Chapter 7. Writing as a Tool for Living

> In an important sense, this story in its ongoing (re)patterning is (re)(con)figuring me.
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> – *Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction"*

In September of 2000, I sent a letter to Madeline to apologize for missing her retirement celebration, which took place that summer. I have vivid memories of missing that event because my wife and I took our two sons on a vacation to the west coast to visit some old friends. My first scholarly book, *Literacy Matters*, had just been published, my first writing textbook had been released a few years earlier, I had recently earned tenure, and I was energized by the prospect of building a scholarly reputation in my field. I was also, unawares, entering a period of unsettling questions about writing and teaching that eventually shook the foundations of my longstanding belief in each as an unequivocal *good* (as I explain in Chapter 2). I had yet to begin thinking seriously about the significance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment as a potential source of the transformative capacity of writing, but in retrospect I can see the beginnings of those ideas in the writing I was doing at that time (especially in my 2001 *Kairos* article "Computers, Literacy, and Being"). I understood my work as a small part of ongoing disciplinary conversations about how to enhance the effectiveness of writing instruction and thus contribute to the larger project of improving education. In the midst of these developments, I sent Madeline a copy of *Literacy Matters*.

In this moment, as I am writing these words, I do not recall sending her my book. But I must have done so, because I refer to it directly in that letter of apology that I sent to her in 2000, which I discovered among some old files as I was working on this book some two decades later. In the letter, I explained that I wanted to send her a book as a gift to commemorate her retirement, but I couldn't find the right one. So I sent her a copy of mine. Here's part of what I wrote in that letter:

> When it became clear that I wouldn't be able to attend your celebration, I spent a lot of time trying to find a book to send you as our gift to mark the event. Many titles seemed appropriate but yet not quite right. In the end, I decided to send you my own book, partly because its subject seems rather fitting and partly because it represents an effort to reveal a little about myself as a teacher to you. I suspect you'll find some of the more academic sections … somewhat tedious. But I think the message of the book is one that you'll relate to. At least I hope so.

Leaving aside the stilted, self-serving prose (in a personal letter, no less!), what strikes me most about this passage—and the letter as a whole—as I reread it now,

is what it reveals about how I understood writing—and myself as a writer—at that stage of my career. As I conceived it then, my book was a record of my scholarly work, a text with a "message" that I hoped would resonate with Madeline. My letter seems to reflect a view of the text as unproblematic container of meaning—a version of the "strong-text" conception of literacy, whereby the text becomes a vehicle for conveying my intended meaning (see Brandt, pp. 13ff.).

This is a conception of writing that I explicitly rejected in my scholarly work as I embraced the poststructuralist critique of writing that gained prominence in the field of writing studies in the 1980s and 1990s. A central tenet of that critique is the instability of meaning, which cannot be encoded in a text but must always be constructed and reconstructed in the complex interaction between writer and reader, an interaction that is unavoidably shaped by the multifaceted social, cultural, historical, political, and ideological contexts within which that transaction takes place. In this formulation, meaning is not a fully formed thing that can be stabilized, encoded in, or contained by a text; rather, it is a function of the complex and over-determined process of meaning-making that occurs when a reader engages with a text. Yet my letter to Madeline suggests that as a writer (and teacher), I assumed that my intended meaning is indeed fully formed and stable, encoded in that text and thus available to Madeline exactly as I intended. As I think about it now, I see in that letter vestiges of New Criticism, in which I was trained as an undergraduate English major in the late 1970s but which I rejected as a doctoral student studying in the late 1980s, when the field of composition studies was being reshaped by the so-called "social turn," the influence of postmodern theory, and, a few years later, the emergence of the post-process movement, which held that "neither writing nor reading can be reduced to a systemic process or to a codifiable set of conventions" (Kent, *Paralogic*; qtd. in Breuch 100). It is striking to me now that it took nearly another decade or so of my own writing and thinking, as well as my transformative experience as part of the National Writing Project, before I began to focus my attention on the writer *writing* rather than the writer's writing—that is, on the writer's experience in the moment of writing rather than on the text produced by that act of writing (see Yagelski, "A Thousand Writers Writing"). The evolution (or perhaps development) of this view, which I have described as an ontological view of writing, was, really, a lifelong process, a function of these many different experiences and my ongoing attempts to answer what seemed to me to be fundamental questions about the nature of writing, its function in education, and its role in our lives. In this sense, my development as a writer is the story of the evolution of my conception of writing more so than the development of literate skill or the acquisition of rhetorical knowledge. You can see that conception evolving in *Literacy Matters*; you can see how that text, along with my *Kairos* article that was published a year later, prefigured the theory I would advance in *Writing as a Way of Being*. But in 2000, when I sent *Literacy Matters* to Madeline, my focus was still on the writer's writing. I was still obsessed with the production of text. And I was still emphasizing textual quality in my own teaching.

I do not recall whether I ever had a conversation with Madeline about *Literacy Matters* or about writing and teaching in general. But I know that if I had, it would have been a very different conversation in 2000 than it would have been a decade or so later, by which time my conception of writing had shifted away to a focus on the experience of writing. I suspect she might have resisted this view of writing—and teaching writing—that I was beginning to develop, a view laid out in detail in *Writing as a Way of Being*, which was published more than a decade after her retirement. Although Madeline and I shared a fundamental belief in the transformative power of education and although we embraced the same progressive vision of education as a vehicle for social progress, I doubt that our views about how to tap that power and realize that vision would have coincided. I think we might have agreed on the *why* of education but not so much on the *how* of schooling.

Madeline, I now believe, held views about institutionalized education that were much more conservative and traditional than her progressive political ideology and commitment to social justice might suggest. If she and I had spoken about teaching after her retirement, I suspect she would have pushed back against my growing ambivalence about mainstream writing instruction, which I critique in *Writing as a Way of Being* as "narrowly focused on specified discourse forms (such as narrative, analysis, and dubious forms like the insufferably resilient five-paragraph essay) and a relatively limited set of conventions related to style and mechanics" (25-26). She probably would have defended the traditional skills-based, grammar-focused approach to teaching writing that I had rejected as ineffective and exclusionary. And she probably would have argued that a pedagogy that emphasizes the power of writing to give students voice and enables them to claim agency, as I advocated in *Literacy Matters*, is absent the rigor that is necessary for the students she had taught for so many years to master "standard" English so that they could succeed in mainstream schools: students of color from low-income homes, from communities with few of the resources and advantages that my own children enjoyed when they were school-aged, students for whom the experience of racism characterized their daily lives and circumscribed their opportunities. Madeline, I think, would have espoused the reasoning of scholars, notably Lisa Delpit, who saw in the progressive pedagogies of the Whole Language and writing process movements reflections of White privilege that ultimately rendered those pedagogies less effective for students like Madeline's.

