

Preface

Actually, when I write there is a feeling of necessity, of something that is stronger than myself that demands that I must write as I write.

– *Jacques Derrida*

Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant.

– *Emily Dickinson*

Sometime in early 1982, newly married and a little more than a year after graduating from college, I was living in my hometown, Dickson City, PA, trying to make a living as a freelance writer. One day I stopped at a local gas station, and I chatted with the owner, Johnny, as he pumped fuel into my car. I had known Johnny since I was very young. He sponsored one of our local little league baseball teams and was well known in our small town. My dad always bought gas there, and once I began to drive, so did I. On this day, as Johnny and I made small talk, he told me that he had recently read an article of mine that had been published a few months earlier in a magazine called *Country Journal* (which has long since gone out of print). I was surprised that he knew about the article, or even that I was a writer, and maybe even more surprised to learn that he subscribed to the magazine, which no one else I knew at the time was even aware of. As he finished filling my car, Johnny asked whether I was working on other articles for the magazine, and we talked a few minutes more about those projects. I paid him, and as I got in my car to leave, he said, “You’re a good writer.” It was as great a compliment as anyone could have given me.

The following year I enrolled in a master’s program in English at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), where I was introduced to the academic field referred to as rhetoric and composition (also called composition studies or writing studies). At UNH, I taught my first writing courses as a graduate teaching assistant, and I met others who, like me, were trying to establish themselves as writers while studying composition theory and pedagogy. I also met Donald Murray, whose ideas about writing provided the framework for the process-oriented pedagogy that characterized the first-year composition courses there. Don was the figurehead for the composition program at UNH as well as a major figure in the field, and he became my first mentor as a writing teacher. As a newcomer to this emerging academic field of “Rhet/Comp,” I was becoming aware of Don’s stature in the field, but I also learned that he had been a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist before joining the English department at UNH. To me, no matter how “big” he was in the field I would soon seek to enter, he was, first and foremost, a writer. And like my peers in the graduate program, I sought his guidance and approval. Don was a genuinely warm and approachable person who was generous with his

time, especially given the many demands we students placed on him. So I felt fortunate when he agreed to meet with me early in my first year in the program. Over lunch we talked about the field of composition, the teaching of writing, available graduate courses—the kinds of things beginning grad students tended to discuss with their professors. But the conversation seemed to shift when Don asked me about my background and learned that I was a published writer who had been earning a paltry living for a few years by selling articles to magazines and newspapers. I cannot recall the specifics of that conversation, but it seemed to me that my admittedly limited track record as a published writer gave me a measure of credibility in Don's eyes. I do remember him saying at one point, "Look, you're a writer. So write." I left that meeting elated. To me, Don Murray's comment reinforced what Johnny had said to me. I was a writer. It was an identity I embraced. And it would come to define my life.

I have often wondered why. I was a first-generation college student, the son of a father who worked variously as a salesperson and travel agent and a mother who was a secretary and then a caterer. During my second year of college, my parents bought a small restaurant, but it closed after only a few years, after which my father worked in the mail room at a nearby university and my mother managed stores for a small, locally owned women's clothing business. Neither had any interest in writing or literature, though my father was an avid reader of history and an amateur artist who spent time in retirement painting landscapes. None of my four siblings, two of whom earned college degrees, pursued careers that focused on writing or creative or scholarly endeavors. My grandfathers were coal miners, and my grandmothers were a factory worker (paternal) and a tavern owner and caterer (maternal). From an early age I was a good student who was expected to earn good grades, but none of my teachers encouraged my writing, in which—I now realize—I showed an intense interest that would have been unusual among my classmates. In seventh grade, with a few of those classmates, I started and wrote for a short-lived school newsletter, and in eighth grade I co-wrote with some friends a satiric play that we performed at a school festival. In high school I began writing songs with my guitar. Despite these and other non-academic writing activities and despite my success with school-sponsored writing assignments, my teachers seemed oblivious to my emerging passion for writing. Save one: Mr. Vanston, my senior high school AP English teacher, a rather eccentric full-time undertaker who taught English part-time at the Jesuit high school I attended. Mr. Vanston, whose wry cynicism I neither understood nor enjoyed, intimidated me, but I was drawn to his knowledge and obvious love of American literature. Sometime during my senior year, he read a few poems I had written, and one day in front of the entire AP English class, he praised them. To that point, Mr. Vanston seemed barely aware of my existence—at least, that's how it felt to me—and had seen only my academic writing, which was exclusively in the form of conventional analyses of the canonized literary texts we were assigned: novels, stories, essays, and poems by Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Dickinson, Emerson, Hemingway,

