, through language we create knowledge and construct reality (epistemic), but we also constitute our very *being* through language (ontological) in dialectical relationship with the reality we perceive and help bring into being. That formulation assigns to language—and literacy—great power and genuine potential for change.

As a teacher of writing and a scholar, I found my perspective on my own work profoundly challenged by Freire's theories, for they revealed that I was an unwitting cog in an educational machine that I was coming to see as troubling and oppressive. Freire's critique of conventional education suggested that the kind of work I was doing served as a tool for preserving the status quo that I believed needed to be changed. It was a kind of existential crisis for me. How could I continue researching, developing, and advocating pedagogies that ultimately enabled educators to teach writing in ways that inhibited the very changes I sought in society? How could I work to develop ostensibly liberatory writing pedagogies that could be implemented within an education system that effectively trained students to adopt a passive stance in relation to the world around them—to accept a status quo that refused to assign them agency and therefore undermined genuine hope for a just and equitable future? How could I *write* to realize these changes? These unsettling questions shook my faith in the idea that my career could be part of a broader effort to improve human life, as Freire puts it, even as that career became, by conventional measures, more successful. I began to lose faith that my work as a scholar and teacher could contribute in some way to the building of a better, more just, humane, and peaceful future. The more I contributed to our collective understanding of writing and teaching, it seemed, the more I also contributed to the educational status quo that, I was coming to believe, was antithetical to my vision for a better future.

But Freire also offered a way out of my dilemma by providing a theoretical—and practical—rationale for focusing on the *experience* of writing as a possible site for liberation, as a vehicle for transformation. In other words, Freire’s analysis of the relationship between literacy and ontology pointed toward a path I couldn’t quite see at the time: away from an understanding of writing primarily as textual production, which is the focus of school-based writing instruction, and toward a conception of writing as a potentially transformative experience of the self in relation to the wider world—which could, I hoped, be the basis for a liberatory practice of writing as a tool for living.

Like many educators who embrace a vision for liberatory education of the kind Freire espoused, I devoted a great deal of time and energy—and suffered a great deal of frustration—trying to fit my evolving version of a liberatory pedagogy into the institutional contexts within which I was working (at my university as well as in K-12 schools where I worked with teachers, mostly through the National Writing Project site I directed at my institution, to improve writing instruction). This sort of struggle is well documented in the scholarly literature in my academic disciplines (Ellsworth; North; Tassoni and Thelin), and some critics argue that any effort to incorporate into American schools a critical pedagogy such as Freire advocated is misguided at best (see Miller, “Arts”). I have known well-intentioned colleagues who abandoned their efforts to make their classrooms sites of liberatory education because of these challenges. For me, the story is about trying to reconcile my liberatory goals with what I came to view as the reactionary role of formal institutionalized schooling and mainstream writing instruction; that is, I tried to make peace with the fact that even as I taught my own classes and trained new teachers in ways that supported a vision of a more just and humane society by questioning and resisting an oppressive status quo, my position as a tenured faculty member in a public university made me complicit in the very system I sought to change. There is a great deal to say about this problem, but what matters for this story I am writing now is that I believed I was resisting the impulse to give in; I consciously tried to stave off a sense of resignation, in part because so many other colleagues I knew and respected remained committed to the idea of an educational system that can help create a better world. Moreover, my students at UAlbany—the university where I have spent most of my career—so many of whom are low-income, first-generation students (as I myself was so many years earlier) struggling against systemic obstacles that dim their prospects for a better future, motivated me to stay in the fight, as it were. They kept teaching me about resilience and possibility.

There is compelling evidence that some institutions, including the university where I teach, can be powerful vehicles for greater economic well-being for our students (Nolan). For example, the Economic Mobility Index (EMI), based on the research of economist Raj Chetty on inter-generational mobility, measures the extent to which students from low-income households benefit economically by attending a specific university (Itzkowitz). According to this assessment, my

own university, UAlbany, 43% of whose students qualified for Pell Grants in 2022 (indicating that they are from low-income households), ranked 78th out of more than 1300 colleges and universities in EMI—and 3rd out of the 64 campuses in the SUNY system. Similarly, UAlbany ranked 39th out of 1398 postsecondary institutions on the 2025 Social Mobility Index (SMI), which “measures the extent to which a college or university educates more economically disadvantaged students (with family incomes below the national median) at lower tuition and graduates them into good paying jobs” (“2025 Social Mobility Index”). Such analyses convey a sense that we at UAlbany are doing well by our students; we are helping many low-income kids improve their lot in life. Nevertheless, these gains, such as they are, occur within a system characterized by increasing inequality (see Siripurapu), the very same system that marginalized these students and their families in the first place. The fact that a percentage of students at my institution do better than their peers from most other universities does not change the fact that the economic/political system in which they live is structured in ways that do not, in the end, serve their interests as human beings seeking well-being, both individual and collective.