In her influential book *Other People's Children*, Delpit calls into question the emphasis on developing *fluency*, rather than technical skills, that characterized the writing process movement as she experienced it in the 1980s and 1990s, when its advocates, such as Lucy Calkins, were gaining prominence and influencing literacy instruction in K-12 classrooms across the U.S. The conception of fluency that energized the movement, according to Delpit, was a narrow and exclusionary White, middle-class conception—embraced by White, middle-class teachers—that did not encompass the kinds of fluencies demonstrated by Black children

in so many American classrooms: "Maybe," Delpit muses, "these writing process teachers are so adamant about developing fluency because they have not had the opportunity to realize the fluency the kids already possess"—fluency in rap music, for example, or "the verbal creativity and fluency black kids express every day on the playgrounds of America as they devise new insults, new jump-roping chants and new cheers" (17). Black teachers, argues Delpit, recognize this fluency, which is why they focus on academic *skills* that in their view represent "the next step, the step vital to success in America—the appropriation of the oral and written forms demanded by the mainstream" (18). These teachers, Delpit says, appreciate the need for their students from under-represented backgrounds to develop the skills necessary for appropriating mainstream discourse forms because they themselves—teachers from under-represented backgrounds—"have been able to conquer the education system *because* they received the kind of [skills-based] instruction that their white progressive colleagues are denouncing" (19; original emphasis). As I reread Delpit's book now, some thirty years after she published it, I hear Madeline's voice in Delpit's words, and I suspect Madeline would have echoed Delpit's argument, if she and I had had the chance to discuss it.

I wish we had been able to have that conversation. I can imagine my younger self earnestly defending the ideas of my earliest mentors, Donald Murray and Donald Graves, both of whom were giant figures in the writing process movement and whose work profoundly shaped my own perspective on writing and teaching. Indeed, Murray's conception of writing as a "process of discovery through language" ("Teach" 15), which I had naively considered obvious and even simplistic when I first encountered it as a new graduate student in the early 1980s, significantly informed my effort to articulate an ontological theory of writing in *Writing as a Way of Being*. In my imagined conversation with Madeline, I would have advocated an emphasis on many of the principles I learned from Murray and Graves: teaching writing as a process of inquiry, giving students choice in their school-based writing, fostering student voice and agency, focusing on discovery and inquiry before craft and skill, exploring experience through the process of writing. And Madeline, I am fairly sure, would have mounted a Delpit-like argument in favor of skills development: we must first help students master the conventions of mainstream academic prose, emphasizing the importance of form and correctness; student voice emerges from competence, which is the ability to apply the rules in order to use writing as a tool for success in mainstream society. But writing is so much more than learning and applying the rules, I would have argued, so much more than producing sanctioned textual forms on demand for school success. Understood as a practice of being, I would have said, writing can become a powerful tool to help students find their way in a complicated world; it can be a vehicle for exploring their experience in order to better understand themselves in relation to that world. It can be a process of telling true stories about their lives as part of our individual and collective quest to live better together. Your students deserve access to this transformative power of writing, I would have told her, and instruction that

emphasizes skills-development and ignores the experience of writing-in-the-moment might prevent them from realizing that power. In other words, conventional skills-focused instruction can be a means of continuing to oppress your already marginalized students, of rendering them powerless.

As I imagine that conversation now, I can see how much my own conception of writing has evolved over time, how my focus has shifted from text to experience, how different my arguments about what and how and *why* to teach have become in the forty years since I began teaching writing—even as my fundamental Freirean commitments to improving human life through literacy education have remained intact. Indeed, it may well be that those commitments are the key factor in this evolution of my thinking about writing. That is, those commitments enabled me to see validity in the critiques of mainstream schooling and writing instruction by Freire and those in my field, such as Berlin and Brodkey and Shor, who prompted me to rethink my views about—and my practice of—teaching writing. Those commitments, it may be, opened me up to the ontological possibilities that I began to see in writing as I explored Zen and as I encountered alternative writing practices through the National Writing Project. Those commitments pushed me to confront my own complicity, as a White man, in the edifice of institutionalized education that helped perpetuate the racial inequality and social inequity that Madeline devoted her life to fighting. To put it differently, my commitments to the sanctity of human life and to a belief in justice and equality and compassion, values that somehow I embraced very early in my life, no doubt in part because of my Catholic upbringing, seem to have shaped how these many other professional and scholarly influences affected my understanding of what writing can be and informed my views about how it should be taught. As I note in the Preface to this book, Dippre and Smith, in promoting lifespan writing research, argue that "a defining feature of the 'span' of life is the differing contexts across which and with which a writer moves" (27), and they emphasize "the transformative possibilities of context" on the writer and their writing. It now seems evident to me, as I approach the end of a long career, that one crucial constant across these many and varied contexts has been these fundamental commitments that energize my vision for a more just and humane world—commitments, I believe, that Madeline and I shared, though they manifested very differently in our lives. My writing, that is, has evolved as *a function* of these commitments.

If Madeline would have been open to my advocacy for writing instruction that places value on the experience of writing-in-the-moment and its transformative potential, and for a pedagogy that engages students in writing about their lives as a process of truth-seeking, I believe it would have been because we shared these commitments. And indeed, her life experience, especially as a White woman who married a Black man, would have enabled her to understand, in ways that I could not, the potential of writing as a vehicle for empowering marginalized students, for engaging them in the process of truth-seeking whereby their true stories become part of the struggle for a better world, and for facilitating their well-being as

humans who must engage in that struggle in an effort to help envision and create that better world. Our shared commitments, I hope, might also have rendered *me* more sensitive to *difference*, to which I had often been blinded because of my own privilege as a White man, and enabled me to appreciate the need to account for difference in my efforts to understand the transformative power of the experience of writing.

That need was highlighted for me by one of the scholars who served as an external reviewer for my bid for promotion to full professor in 2015. In an incisive evaluation of my scholarly record, that reviewer noted that my efforts to articulate an ontological theory of writing seemed to ignore the matter of cultural difference, as if the experience of writing has nothing to do with the writer's identity or positionality within an inherently racialized and gendered world. Those comments gave me pause (and rightly so), but the problem was more poignantly brought to the fore ten years later, as I was finishing work on this book.

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On a lovely late summer day in February of 2025, I find myself in a conference room at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, engaged in a spirited conversation with Professor Barbara Grant and six doctoral students who are members of a writing group that Barbara has run for more than a decade. Three of the students represent national identities from the Global South: Colombia, India, and Pakistan; one student hails from Canada, another from China (though she now has New Zealand residency), and the sixth, who is from Lebanon, has spent a significant part of her professional life teaching in the Persian Gulf. All six are women, with scholarly interests that include gender and Indigenous memory and academic identity. They are here because they have been part of Barbara's group, where they share their writing but also their experiences and concerns and fears as scholars-in-training. They are here because this writing group has provided a community of diverse writers with like-minded goals who share the challenge of writing their way as outsiders into an academic world that has traditionally been White and Western and male. I am here because they have read an article I co-authored a few years ago with Dan Collins, "Writing Well/Writing to Be Well," which they have invited me to discuss. I am White and Western and male.

In 2024, as I was finalizing plans to be a visiting scholar at the University of Auckland, Barbara extended a gracious invitation for me to meet with this group, and in anticipation of my visit she shared my article with the group members. Now, in early 2025, we are finally together, and the students share their feelings about how that article, with its focus on well-being, resonated with them. For those students, the perspective on writing that Dan and I promote in that article was affirming; it helped them put into perspective their own struggles with academic writing. But at the moment, we are not talking about that piece. Instead, we are talking about an uncertain and treacherous present that seems to portend an
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uncertain and treacherous future—for all of us, but perhaps especially for these deeply thoughtful and engaged doctoral students, all of whom are seeking to become part of academe at a time when academe, like truth, is under a sustained attack fueled by the global rise of fascism.