and Fitzgerald. But in a pedagogical practice that I now recognize as unconventional, he allowed us to submit original stories or poems in place of the required weekly literary analysis essays. He never commented much on those academic essays of mine, other than to grade them, but his surprised and positive reaction to my poems I took as validation of my writing.

It wasn't until I was a junior in college that a professional writer named Robert Gannon, who taught non-fiction writing at Penn State and who had published numerous books and hundreds of magazine articles, primarily on scientific topics, encouraged me to pursue writing professionally. It was because of Bob Gannon's guidance that I was able to secure my first magazine assignment and publish my first newspaper article—two years before I graduated from college.

Looking back now—as I come to the end of the career that, arguably, began in Gannon's non-fiction article-writing course at Penn State in the late 1970s—I can craft a coherent narrative about how I got from that point to where I am now as a writer. And to some extent, this book includes that narrative. Or a version of it. And yet, as I try to tell this story about my development as a writer as part of another—distinct but related—story about my cousin Madeline, I wonder how it was that I found myself in Bob Gannon's class, which I chose as an elective among the many traditional survey and genre courses that were available to English majors. What drove me to seek the guidance that Gannon eventually gave me? What factors nurtured my desire to write and shaped my decisions then—and later—to pursue this career that evolved from writer to writing scholar?

According to Ryan Dippre and Anna Smith, “A defining feature of the ‘span’ of life is the differing contexts across which and with which a writer moves” (27). This seems self-evident, and much of this book is about how *context*, in all its “protean” complexity (to use Dippre and Smith's term), influenced my development as a writer—and shaped the remarkable life of my cousin Madeline, whose story is part of my own. This book is the story of my effort to tell a true story about her life, and that effort becomes the vehicle for a parallel story: how I became the writer I am now and, more to the point, how my conception of writing evolved from a conventional focus on textual production to an understanding of writing as an ontological act and a focus on the experience of writing-in-the-moment. Not only do these intertwined stories emerge from complex and varied contexts, but they also are being written in yet another complex and fluid context in this moment—which inevitably shapes those previous moments, as I demonstrate in this book. In their examination of context for writing, Dippre and Smith underscore this complexity, arguing that “thinking of context as protean can launch the transformative possibilities of context to the fore of our thoughts when working to imagine writing through the lifespan” (28). The story of my evolution as a writer might serve to illuminate these “transformative possibilities.” But my story also raises questions about the different ways in which these possibilities can emerge from the same context.

In my case, there always seemed to be a *need* to write. I cannot recall a time when I didn't write—or didn't want to write. Nor do I recall imagining a life

without writing somehow at its center. I don't know where this need to write came from. No one else in my family has ever engaged in writing in anything like the way it has been central to my life. And no one in my family ever displayed a desire—a need—to write. We all were exposed to similar social forces that paradoxically encouraged and discouraged writing as anything other than school-sponsored or utilitarian. We all grew up in the same small town, went to the same small Catholic elementary school, and shared similar formative experiences with literacy as kids, students, and young adults in those contexts—all of which circumscribed our individual literate development, but somehow in very different ways.