Semester after semester, I have come to know the stories of my students, and—my university’s EMI or SMI rankings notwithstanding—those stories reinforce the larger narrative that emerges from studies like those conducted by Bowles and Gintis: young people from precarious economic circumstances, whose families live on the verge of financial ruin, who have to cut corners in ways that undermine their academic progress, who face uncertainty about whether they will be able to remain in school for another semester or year, who question whether they even belong in college—and whether it is worth the great financial and social risks they face—struggling to reap the seemingly mythical rewards of a college degree.

Semester after semester, my students have written about these challenges, about their worries and fears, and about their hopes. And in their writing, they share deep anxieties and doubts: Do I have what it takes to succeed in college—and life? Should I be borrowing so much money for a degree? Will I be able to pay off my loans? How do I decide whether this major or that one will lead to a good job? My students also write about their successes: earning a good grade in a challenging class, receiving praise from a respected professor, joining the board of a student organization, getting a scholarship or academic award, landing a coveted internship. And they tell the stories of their lives: the daughter of a single mom who worked extra jobs to save money for her daughter’s college education; the brother who washed out of college but encouraged his younger sibling to stick it out; the father who insists on a science major his son hates; the immigrant parents who don’t understand financial aid; the politically awakened young woman who felt estranged from the conservative rural community where she grew up after getting involved in the Black Lives Matter movement on campus. Semester after semester what seemed to matter most to my students was telling

their stories—writing about the joy and pain and challenge of their own lives, writing about their own experiences with bigotry and poverty and love and loss and change, writing to raise their own distinctive and often silenced voices, writing their individual and collective ways to some semblance of agency—writing to realize some truth about their lives, and about life in general.

Significantly, my students told their stories in whatever form was available to them. For their required formal essays—standard research-based academic analyses or arguments—they wrote about important matters in their own lives, even when the ostensible subject of the essay was something else: an analysis of the social, financial, and educational impacts of growing up in a single-parent household, an argument against the permissive social mores in college, an investigation of the stigma associated with mental illness among Latino/Latina students. These essays look, at first glance, like conventional academic writing, but they were actually vehicles for these students to examine and understand their own lived experience, to place that experience in broader social and economic context, and to make sense of who they are as young people confronting the complex challenges of a treacherous world. Focusing, as educators tend to do, on the standard measures of “success,” which, in the case of college writing courses, typically includes the “quality” of the students’ prose, can make it all too easy to overlook how much this work meant to these students—not the quality of their finished essays (or the grades they might have earned for their efforts), but the process of inquiring into their experiences through writing, and feeling validated as a result, gaining a new, if sometimes unsettling, perspective on their lives.

For me, it became impossible to ignore how much these experiences mattered to my students. Increasingly, their inquiries into the pressing questions and problems that shaped their young lives emerged in less-formal writing that I eventually began to ask my students to do as a regular part of my pedagogy. (I say a bit more about this development in Chapter 7.) I begin each class meeting, for example, by inviting students to write about their questions, ideas, or feelings about a specific problem or question or about something happening in their own lives or on our campus. Although these writing activities were intended in part to contribute to students’ development as effective academic writers, the real value of this writing is that it gives students low-stakes opportunities to delve deeply into their own experiences in the world, to identify the challenges they face, and to explore the many difficult but crucial questions they have about living. Over time, it became clear to me how much the students appreciated and benefitted from these writing opportunities, especially when freed from the burden of worrying about their grades. It became clear that the *experience* of writing mattered to them, especially when that experience was driven by genuine inquiry and not circumscribed by the expectations of formal writing assignments. At the beginning of every semester, my students would exhibit skepticism about these writing activities, but they would dutifully complete them as if simply fulfilling another course requirement. But as the semester progressed, their engagement

inevitably intensified and, for most of them, the writing became a genuine act of inquiry. They would write, silently and intently, for the first ten minutes or so of every class meeting. They would write about experiences and ideas and feelings that are at the center of their changing lives. Later, they would tell me how much they valued those opportunities to write about what matters in their lives without worrying about grades and grammar and judgment—to claim their own voices through that intense silent writing, to *be* in their writing.

And in this way, my students helped me gain a different perspective on my concerns about the detrimental impact of mainstream education. They helped me see a way to make my work as a scholar potentially consistent with my vision for a more just and equitable future—and a more humane world. Significantly, their experiences became the embodiment of what I was coming to understand in Freire's theories about the necessity of rethinking the nature of the self and how it emerges in acts of writing. In this regard, my students helped me see writing differently—not exclusively as an essential communicative skill and powerful means of learning, but, more importantly, as a tool for living.