Each of these students tells a different version of the same basic story about the obstacles they face as women, all but one of them women of color from outside the West, who are seeking entry into the institution of higher education, which they have experienced as a fossilized enclave of Western White male privilege. Indeed, as each of them describes her individual scholarly project, I hear them as part of a collective effort to challenge and transform that exclusionary and threatened institution: one project examines the value of Indigenous ways of knowing that have long been excluded from scholarly inquiry in mainstream academic disciplines; another explores the implications of the rise of a data-driven culture that seeks to quantify education in ways that are ultimately exclusionary; a third investigates how age, ethnicity, sexuality, and the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced women's perception of their bodies, not often for the better. Although these students participate in Barbara's writing group primarily to share their academic writing, which is an essential tool for their professional success, their writing has taken other forms as well and has come to serve as a way for them to understand their experiences and to navigate the challenges they so poignantly describe.

Caro, for instance, who is from Colombia, describes how rethinking writing as a means to well-being has begun to transform her own writing practice and, more movingly, her sense of self as a Latina woman from an Indigenous heritage in South America. In an email she will send to me a few days after this meeting, she will write, "Before learning about your work on writing and well-being, I was really struggling with my own writing. I felt stuck, I read a lot, kept journaling, but nothing related to my PhD was moving forward." She will go on to discuss a presentation that she participated in with some of the other members of Barbara's group. After that presentation, which explored "whether and how well-being might be possible in the academic practice of writing," something shifted for Caro, and she was able to complete a paper on the colonial legacy of academia, a project that is both professional and deeply personal (and which will be published a few months after my visit; see Peña). At this moment during the writing group meeting, we are discussing the potential implications of pursuing an academic career on our sense of self, and I mention Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, which chronicles his journey to academic success as the son of Mexican immigrants, first in Catholic schools in California and then as an undergrad at Stanford and a master's student at Columbia and eventually as a doctoral student in English literature at Berkeley. Rodriguez writes movingly about losing his connection to his Mexican heritage and even his first language of Spanish, and he eventually decides that the personal price he was paying for success in the White, monolingual institution of academic English studies was too great, and he leaves

academe altogether. In her follow-up email to me, Caro will thank me for recommending the book, and she will write that "it's made me realize that part of what was holding my writing back was the sense of separation it brings from my family and hometown. But I'll keep going, I'll keep writing, knowing that my ancestors, my family, and my hometown are significant to the voice I'm trying to find as a scholar." In the writing group discussion, Caro confides that academic writing has long been a struggle for her, but that story is changing as her perspective on writing and her writing practices are changing. Like her peers in Barbara's writing group, Caro tells a story of struggle as someone from a background that has traditionally been excluded from the profession she wishes to enter. The challenge she describes is one in which her effort to find her voice as a scholar cannot be separated from her identity as a woman with indigenous roots from postcolonial Colombia. Like her peers, she is coming to understand that she is writing her way into and through this challenge.

Heather Falconer, who has written provocatively about systemic bias in STEM fields, illuminates this challenge:

> What people do (and say/write) within a given situation is dictated both by what they are physically and cognitively able to do, as well as what they believe they are permitted or forbidden to do based on historically and culturally situated storylines (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 97). Storylines are developed in response to the experiences and encounters individuals have had along their journeys to this moment, but they are also informed by the ways individuals are oriented. (Falconer 31)

In her research, Falconer examines "how race and racism, gender and patriarchy, and class and classism are systematized into the epistemologies, discourses, and practices of STEM disciplines" (28), but her conclusions apply to academe more broadly. And they reinforce what the doctoral students in Barbara's writing group at the University of Auckland describe as they share their stories. Falconer argues that "experiential knowledge (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019, p. 6) is central to understanding the lived experiences of historically marginalized people in STEM. We cannot know the felt experiences without *listening* to their stories (Collins, 2000). Ignoring such stories, or writing them off as outliers, causes harm" (28). The students in Barbara Grant's writing group, all of whom represent identities that have been historically marginalized, refuse to allow their stories to be ignored in this way. For them, writing has become an essential way to be heard, and writing their own true stories is a means for them to insist on being *seen* as well. In doing so, they not only challenge norms of academic writing, but they also engage in writing as an act of truth-seeking.

I endorse and applaud these efforts, and one way I can do so as a White Western man near the end of his career is to *listen*. Silence in the face of injustice can be complicity, but as I have written elsewhere, "intentional, aware, deliberate,

responsible, mindful silence" can be a way of being with others, a vehicle for compassion and empathy (Yagelski, "Writing, Silence, and Well-Being" 16). As Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe note in their volume *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, silence can be conceived as a "'moral posture and rhetorical tactic'—not to be confused with 'passivity or quietism'" (1). In this sense, to listen in silence to the women in Barbara Grant's writing group is to give them space to claim agency. And that can be an act of hope. For despite the dark clouds blown into our lives by the ill winds of fascism, I have hope that the projects these women are pursuing will have their intended effect of changing academe, of making it more inclusive, more responsive to the stunning diversity of the world. I think of recent work I have encountered that lives in this same space occupied by these students. Sharin Shajahan Naomi, for example, has written poignantly about decolonizing knowledge, in part by writing in unconventional forms and for the explicit purpose of challenging the exclusionary traditions of academic work: "As a feminist, Bangladeshi, and spiritual woman, I realized that to bring out the non-western voice and view, I had to craft non-western ways of writing. This non-western way is crafted through alternative epistemology, subjectivity, and style of narratives" (12). Naomi goes on to describe her experience of writing her dissertation in this "alternative" style as a spiritual one, and she argues for an Asian contemplative epistemology, which she defines as "a form of knowing that comes from meditative ways, including mindful states, profound silence and stillness, openness, intense focus and clarity, creating detachment with the contents of mind," which "can be reduced neither to reason nor emotion (Ferrer, 2002). Hence, it can hold both, while at the same time it is beyond" (13). According to Naomi,

> This way of knowing, if combined with critical insight, gives a new insight into self, reality, and social actions (Burggraf, 2007; Klein, 1995). It can bring a new interpretive angle to human experience from a holistic critical perspective. This mode of inquiry includes the use of arts, poetry, photographs, and creative writing in research in ways that share a subtle level of human experience. (13)

Significantly, the scholarship that emerges from this approach is ontological as well as epistemological: "My epistemology presented a subject that refused to identify a singular self with mastery and command over the readers. Instead, there was a dynamic intersubjectivity in my writing through multiplicity and dialogic selves which works as an antidote against conventional western cartesian subjectivity" (14). In other words, a self emerges in the act of writing, which lends significance to the experience of writing. For Naomi, this perspective on academic writing transforms the text as well as the reader's engagement with the text:

> My writing was not to be read, but to be experienced. In this experience, multiple meanings become available and a range

> of emotional, psychological as well as intellectual responses are invoked. Neither the author nor the readers controlled the meaning completely. As a result, knowledge could flow from the co-construction of reality. (14).

To my mind, the students in Barbara's writing group are pursuing scholarly work in this same vein. They are redefining scholarly writing even as their experiences as writers are redefining them as human beings. And there I see cause for genuine optimism about the future.