Dippre and Smith argue that context does not exist separately from actors but is, rather, co-constructed. And “if actors co-construct context as they construct social order, we can begin to think about the ways in which context participates in that co-construction.” How, Dippre and Smith ask,

do the resources that actors talk and act into meaning in a given moment emerge from the talking and acting that went on in the moment before? In the moment that follows? Furthermore, how do these resources shape the talking and acting that goes on within that moment? If context is tied to history through the work of relocalization, how might the protean nature of that context enable actors to untie and retie various historic threads in the production of the moment? The protean nature of context enables a multiplicity of alternatives in any given moment of social action that might be recognized by members of the scene in question as legitimate and meaningful. (Dippre and Smith 32)

This understanding of context seems to offer at least one way to answer my questions about why I felt this intense need to write from an early age while those with whom I grew up in similar circumstances did not. But the proverbial devil is in the details: in the “multiplicity of alternatives in any given moment of social action” to which Dippre and Smith refer. And this book is, in large measure, a detailed account of the evolution of my own writing—especially my conception of what writing is and what it is for—as it emerged from those many alternatives over time. Dippre and Phillips describe the purpose of lifespan writing research as an attempt “to build accounts of whether and how writers and writing change throughout the duration and breadth of the lifespan” (quoted in Dippre, p. 4). This book provides an unequivocal yes to the question of *whether* writers and writing change over one's lifespan; the question of *how* is more complicated. This writing that you are reading is an account, imperfect though it may be, of how this writer and his writing have changed over time.

In the following pages, I tell a story of my effort to write a true story about a remarkable person, my cousin Madeline, whose life affected so many others, including me, in profound ways. This is a story about finding truth in a life, through

writing, and why that matters. And in telling that story, I tell the story of how my conception of writing has changed over time and why I believe *that* matters. Significantly, this story of my effort to write a true story about Madeline is also an *enactment* of the conception of writing that has emerged from my scholarly inquiry over time: a conception of writing as ontological, as a way of being, that illuminates the transformative capacity of the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment. In some of my scholarly writing, I have described this development of my thinking as a shift in focus from the *writer's writing* to the *writer writing* ("A Thousand Writers"; *Writing as a Way of Being*; "Writing as Praxis"). This way of thinking about writing means that to be a *writer* is not just about producing texts, as I long believed; it is also—and more importantly—about engaging in an act of writing-in-the-moment as a way to make sense of our experiences in the world and to seek truth in that moment of writing. In that regard, this book is ultimately an argument for a way of understanding writing as more than textual production, as more than a communicative act, as more than a social or cognitive process: as a process of truth-seeking.

As I come to the end of my career as a writer and scholar, as I witness changes in the world that I did not think possible—changes that have shaken the Freirean sense of hope that I have tried to embrace throughout my career—I have come to appreciate more profoundly the pressing need to seek truth and to protect the communal process of finding shared truths by which we can live humanely and peacefully together. Much of this book is about the emergence of this need to place a viable shared conception of truth at the center of what we do, not only as writers and scholars and educators but also as human beings who must live together in this threatened world we share. In some ways, this is an old project, the value of which I am only now, late in my life, coming to appreciate. Early in my scholarly training I was introduced to the Sophists, who sought truth in the practical realities of human life rather than in metaphysical realms, and I wrestled with the problem of defining rhetorical practice as more than *techné*, as more than a set of communicative skills that could be turned to any purpose, good or ill. My thinking was shaped by the work of scholars like Susan Jarrett and Barbara Couture, who pressed the field to confront this problem, anticipating, perhaps, how the lack of a shared conception of truth—or at least an agreement that such a conception is possible and necessary—would become central to the resurgence of fascism that we are witnessing as I write these words in 2025, both here in the U.S. and around the world. Rhetoric, these scholars argued, must ultimately be about truth, and slowly I came to appreciate why this problem remains central to the discipline to which I devoted my career. Powerful new technologies and the recent emergence of artificial intelligence have changed the game in important ways, but the need for honest and ethical truth-seeking seems as pressing as ever. Writing, I have to believe, can be central to that process.