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I am telling this story about my evolution as a writer and scholar in part because it might help explain how I came to appreciate the importance of the *experience* of writing—and illuminate the story I am trying to write about Madeline. The crisis of faith I had as a professional somehow seems similar to the crisis that Madeline must have faced when she was sent away from the Catholic school where she was teaching in Washington, D.C. and where her superiors prevented her from doing the activist work she was engaged in there, which eventually resulted in her decision to leave the convent. She must have believed fervently in her activist work if she was willing to give up her identity as Sister Marlene in order to continue doing that work on behalf of vulnerable students. She must have held an unshakable belief in the rightness of that work if she would walk away from the convent after two decades of devoted service as a Catholic nun. I do not pretend to equate my own professional struggles with Madeline's decision to leave the convent, nor do I see my educational career as equivalent to hers, even if we both understood our work as serving vulnerable students in some way. I am, instead, trying to understand her decision to leave the convent, which seems so consequential a moment in her life and in the lives of others, through the lens of my own experience, which makes her decision seem even more momentous and remarkable.

As I am writing this more than five years after Madeline's death, it strikes me that Freire's Catholic upbringing is relevant here. I wish I knew whether Madeline was aware of Freire's work and, if so, whether she was drawn to it as I have been. She was already an experienced teacher and engaged in social activism at about the time that Freire's writings became available in the U.S. in the early 1970s, and she left the convent as his ideas were beginning to influence progressive educational

movements in the U.S. and elsewhere. Her dedication to her students' well-being, her lifelong fight for social justice and political franchise, her efforts on behalf of racial equality, and her deep belief in the potential power of education to improve the lives of all her students but especially the most vulnerable among them—all these suggest that she shared Freire's most fundamental values as well as his unwavering hope that human life *can* be improved. But would she have agreed with his critique of institutionalized mainstream education, in which she worked for fifty years? Nothing in my memories of her—or in the memories of my relatives who knew her—indicates that she believed the established institutions of formal schooling were so deeply flawed as to be inconsistent with her own beliefs in social justice and racial equality and love for others. The fact that she remained a teacher in a public school for most of her fifty-three-year career suggests that, at the very least, she saw public education as a vehicle for the pursuit of justice and equality, a means of individual agency and societal improvement. Or maybe she understood her work within the education system as a necessary compromise.

I don't think I can know whether Madeline was aware of Freire's work or whether she would have embraced his vision. I want to believe she did. It would be a perfect story if I were able to share a memory of a conversation I had with her about Freire's vision for liberatory education, about implementing his problem-posing method in the urban schools where she taught. I have no such memories. But at this moment, as I am writing this story, I believe she believed in the Freirean ideal of education as a practice of freedom, whether or not she knew of Freire's work.

Sartwell argues that a story like the one I am telling right now—the story of my own development and evolution as a writer and scholar—is driven by the belief that there must be a purpose in what we do and that the trajectory of our lives bends toward that purpose. This is the obsession with teleology that Sartwell abhors, as I noted earlier in this book. I suspect Sartwell is right about all this. Perhaps I am constructing a narrative that assigns coherence and meaning to these disparate events in my past because I need to find purpose in my life as my career as an educator winds down. It might well be that I cannot accept the absoluteness of living wholly in the present. Maybe I just can't accept the notion that we have no purpose other than to live in the moment. Maybe I can't just "let the world be," as Sartwell urges us all do (133). If so, for now—for right now—I accept my inability to accept. Right now, I want to see purpose in Madeline's life—and my own. I want to believe that she lived a meaningful life. I want to believe, with philosopher Todd May, that "meaningfulness lies not in what is achieved or recognized, but in *how* a life is lived" (181). To my mind, there can be little doubt that *how* Madeline lived meets May's criteria for a meaningful life. A *good* life. But like Sartwell, May seeks meaning in a universe that he believes is devoid of it—what he calls "a silent universe"—and Madeline would reject his formulation of meaning. I am certain of that. For her, meaning arose from her fervent and unshakeable belief in a god, in God, which, I think, gave an unquestioned sense

of purpose to her service to others. Right now, I still need to make sense of these seemingly significant events from Madeline's life—and my own—in a way that assigns some kind of meaning to them and identifies in them some kind of truth.

So I am writing this story of my development as a writer and the evolution of my work as a scholar in order to explore a truth about writing that I see as central to the story I am trying to write about Madeline and the truth of her life. I have learned through my journey that writing can make a difference in our lives, that the experience of writing about our own experience can help us makes sense of our lives and, ideally, help us live better lives. That is a truth that I believe is emerging in this moment as I am writing, a true story that is a function of this *praxis* in which I am engaged in this moment. And I am writing about Madeline to understand how storytelling can help us find these truths we need. But I also know that I am finding a truth in this moment of writing. The very act of writing this story matters, right now, and that might be enough.