In the writing group meeting in Auckland, I say so. I tell them that I believe that they themselves and the work they are doing represent the future, a better future. But it is clear to me that the students are skeptical, even as they embrace this view of writing as transformative and see great value in the experience of writing-in-the-moment, even as their own writing is transforming academic discourse. Sensing their skepticism, I offer the disclaimer that perhaps my optimism is a function of my own identity as a Western White man at the end of his academic career and the privilege that identity affords me. There is an awkward pause. They smile, affirming my comment. They all remain hopeful—in a Freirean way—but their struggles as women whose identities have excluded them from the privileges I enjoy are too real, too immediate, too raw, for them to share my optimism. Despite this uncomfortable (for me) realization, the moment reaffirms my belief in the value of the experience of writing, and it leaves me hopeful about the future. It also leaves me shaken.

A few months after that visit to the University of Auckland in early 2025, one of the students, Manal El Mazbouh, published an article in which she argues that academic writing must be more than the production of texts that conform to narrow standards of quality and reflect exclusionary conceptions of knowledge-making. She asserts that academics have "an ethical duty and a practical incentive to enable writers to be 'composers of text,' so 'academic' writing can fulfill its transformative imperative of enabling change for social justice as opposed to fulfilling the 'performativity' of a hollowed-out semblance of an academic text" (27). In other words, academic writing should not erase the writer but become a vehicle for agency in the pursuit of a greater vision for a better future.

Manal's argument might be understood as yet another way to say that how we conceptualize writing matters, and it rekindles my optimism. She focuses on "academic" writing, which is appropriate given how important it is for aspiring scholars to gain entry into their chosen academic fields through their scholarly writing. But it is also appropriate because conventional standards for academic writing—and school-sponsored writing more broadly—have long served normative and exclusionary purposes. As I have argued in my previous work ("A Thousand Writers"; "Writing as Praxis"; *Writing as a Way of Being*), by enacting a Cartesian conception of writing, whereby the writer is separated from the

writing, and by valorizing a certain kind of text, mainstream school-sponsored instruction devalues the experience of writing and thus robs the act of writing of its transformative potential. Manal uses the term "zombification" to describe this dynamic, a startling usage that is also apt in this context. As she demonstrates, academic writing can render the writer invisible—a lifeless zombie—because the conventions of academic writing demand the production of a specialized kind of text that erases the identity of the composer of that text under the guise of presenting objective or "true" knowledge. In other words, the conventions of academic prose purportedly enable the sharing of knowledge that is untainted by the writer's biases or shaped by the writer's identity. This set of standards would seem at first glance to be egalitarian, for in theory all writers are equal in the sense that their identities shouldn't matter; what matters is the validity and reliability of the knowledge they are communicating via the text. In practice, however, erasing the identity of the writer potentially reinforces the marginalizing of those writers whose identities are already marginalized.

If the obsession with a certain standard of textual quality for academic writing is potentially exclusionary (as other scholars, such as Inoue, also claim), then valuing the experience of writing-in-the-moment repositions the writer, placing them at the center of an act of writing and displacing the text itself. That, in turn, can lead to a more inclusive approach to writing instruction.

Manal and her colleagues in Barbara's writing group in Auckland speak passionately about the personal toll academic writing has taken on them. They speak just as passionately about what they have begun to learn about the potential of writing as a process of truth-seeking and also as a vehicle for well-being. Some months after my visit to Auckland, Manal shared her article with me, and in her email she described the joy she experienced in writing her way to a truth about academic writing that previously eluded her. The experience was both revelatory and transformative for her, and it has energized her academic writing as she continues to seek entry into her chosen scholarly discipline.

I wish I were able to share *my* experience in Barbara Grant's writing group with Madeline. I suspect she would see in those women kindred spirits. But I would also want her to see how writing for them is not simply a matter of textual production, of learning rules for producing texts that conform to established academic standards that can exclude and marginalize. Writing has become for them a powerful tool for living, a way of being in the world, a means to powerful truths for living better together. And writing could be all these things for students like those Madeline once taught. What Manal and Caro and their colleagues shared about the transformative impact writing has had on them I have seen with my own students—though it is only in recent years that I have been able to recognize this impact of writing on them and have begun to teach in a way that is intended to foster it.

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In 2013, I had the good fortune to be appointed director of the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry (WCI), which I helped design as part of a revised general education curriculum at the University at Albany (SUNY), where I had been a faculty member since 1995. In the role of WCI director, I regularly taught sections of the required first-year writing course we offered in the program. It was during those early years in WCI that I began to incorporate into my teaching numerous ungraded, low-stakes writing practices that afforded my students opportunities to use writing to explore and make sense of their own experiences—and to do so free from the pressures of meeting standards of form and correctness in academic writing. (I have described these practices in a 2021 article titled "Pedagogical Uses of Writing to Support Well-Being.") Some of these practices, such as impromptu written responses to a text during a class discussion, had been part of my pedagogy since my first years as a writing teacher, but in WCI I dramatically expanded the type and frequency of these practices and made them central to my pedagogy. These activities provided my students with regular and varied opportunities to write in ways that I believe mattered more to them even than the academic skills and knowledge they might have acquired in the course, no matter how important or necessary those skills and knowledge might be. Semester after semester, I watched my students embrace these opportunities and engage in writing more deeply than I had seen in my classes in the past.

If I were able to do so today, I would share with Madeline stories about the impact that these writing practices had on my students—stories in which I think she might see her own students. Stories about students like Camille,[6] the eldest daughter of a single mother from New York City, who became the first person in her family to attend college but who struggled with a sense of guilt about leaving her two younger siblings without their older sister to help care for them; who fought against the feeling that she didn't belong in college, a feeling well documented in the psychological and sociological research as the Imposter Phenomenon, which afflicts young people of color, especially those from low-income backgrounds (Cockley et al.; Peteet et al.). Camille felt inadequate to the task of producing prose that meets the conventional standards for academic writing at the university level, yet her writing in my first-year writing course examined, in in-depth analysis of the kind valued in higher education, the social, economic, and academic obstacles facing students like her from low-income single-parent households and at the same time gave voice to her fears and hopes and dreams as one of those students. She told me at the end of the semester that what she learned most about writing in the course was *the need to write what is true*.

Or Sophia, the daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants, who also struggled with the sense that she didn't belong at my university—not because she doubted her academic skills but because she felt alienated from college life that she saw as antithetical to her strong conservative Catholic faith; who wrote about

6. The names of the three students discussed in this chapter are pseudonyms.

her multi-dimensional and conflicted identity as a young Latina woman and first-generation American; whose writing confronted the question of whether she was "American" at all—a sincere and painful inquiry into her own lived experience that resulted in a more nuanced sense of self and a more confident embrace of her complex identity; who, like Camille, embraced writing as a powerful tool for understanding herself as a young woman becoming.

Or Josh, a young White man from a small Hudson Valley community who literally came out in one of the essays he wrote for my course, an essay in which he told the story of struggling with his sexual identity as a high school student in the face of what he felt were oppressive gender norms and the expectations of the family he loved to be masculine in a way that was consistent with those norms. By the time he enrolled in my writing course as a first-year college student, he had come to terms with his sense of identity and embraced the opportunity that attending college presented him to define himself anew.