Very early on I was influenced by the work of scholars who emphasized the inherently ideological and political dimensions of writing practices and pedagogies,

especially Richard Ohmann and James Berlin (whose colleague I was privileged to be at Purdue University for a few short years before his untimely death in 1994). Their work, especially Ohmann's *English in America* and Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*, helped me begin to appreciate the complicated ways in which writing functions in Western society. As this book will demonstrate, Paulo Freire's work, which informed the writing of Berlin and other influential scholars in writing studies, became central to the evolution of my thinking about writing, and I have returned to it time and again over the four decades since I first entered graduate study. I return to it in this book, too, in part because his ideas reward sustained study but also because they are relevant to *this* moment. The fundamental ideas that inform his theories about literacy—that teaching literacy is inherently political, that language is an essential tool for human agency, and that truth is essential for liberation—might be self-evident at this point, but as I survey the current landscape of writing studies, these ideas, despite their complexity and significance, seem so taken-for-granted as to be almost ignored. They should not be. I see little in current scholarly conversations that should call into question Freire's vision for literacy instruction whose purpose is to enable students to become “more fully human” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 44) and to resist the dehumanization that results from the oppression brought on not only by fascism but also by established political and economic structures in our ostensibly democratic society. In this regard, the scholarship of Freire and those who adopted his ideas in their work never seems dated. Current scholars stand on their shoulders.

What Berlin and Ohmann and Jarratt and Couture—and Jackie Jones Royster and Deborah Brodkey and John Trimbur and many other scholars who are sometimes associated with what came to be called the “social turn” in writing studies—really taught us, I believe, is that how we understand writing is inseparable from the writing practices that characterize mainstream schooling, which continues to valorize the production of a narrow range of texts and serves as a tool for disciplining young minds so that they are prevented from experiencing the transformative potential of writing; as a result, mainstream writing instruction represents an obstacle to the development of the critical consciousness that Freire believed was essential for liberation, and it obstructs that process in precisely the ways Freire describes in his famous “banking model” critique (*Oppressed*, chapter 2). Berlin famously writes in a 1988 *College English* article that “a way of teaching is never innocent” (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 492) but is inherently ideological, which is another way of saying that how we conceive of writing matters, for our pedagogies rest on the foundation of our conception of writing, consciously adopted or not.

On this insight, I vividly remember Janet Emig castigating Berlin in her keynote address at a conference at UNH a few months after that article, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom,” was published in 1988. She was incensed that Berlin classified her work as “cognitivist,” not only because doing so was reductive but also because she understood the power of theoretical ideas about

writing and how that power can be turned to political purposes, those that are nefarious as well as those that are ethically sound. At the time, I was in my first year as a doctoral student at Ohio State, where my thinking would be guided by Andrea Lunsford and Edward Corbett and other scholars who approached their work with a deep sense of ethical responsibility. But sitting in the audience at that conference, I did not quite appreciate the importance of the moment, nor did I fully understand the reason for Emig's ire. All these years later, older now than Emig was then, I think I do. She was not only rejecting the label of "cognitivist" as a description of her views on writing; she was also objecting, I believe, to the ways in which Berlin's classification system oversimplified writing and undermined the power of the very ideas about writing that Emig set forth in her own work, most significantly in her article "Writing as a Mode of Learning." Recalling that moment all these years later, I think Emig's anger was justified. I will say again: how we conceptualize writing matters. And we should do so carefully, intentionally, ethically, and with humility. Together.

This book, then, is a project of reconceptualizing writing in ways that support ethical truth-seeking and oppose oppression. It documents the evolution of my own theoretical view of writing as an ontological act and a process of truth-seeking. At the same time, it *enacts* that theory in telling the story of my cousin Madeline, who sought her own truth as she fought for justice, peace, and tolerance as a Catholic nun who became part of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In that regard, the project of telling the story of my development as a writer, as part of the emerging project of lifespan writing research in this field of writing studies, is also a continuation of the age-old effort to work out the relationship between language and truth; this project is thus part of the never-ending struggle to imagine and create a more just, humane, and peaceful world. Together.