

Peter Elbow

TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FREEWRITING

A scene. I am leading a workshop for teachers. I introduce freewriting as merely a first thing: easiest, lowest level, not very complicated—good for getting started. I don't allocate much time: ten minutes for writing, ten for brief reactions. This is all just warming up and going on to other more complicated activities in teaching writing—activities that will take more time to try out and discuss. But as we talk about it we tangle. Some love freewriting. A few even get what I would call too enthusiastic, going overboard—developing a reactive revulsion at all the planning and care they'd always associated with writing: breaking out, spontaneity is all, "free at last." But others are deeply distrustful, disturbed, critical. Freewriting touches some nerve. We fight. Finally I get tired of the fighting and defending—or suddenly realize how much time has gone by. "Let's move on, this is not the main thing, it's just one of many kinds of writing—options, spectrum, no big deal."

After this happened a number of times I began to sense the pattern and finally realized it wasn't just *they* who were getting caught up in it. "No big deal," I say, so I can extricate myself from the tangle—but finally I realize that it is a big deal for *me*. I must admit to myself and to others that freewriting may be what I care

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about most in writing and teaching writing. I learn the most from it. I get my best ideas and writing from it. I get my best group- and community-work done that way. I feel most myself when I freewrite. I think freewriting helps my students more than anything else I show them, and they usually agree with me over the years in formal and informal evaluations (and often the same response from teachers I work with). I'm bemused that I work so hard teaching complicated ideas and procedures, yet at the end they say they learned most from what I taught them in the first half hour of the first class (though I use it extensively throughout the term).

But when I do workshops for teachers I sometimes forget about the depth of my personal connection to freewriting, how much I've cathected it, because I want so badly to be pragmatic and show how it's "just a tool": useful to one and all, no ideology attached.

In this chapter, then, let me try to tell why freewriting is not just a handy-dandy tool but something at the center of what I do as a writer and a teacher. I started out writing a considerably different chapter—more impersonal and analytic. It got soggy and I gradually sensed I should focus on how I use and experience freewriting. But I'll also try to draw conclusions.

Freewriting Without Knowing It: Desperation Journal Writing

What may have gotten me most personally involved with freewriting was, perhaps fittingly, my use of something like freewriting for my own personal life. There was a long period of struggle in my life, almost a decade, when intermittently I felt at the end of my tether. When I experienced myself as really stuck, nothing I did seemed to help me or diminish the pain. But I'd kept a kind of diary for a while, and so at really stuck times I took to simply sitting down at the typewriter and trying to *say* or *blurt* everything and anything I could. I remember sometimes sitting on the floor—I'm not sure why, but probably as a kind of bodily acting out of my sense of desperation. I could type fast and I learned that I could just let myself flow into words with a kind of intensity. When I felt myself shouting I used all caps. This process seemed to help more than anything else, and in this way I drifted into what I now take as the experiential germ of freewriting—the "freewriting muscle": don't plan, don't stop, trust that something will come—all in the interest of getting oneself "rolling" or "steaming along" into a more intense state of perception and language production. I don't think this was a conscious methodology—just a vague awareness that it helped.¹

This was very private writing. I've never shared it and won't

share more than a few short passages here. But the fact that I can do so after twenty-five years—you will not have failed to notice—shows that I saved it. It felt precious to me.

There were all kinds of writing jumbled up in these hundreds of single-spaced typed pages. Anyone who has kept a diary in hard times can imagine what's there. For me the characteristic move was to start from feelings and seek relief in trying to figure things out:

I'm being driven out of my mind by — — —. What power can I gain over it by this process. Maybe the fact that it is exceedingly hard to get myself to sit down and deal with it on typewriter is clue that it will be effective—ie, that the demons inside don't want me to do this.

But there was more naked blurting too. I began one long entry like this:

Please let me be able to face up to what it is that is bugging me and face it and get through it and come out on the other side.

In this passage I seem to be tacitly using the genre of prayer or supplication—I'm not sure to whom. Prayer was a usable if leftover genre for me since it had been an important part of my life, and I hadn't been above asking for personal favors.

Sometimes in desperation I ranted and raved. Toward the end of a very long entry—in effect, working myself up over three or four pages into a frenzy—I wrote:

AND LESS THAN THAT I WILL REFUSE! LESS THAN THAT IS UNSATISFACTORY! LESS THAN THAT IS WORTHY OF HATE! LESS THAN THAT I WILL REFUSE. AND I WILL BE ANGRY. AND I WILL ACCEPT NOTHING FROM THIS UNIVERSE: I WILL ACCEPT NOTHING. I WILL ACCEPT NO WARMTH, NO COMFORT, NO FOOD, NO GIFT, NO ANYTHING UNTIL. . . . [going on and on and ending with] I HATE EVERYBODY.

Two things strike me (besides the purple theatricality—which I didn't experience that way at the time). First, I was using this private writing to allow myself kinds of discourse or register I couldn't otherwise allow myself (my public language being rather controlled). The basic impulse was to find words for what I was experiencing; somehow it helped to blurt rather than to try to be careful. Second, even in this ranting I see a kind of drive toward analysis that the reader might not notice: by letting myself rave, I helped myself catch a glimpse I hadn't had before of the crucial

pattern in my inner life—helped myself admit to myself, “I *insist* on cutting off my nose to spite my face! And I refuse to do otherwise.”