All three of these students, like so many of their classmates, used their formal academic assignments as opportunities to confront challenging questions that mattered in their young lives: How does growing up in a single-parent household affect one's academic prospects? How do religion and culture affect one's identity and sense of belonging? How does one define oneself as a sexual being in the context of familial and societal expectations that become obstacles to that identity? But they also took advantage of the many opportunities I gave them to engage in less formal writing as a way to make sense of their experiences: regular ungraded, sometimes impromptu writing activities without any rhetorical exigency, without the pressure of evaluation, and without concern for the form and quality of the text. In those moments, the students wrote to describe, articulate, and understand their experience of themselves in a world whose challenges they were trying to meet; they wrote to give voice to their evolving sense of self, to *be* in the moment of writing. And, as Camille told me, *to write what is true*.

I would share with Madeline these stories of students who were eager to embrace the opportunity to write as a way to live their lives. But I would also emphasize that it was relatively late in my career that I made these opportunities available to my students, as my evolving conception of writing as a way of being and my interest in illuminating the importance of the experience of writing began to reshape my pedagogy and, more important, my sense of purpose in teaching writing, which I now believe is to make available to students the transformative possibilities of writing in order to participate in the larger shared project of imagining, creating, and sustaining a more just, peaceful, and humane world. Had Camille or Sophia or Josh or their classmates in the last decade or so of my career taken my classes in the 1980s or 1990s, they would not have had such experiences; rather, they would have been expected to focus exclusively on learning to produce "good writing" without regard to the impact their writing might have on their own lives, their own sense of being in the world—that is, their focus would have been solely on the text, not the experience of writing and what it can offer them as a tool for living their lives.

What I witnessed with my students in the WCI program seems to be validated by a large body of research from psychology that I came across rather late in my career, during the period (2012 to 2022) when I was designing and directing the WCI program and, as part of that role, investigating methods of enhancing students' writing self-efficacy and, more broadly, their well-being (see Yagelski, "Pedagogical Uses of Writing"; Yagelski and Collins, "Writing Well/Writing to be Well"). This body of research has illuminated the impact of what researchers in psychology call "expressive writing"—that is, expressing in writing one's feelings about traumatic or stressful experiences. (This "expressive" writing is not to be confused with *expressivist* writing or rhetoric, which refers to a particular school of thought in the field of writing studies, associated with influential figures such as Peter Elbow and Donald Murray.) The preeminent authority on this so-called expressive writing is social psychologist James Pennebaker, who, along with his research team, has studied the impact of expressive writing, or "written disclosure," on physical health and emotional well-being since the mid-1980s. Pennebaker's research and the thousands of studies by other researchers who followed his lead document the powerful impact that writing about one's experiences can have on the writer's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being.[7]

7. In 1986, James Pennebaker and his co-author, Sandra Beall, published the first report of an experiment in which they found that writing about traumatic experiences—such as the loss of a loved one or a serious illness—was associated with "long-term decreases in health problems" (Pennebaker and Beall 280). Their experiment seemed to provide evidence that "the mere act of writing about an event and the emotions surrounding it is sufficient to reduce the long-term work of inhibition" (281). In other words, this kind of expressive writing could diminish some of the deleterious physiological and psychological effects of suppressing one's memories of and feelings about a traumatic experience. Serendipitously, in studying the impact of disclosing trauma, Pennebaker and Beall stumbled upon the potential power of *writing* about a traumatic event—as compared to oral discussion of such an event. As they tell it, "we seem to have provided some subjects with a new strategy for coping with both traumatic and significant daily events. … [Some subjects] had begun writing about their experiences on their own after having participated in the experiment" (280). One such participant later told the researchers, "It helped to write things out when I was tense, so now when I'm worried I sit and write it out … later I feel better" (279).

A voluminous body of research has reinforced Pennebaker and Beall's original conclusions about the potential benefits of what is now widely referred to as "expressive writing," not only in therapeutic settings but in a wide range of other contexts as well. For example, studies have found that expressive writing not only contributed to improved grade point averages (Lumley and Provenzano) but also reduced depression in college students (Gortner, Rude, and Pennebaker). Expressive writing also has been shown to have various medical and physiological benefits (Booth, Petrie, and Pennebaker; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, R.; Petrie et al.), including improving symptoms in patients with PTSD (Sloan and Marx). One study even found that expressive writing "may reduce cancer-related symptoms and improve physical functioning in patients with RCC [renal cell

What emerges from this research is a description of writing as a powerful tool for living, a means of understanding and dealing with common but often difficult life challenges. In this arena, writing is not about the production of text or even about communicating ideas or information. It is about how we experience ourselves as beings in the world, about how we make sense of our experiences in the world. Pennebaker notes that for participants in his experiments, "Much more happened than just a recording of traumatic experiences, however. *The writing exercise often changed their lives*. There was something remarkable about their expressing themselves in words" ("Telling Stories" 3; emphasis added). Pennebaker believes that the kind of writing participants in his studies did was fundamentally narrative in character, which helps explain its impact on participants: "the act of constructing stories appeared to be a natural human process that helped individuals understand their experiences and themselves" (3) and "is associated with

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carcinoma]" (Milbury et al. 663). In summarizing this research, Pennebaker and Evans note that expressive writing has been shown to help patients "deal with traumas or other emotional upheavals" and "to bring about healing" (1).

Significantly, the writing reported in these studies had *no* rhetorical exigency. As Pennebaker notes in summarizing the main findings of his studies, "The effects of the writing are not related to the presumed audience. In most studies, participants turn in their writing samples with the understanding that only the experimenters will examine what they have written" ("Telling Stories" 6). The quality and rhetorical effectiveness of the texts that participants produced in these studies was thus irrelevant. What mattered was the *experience* of writing.

Some recent research in neuroscience may lend credence to the view that the experience of writing-in-the-moment can have a significant impact on the writer. For example, one research team tracked brain activity with MRI imaging technology while writers were engaged in different writing tasks (Erhard et al.). As participants "brainstormed" ideas for a story, an area of the brain was activated that is known to be associated with "the integration of interoceptive information and emotional experience" (Erhard et al. 22). In other words, this writing activity stimulated neural pathways involved in regulating physiological sensations, such as hunger, and emotional states like happiness or sadness. Expert writers in the study were also shown to experience a kind of "flow" while composing, whereby technical language skills and rhetorical decisions were performed "in an automatic, unconscious and intuitive way" (21). This phenomenon has been documented in other studies showing that the "experience of flow" requires "a state of transient hypofrontality that enables the temporary suppression of the analytical and meta-conscious capacities of the explicit system" (Dietrich 746). That is, as they write, experienced writers enter a state in which they temporarily ignore rhetorical considerations. This research seems to suggest that removing the rhetorical exigency from an act of writing, even if only temporarily, might suppress a writer's "analytical and meta-conscious capacities" and enable that writer to experience writing-in-the-moment without the anxiety associated with writing that some researchers have described (Daly), which is tied to rhetorical concerns; freed from those concerns, the writer's consciousness is perhaps engaged in a deeper, more profound way—the "flow" that this research identifies—that goes beyond cognitive or analytical problem-solving and encompasses the writer's emotional and physical states of being.

mental and physical health improvement" (11). He concludes, "A constructed story, then, is a type of knowledge that helps to organize the emotional effects of an experience as well as the experience itself" (11).

Interestingly—and perhaps paradoxically—the solitary act of writing about challenging experiences seems to have social benefits. Participants in Pennebaker's studies who wrote without a rhetorical exigency "about emotional topics" or "traumatic experiences" rather than "superficial topics" subsequently engaged in more positive social interactions, such as "talking more to their friends, laughing more, and using more positive emotions in their daily language" (14). These findings lead Pennebaker to conclude that "writing about emotional topics has an immediate positive impact upon the subsequent social interactions of those who write with others in their community" (15). This kind of storytelling, he suggests, "helps us maintain a stable social and emotional life" (15).

As I see it, this intriguing research on expressive writing constitutes powerful evidence of the powerful impact that the experience of writing-in-the-moment can have on the writer writing, on the writer *being*, on the writerly self *becoming* in the moment of writing. It is striking—and dismaying to me—that the view of writing that emerges from this research is not really evident in mainstream education or even in much of the scholarship in the field of writing studies. In formal schooling at all levels of education, writing continues to be conceived, taught, and practiced primarily as a rule-governed communicative skill that is necessary for success in the classroom and, eventually, the workplace. Even when we allow students to write about topics that matter to them, to tell their own stories, we tend to do so in the service of developing proficiency and technical skill and learning to produce a narrow range of specified textual forms, rather than as a way to help them make sense of their lives and to navigate the challenging waters of contemporary life—or to find truth in their experiences in the world. Indeed, in my experience in classrooms at all levels of education over four decades, rarely, if ever, are students invited or allowed to engage in writing as a practice of living or truth-seeking. That should change.

This is the case I would have made to Madeline: that writing is a tool for living, and when engaged in as a practice of living, it can also be a practice of truth-seeking. Students like Camille and Sophia and Josh were not just confronting difficult or traumatic or even mundane experiences when they were writing; they were also realizing truths about themselves and about living. In the past decade and a half, I have written much about how students like them have used writing as a way to realize truths about their lives ("A Thousand Writers"; "Writing as Praxis"). And in doing so, I have posed this question, a question I would pose to Madeline if she were here today: If writing can be a powerful vehicle for transformation in these ways, and if writing our about our experiences in the world can be a means of identifying and sharing the truths we need to live together, why would we teach it as anything else? Why would we narrow the scope of what writing can be so that we teach it as little more than a rule-governed communicative

skill, in the process stripping it of its transformative power? To teach it as such is to send students—young people like Camille and Sophia and Josh—out into a dangerous and complicated world more vulnerable, I believe, without the power of writing as a tool for living to help them confront the dangers and complexities that they will surely face in their lives. And it leaves them without the vital sense of the importance—and challenge—of writing their stories as part of a broader exigency for truth-seeking.[8]

8. I have argued elsewhere that giving students access to the transformative power of writing as a tool for living—valuing the *experience* of writing in instruction—and helping students develop technical and rhetorical skills as writers are not mutually exclusive goals (see Yagelski and Collins). Some empirical evidence has emerged in recent years that underscores this argument but also illuminates potential benefits of giving students opportunities to write as a way to understand their experience in the world and as a tool for living their lives. For example, in his study of an adolescent L2 writer whose first language is Chinese and who engages in various "expressivist" forms of writing to negotiate past trauma and struggles with identity, Jonathan Litten concludes that "[the student's] work constitutes a passionate response to functional literacies, demonstrating the potential for writing instruction beyond mastering steps in process or technical mastery. Her work speaks on behalf of a writing pedagogy that honors the connection between her writing and her being" (406). Although the focus of Litten's study was on examining the student's use of writing to confront the complexities of identity, Litten essentially documents the student's efforts to write about her past as a way to understand herself—that is, to try to write a true story about her life—while developing the kinds of competencies traditionally emphasized in mainstream writing instruction.

Other studies illuminate the impact of writing about topics of personal importance on students' academic performance in content-area learning. One randomized double-blind study of 399 students in an introductory college physics course, in which participants in the treatment group wrote about "their most important values," found that these brief ungraded writing exercises "reduced the male-female performance and learning difference substantially and elevated women's modal grades from the C to B range" (Miyake et al. 1234). Significantly, "The writing exercise [used in this study] is brief (10 to 15 min) and is unrelated to the subject matter of the course" (1235). Previous research using the same kind of writing "intervention" with 243 middle-school students found that the exercise "significantly improved the grades of African American students and reduced the racial achievement gap by 40%" (Cohen et al. 1307). As in Miyake et al., participants in the treatment group in the Cohen et al. study identified a value of importance to them, such as friendship or proficiency in art, and "wrote a brief paragraph about why their selected value(s) were important to them" (Cohen et al. 1308). Like participants in Pennebaker's studies of "expressive" writing, the students in these studies wrote without a rhetorical exigency or concern for the quality of the text, but the effects of these brief ungraded writing activities on their sense of self-efficacy seems to have resulted in greater academic achievement in the specific content area courses in which the students engaged in the writing. These varied bodies of research representing different areas of inquiry (e.g. psychology, writing studies) provide compelling empirical evidence that engaging in writing as a means of exploring personal experience or expressing personally important ideas or opinions can support subject-matter learning and skill development as well as writing

This is what I would say to Madeline. And as I am writing in *this* moment, I'm not sure she would have agreed. For in writing this story about her, I have been encountering truths that are reshaping the story as I am writing it.

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For all Madeline's activism and progressive ideology, which I deeply admired and which endeared her to me, she also had, I am realizing, a more conservative sensibility in some respects, especially when it came to education. As I suggested earlier, I have doubts that she would have embraced critical pedagogy, as I have, and I suspect that she also would have been skeptical about my advocacy for a pedagogy that emphasizes the experience of writing and the practice of writing as a vehicle for truth-seeking. Our respective conceptions of *truth* would likely have diverged, as I think is clear from anecdotes I have shared, such as her visit to the shrine at Częstochowa in Poland or her funeral service, that underscore her deep Catholic faith. For her, I suspect, the questions I have raised about truth in this act of writing would have been largely settled—primarily because of her religious beliefs. As a result, she likely would have resisted my conception of truth as contingent, a function of a sustained, shared process of truth-seeking, as I have tried to articulate it in this book. She and I shared, I believe, a fundamental vision of the possibilities for a better future, a belief in equality and social justice and tolerance, and a hope that human beings can learn to live together peacefully and humanely; we shared a sincere belief in human dignity and the sanctity of human life. But our views about the role and value of institutions in realizing this vision differed, I now think.

Madeline seemed more comfortable than I am with certain structural components of the status quo, such as institutionalized mass education and the capitalist economic system that controls it. If she knew of Freire's work, she likely would have shared his vision for a better future through education but rejected much of his critique of mainstream schooling, a critique that profoundly shaped my own

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ability more generally.

In other words, emphasizing the potential power of the experience of writing does not preclude the development of traditional writing skill in formal instruction. In recent years, a number of writing studies scholars have advocated for pedagogies variously described as "trauma-informed" (Nguyen), mindful or contemplative (Muir and Mathieu; Peary), or emphasizing wellness (Cochran) that reconceive the mainstream writing classroom such that the focus is on student well-being, broadly defined, while retaining traditional goals of skill development. As Nguyen puts it, such courses are designed "to achieve a two-fold learning outcome: (a) develop academic writing competence and (b) through learning to write, discuss and support student well-being" (iii). To my mind, such approaches are consistent with the general argument I have advanced in this book about the need to emphasize the experience of writing in instruction and to encourage students to write their own stories as a process of truth-seeking.
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thinking about education and literacy and energized my work as a teacher and scholar. After her courageous—and, as I now see it, complicated—decision to leave the convent after two decades, during which she taught in various Catholic schools, she began a decades-long career as a public school teacher, serving in mainstream public schools in the Washington D. C. area. Nothing I have learned about her service as a public school teacher and nothing in my memory of my conversations with her or with relatives who knew her suggests that she tried to foster in the public schools where she taught the kind of progressive change she tried to implement in the Catholic schools where she taught as a young nun—efforts that ultimately contributed to her leaving the convent. Surprisingly (to me, at least), Madeline seems to have followed a rather conventional career path as a classroom teacher after leaving the convent. Maybe she believed that her work in mainstream public schools that primarily served students of color was consistent with her social justice ideals and her earlier civil rights activism. In other words, as a public school teacher in urban Washington D.C., Madeline might have found what she had been seeking but was unable to find as a nun teaching in Catholic schools. It may be that she had found the right institutional home for doing work that reflected her beliefs in racial equality and the promise of a better future, trading one institution (Catholic schools) for another (public schooling). It may be that her early anti-establishment activism ultimately led to her becoming part of the establishment.

That is a truth that is emerging in this moment. It is a truth that has emerged from the multilayered and complicated story I am trying to write about why Madeline made that life-changing decision to leave the convent. Earlier in this sustained act of writing, I found myself describing that decision as both messy and beautiful. I now see it as both straightforward and complex, simple but nuanced, whole yet unfinished. It is as straight and crooked as the doorframe that I see differently out of my healthy eye and my damaged eye, as I have described it in Chapter 5.

And the truth about that decision will continue to evolve as I write.

And this, perhaps, is the central truth that is emerging from this writing: that the truths we need might be momentary but are nevertheless essential and always, like our very being, in the process of becoming, never static, never settled once and for all. In this regard, the contingency of truth is not a flaw or weakness but a strength, a source of its value, its power. As Blackburn notes, our efforts to engage in a genuine process of truth-seeking inevitably lead not to a final, objective Truth but rather to contingent truths that we must constantly revisit and refine and adjust and sometimes even reject and replace as we continue to engage in the shared—and fundamentally ethical—project of seeking "better" truths by which to live. Writing, I have come to believe, can be an integral part of this process of truth-seeking and thus a powerful tool for living. Writing is a way not only to confront and explore important and often troubling questions about living but also to live with those questions rather than to seek final answers to them, to inhabit rather than resolve and forget them. The contingent nature of truth and the

need to constantly seek "better" truths by which to live places an ethical burden on the writer, who must live with uncertainty even as they seek to move past it. Trying to write a true story about Madeline is to embody this necessary uncertainty and, more fundamentally, to *enact* the contingency of truth. For if truth is always in the process of becoming, then we must continue writing in order to bring truth into being. In this moment. And the next.

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And in this moment I am thinking once again about philosopher Crispin Sartwell's rejection of *telos*—the view that human life has purpose—and his suspicion of narrative as a way for us to construct "the teleological ordering of time and of the lives that take place in time" (8). In this moment, I find myself returning to his call for us to "stop struggling to reduce everything to means which we can annihilate into ends" (124) and to embrace the present, acknowledging the joys but also the limitations of being human: "What's hopeful about our entrapment in the human, conceived as being a matter of linguistic representation and of practical rationality and of historical time, is precisely that it is a delusion" (132). The hope Sartwell sees lies in recognizing that language is merely "a craft by which we sense our connection to the earth," nothing more. So use it as such, he exhorts us, and let go of the almost irresistible impulse to wield language as a tool to impose order on an unavoidably chaotic world. "Learn to let the world be," he advises (133). And learn just to *be* in that world.

Earnest though this wish might be, Sartwell confides his own struggle to live it. In his effort to reject *project*—to reject the idea that our lives must fulfill some special purpose—he argues that "the point is not to let go of project, but to see that none of us lives by and large in and for projects, except as a self-delusion and avoidance of life" (65). He himself does so, he tells us, by caring for his children and playing music, which, he acknowledges, might seem like projects but which he sees primarily as normal human activities in which to immerse himself. In such activities, he claims, "purpose is achieved precisely at the moment when it fades from awareness; those moments are the extinction of project sought by project" (65). To be fully immersed in the present, in other words, is to be free of the tyranny of telos.

And then he writes this:

> I guess what I'm writing this book to wish is that I could live there more, that I could play more. When I take up more and more of my past life into a narrative, I find there a distance. This effort reflects a need to put things in order, and then I lose a succession of present moments; that is, I lose precisely what I am trying to hold into the narrative. What I am writing to recommend to myself is deeper and longer forms of immersion. The
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> distance I purport to achieve in the narrative—when I think of myself as a character, think of myself outside myself—is a distance from myself. (65-66)

Sartwell wishes to live, even if only momentarily, outside of telos, outside of project. To do so would be to engage in "deeper and longer forms of immersion" in those moments when he lives seemingly without project, in a present not defined by project but rather by *being*. His book is his effort to articulate and justify this wish, to engage in the very kind of project he so earnestly rails against in order to be free of the impulse to engage in project. And in that regard, the book as project paradoxically takes him further from his wish. In the introduction to his book, Sartwell acknowledges that the book is a project rather than the "inarticulate" howl of just *being* that he seeks, a howl that is "not a sign of anything" but "a sonic and *existential* event" (8; emphasis added). "If there could be a book that was a sheer howl," he writes,

> I would try to write it, but instead this book I am actually going to write will itself prowl among texts; this book I am going to write is itself locked into the order of the sign and into teleological order. This book displays my entrapment in language as clearly as anything could, and in that sense it confirms what it attacks. … [T]his book is the disease I am trying to treat; it tries to cure itself above all. I am the person farthest away from the cure that I myself prescribe; this book is an attack on myself, on itself, a structure devoted to its own annihilation. (8)

What Sartwell does not quite see, does not recognize, I think, is that although his book might be "locked … into the teleological order," the *writing* is not. The act of writing his book, the moments of writing, are a kind of enactment of his desire to live in the present, to be outside of project, to reject the need to impose order on his life and just *be*—like caring for his children or playing music—even if the writing is part of his project, even if his project is writing to produce a text that rejects project. In those moments of writing, he is realizing his vision of letting go, of being fully present in the moment. The experience of writing-in-the-moment *is* a letting go, an immersion in the moment, which is what he seeks. He appropriately sees the *book*—that is, the production of a text—as a project, but he does not seem to realize that the *writing*—the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment—is the realization of his wish to be outside of project, even if only momentarily. And this is in part because he sees written language, like all language, as a prison house because of its inability to fully capture experience. But the experience of writing-in-the-moment is not inherently an effort to capture or represent experience but rather to *experience* the moment itself, to be immersed in that moment, to let go in that moment of writing, even if a text is eventually produced. And, paradoxically, this letting go is possible *because* of language: an

act of writing is an immersion in language that enables the writer to *be*; it is an act of becoming whereby the writerly self is brought into being in that moment of writing (see pp. 112ff. in *Writing as a Way of Being*). For the experience of writing-in-the-moment is not the production of text. They are not the same. Moreover, that moment of writing, that immersion in the moment of writing, is an implicit rejection of the understandable human impulse to impose order on our experience, a kind of letting go of the impulse to narrativize our experience that Sartwell seeks to avoid, for it encompasses past and future as well as present. In that sense, the experience of writing-in-the-moment enables us to be in that moment and outside it at the same time, to transcend time in precisely the way Sartwell desires. Even when ostensibly writing a narrative, even when writing true stories about our lives, we are momentarily free from the impulse to impose order on experience when we are immersed in that moment of writing.

What I wish to say to Crispin Sartwell, then, is that the writing and the text are not one and the same. The text might be a project—or a reflection of project, of *telos*—but the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment need not be. And his experience in writing that text is *not* the text; it cannot be contained in the text, as he himself argues. But the experience occurred nonetheless, and its impact on him remains, whether the text—his book—is a project or not. What I wish to say to Crispin Sartwell is that a potential solution to the problem he sees with his book—the problem that his book is an enactment of the very same kind of project he wishes to reject—lies in reconceiving writing as an ontological act and thus freeing the act of writing itself from rhetorical exigency and the tyranny of textual production. In doing so, he can free himself from *project* even as he engages in a project.

As for Sartwell's worry about narrative and our collective obsession with constructing coherent stories to give order and meaning to our lives, I would say this: the truths we might identify in the process of trying to write stories about our experiences in the world have value even if the stories themselves are inevitably constructions, partial and incomplete, even delusional, incapable of fully capturing experience or imposing order on chaos, as he argues. The value of these stories lies in helping us identify truths we need to live better together on this earth, in that chaos. We need not succumb to the delusion of narrativizing experience, which Sartwell wishes to reject, by creating narratives to understand experience and seek truth in it. Writing our stories as part of the process of truth-seeking is not the same as the narrativizing he criticizes. We can write stories in the ongoing effort to identify truths by which to live better together while at the same time recognizing the potential dangers of using narrative to sustain delusions of order and control. In other words, the act of writing true stories can be a way to use narrative in the service of truth-seeking while acknowledging its limitations and resisting its dangers. We can use narrative to identify truths we need without seeing the narrative as truth.

This is what I would say to Crispin Sartwell. To my mind, his provocative critique advances our collective understanding of the need to reconceive writing as more than the production of text.

This is also what I would have said to Madeline in my imagined conversation with her about teaching and writing. I would point to some of the promising ways that writing is being reconceived today by contemporary scholars, such as Marilyn Cooper, who notes that "studies in cognitive ethology, cybernetics, and neurology have undermined the belief that writing is merely thought on paper, thought on screen" (47). Like some other contemporary theorists (Boyle; Crawford), Cooper draws on current thinking in physics and psychology to reject the simplistic but widespread view of writing as a verbatim reflection of thinking; she challenges the idea that writing is a function of complex cognitive processes that reflect intention. "We know that the thinking involved in writing is not only limited to rational conscious thought," she writes, drawing on physicist Karen Barad's theories, "but is *as much a behavior as any action or feeling*. We think with our bodies … and everything we make, from texts to technologies, are material entities entangled in one reality" (47; emphasis added). All of this is embodied in the moment of writing, in the experience of writing-in-the-moment, no matter what sort of text, if any, might result from that act.

I would say this again, too: To conceive of writing exclusively as a means of producing a text is to miss the potential power of an act of writing. It is to ignore the transformative capacity of the experience of writing-in-the-moment. It is to limit the possibilities of writing as a process of truth-seeking. I did not grasp this truth about writing for the majority of my career as a writing teacher and scholar. I wish I had. But I also know that it is unavoidable that one's conception of writing will evolve over time, shaped by experiences and forces far too numerous to describe. I have been writing this story about Madeline as a way to document the evolution of my own thinking about writing, and as I have tried to show in writing this story, how we conceive of writing matters, not just in terms of how and what we write but, more important, *why* we write.

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In late 2022, nationally syndicated columnist Michael Gerson published an essay in the *Washington Post* in which he wondered why Americans who are Christians would support the decidedly un-Christian politician Donald Trump. In trying to make sense of Christian support for a candidate who seemingly rejects so much of what Christians believe and value, Gerson presented the teachings of Jesus Christ as a progressive message about how to live rather than as a theology. "Jesus," Gerson writes,

> thought He could implant a new way of life on Earth. Defying most historical practice and precedent, He sought to reform human affairs in ways that privilege the poor, the prisoner, the blind, the oppressed. He wanted to put the joy, freedom and healing of outcasts at the center of a new era. At least trying to
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> live under the inspiration of this good news lends purpose to our days and nobility to our failure.

In this essay, Gerson rejects the notion that Christians who seek social or political influence should align themselves with "groups that fight for their narrow rights — and certainly not those animated by hatred, fear, phobias, vengeance or violence." Instead, Gerson calls on Christians "to be ambassadors of a kingdom of hope, mercy, justice and grace"—in other words, to live their lives according to Christ's message of love. "God's call to us," Gerson goes on, "—while not simplifying our existence—does ennoble it. It is the invitation to a life marked by meaning. And even when, as mortality dictates, we walk the path we had feared to tread, it can be a pilgrimage, in which all is lost, and all is found."

Reading Gerson's essay in late 2022, I could not help thinking of my cousin Madeline. I began writing this story in order to identify truths about Madeline's life and to determine the extent to which she lived a meaningful life, as philosopher Todd May defines it. Gerson's essay seemed to articulate a compelling way to define Madeline's life as meaningful, a way in which she herself might have defined it. And as I am writing in this moment, I see more clearly how this effort to write a true story about her life and to understand her decision to leave the convent has also been a way to try to understand my own life—and what it might mean at this moment in time, when I am at the end of a career that I would like to describe as meaningful. This story about Madeline is also a story about the evolution of my conception of writing as an ontological act and, ultimately, a process of truth-seeking. It is an effort to declare the importance of understanding writing in this way—and to assign meaning to my lifelong effort to understand writing. Such an effort might simply be a reflection of my own arrogance, an act of hubris, of ego, maybe even of desperation—a reflection of my need to see value and purpose in my work, the very same desperate need to see my life as *project* that Sartwell fervently wishes to resist in his life.

That is a truth that has been emerging in this experience of writing this story—*these* stories. If Madeline's story is complicated, so is mine. It reflects an effort to find or construct meaning that might not exist, to declare some sort of value to this lifelong project of mine that might be as fleeting and insubstantial as this moment I am experiencing right now. In that sense, this writing is a *howl* of the kind Sartwell describes, but a howl that proclaims, "This matters! *I* matter!" It is a howl that fades as soon as it is made. As Sartwell might say, this story of my evolution as a writer and scholar is my doomed effort to engage in a project that reflects purpose and to claim significance in that project, and it is a delusion.

If that is so, so be it. I acknowledge and embrace the delusion, even as this project of trying to write true stories about Madeline and about myself is a futile attempt to deny that delusion. For if the conception of writing that I have been trying to articulate and enact in telling Madeline's story has any validity, and if writing a story about her as a way to tell my own story has illuminated—for you

and for me—the potential of writing as a process of truth-seeking, then perhaps this effort—which is really nothing more than one moment that encompasses every other moment of writing that has defined my life and my career as a writer and teacher and scholar—is worthwhile.

But it is also true that this act of writing is its own justification. In this moment, that is really all that matters. I *am* in this moment of writing. And this moment of writing also brings Madeline into being. Her own lifelong mission to serve others continues in this story, in this moment in which I am writing this true story about her life. And although this story, this text, might be finished, the writing continues.