In the next excerpt I explore the writing-thinking-discovery process itself (in a passage coming on the fourth single-spaced page of a very long entry):

—There is a moral in what I’ve done tonight and also last Sunday most of the day. On both occasions I was bothered by feelings, but didn’t know what they were. I felt helpless both times. Tended to vacillate and wander around and do nothing. Same thing had happened an infinite number of times in the past and resulted in hours or days of compulsive wandering and brooding and being in irons and getting nowhere—ending only when fortuitous circumstances jolted me out of it. BUT these two times I somehow had the determination to sit down with the typewriter. And the fact seems to be that once I do that, and once I begin simply to line up the data—my feelings and actions—I start to see and sense functionalities and see relationships. And that produces both insights and even new feelings. BUT THINKING AND BROODING NEVER WORKED: IT SEEMS TO REQUIRE THE WRITING OF THEM OUT. Like writing papers—once one can get writing, things—and *big* things—begin to come. REMEMBER ALSO THAT IT TENDS TO BE DEAD END TO TRY TO WRITE OUT INSIGHTS. WHAT IS TRULY PRODUCTIVE IS ATTEMPT SIMPLY TO LINE UP THE DATA AND SEE THEN SEE WHAT EMERGES. WRITING STARTING OUT WRITING INSIGHTS SIMPLY TRAPS ME IN OLD FAILURE PATHES OF THINKING + NO NEW INSIGHTS THAT WAY.

—Thus, it may be that the new element in my life is the determination to apply the seat of the pants to the typewriter. Not determination, really, but somehow I did it, WHEN IN THE PAST I DID NOT DO IT. WHY? WHY? SOMEHOW A SENSE THAT I COULD GET RESULTS.

I could be (read “am”) embarrassed by the endless pages of self-absorption in these journals. And I’d happily trade in much of it now, ten cents on the dollar, for some concrete descriptions: where was I, what was I doing, who was I with, who said what—in short for “good writing.” Nevertheless I hold fast to a charitable view and remember how important this continual churning process was for my survival—and *also*, it now strikes me, for making writing a deep part of me.

What also strikes me is how analytic it is—however driven by feelings and full of descriptions of feelings in loose and often emotional language. Indeed the hunger to figure things out led to so much analysis as finally to show me the limits of analysis—to show me that “expression” or “blurting” was often more useful than insight.

Finally, I see a drive toward honesty here. I felt stuck in my life. I was willing to write things I couldn’t tell others and, indeed, didn’t want to tell myself—in hopes that it would make things more bearable. I still feel this at the root of freewriting: that it invites a *personal* honesty even in academic writing, and thus helps me pursue feelings or misgivings about my thinking that are not possible when I’m writing a draft for the eyes of others.

Freewriting as Incoherent

As I let myself careen around in my inner life I let my journal writing be careless and digressive and unformed. But I never let it be actually incoherent. I was, after all, a graduate student or a teacher for all these years. My motivation was to “figure things out.” It wasn’t till I had actually worked out a theory of freewriting (thanks to Ken Macrorie and to my experience as a returning graduate student who was now stuck in his writing, not just his living) that I consciously adopted the principle that I should sometimes keep on writing even if it led to nonsense.

Freewriting as nonsense happens to me most characteristically when I am feeling some responsibility about being in charge of a class or workshop. I often find it easier to freewrite productively when I’m alone or in someone else’s class or workshop and can concentrate on my own work and not worry about people I’m responsible for. When I’m feeling nervous about being in charge, I sometimes cannot enter into my words or even very much into my mind. Here is an example of the nervous static I produced just the other day at the start of my 8 a.m. freshman writing class:

Freewriting. where does my pen take me. Heck Keep the pen going. And keep your pen moving. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. I don’t know whats happening. I feel sleepy and down. I get more cheerful in their presence. I feel more cheerful when they’re here. [Seeing the students be sleepy and grumpy made me overcome my similar feelings.] I feel more sleepy—no happy—when they’re here. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.

Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.
Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.
Whats happening.

Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.
Whats happening. Whats happening. Whats happening.

I don't know whats happening to me. I don't want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. I don't know what I want to write. [Written by hand]

Is this a *use* of freewriting? Or an abuse or a nonuse? Am I using it to avoid what's bothering me? With all my talk about honesty, why can't I explore what's on my mind in the safety of this private writing? Was I nervous? I don't know. It would have been easier if I hadn't been sitting there facing the class. This whole question still perplexes me.

But this kind of freewriting helps me identify with a certain proportion of the *student* freewriting I've seen (private freewriting that I've been allowed to see later): sometimes nervousness (or something else) prevents students too from entering in or giving their full attention to their writing. A touching irony here: I'm nervous because I'm in charge and wondering if I'm doing the right thing; they're nervous because they're in this required class with some guy making them write without stopping. In addition students sometimes produce this "static," freewriting for the opposite reason: it feels to them too boring and inconsequential to write words on paper that the teacher won't grade and *no* one will read. The moral of the story is that even though freewriting usually helps us concentrate better and enter more fully into our words (not pausing to reconsider our words or worry about reader reactions), it cannot *ensure* safety and involvement even for an experienced writer like myself.

In the end, however, my deep sense of *safety* with freewriting depends crucially on my being allowed to "abuse" it this way. It feels crucial to be able to say that I've freewritten *perfectly* as long as I didn't stop my pencil. If I had to be honest or meaningful or coherent all the time ("did I do a good job this time?"), it would create a burden that would undermine what I experience as central to freewriting.

Freewriting for Unfocused Exploring

Unfocused exploring is probably my main use of freewriting: I

have a thought, perhaps out of the blue or perhaps in the midst of writing something else, and I give myself permission to pursue it on paper in an uncontrolled way wherever it wants to go—even if it digresses (which it usually does). This kind of freewriting is precious to me because my mind seems to work best—at the level of ideas as well as of syntax—when I allow it to be uncontrolled and disorganized. I cannot find as many ideas or perceptions if I try to stay on one track or be organized. And the not-stopping seems to build mental momentum—helps me get wound up or get rolling so that more ideas come.

Here is a long example: a single piece of freewriting that provided important germs for two different published essays (on voice and on audience). I'd been reading one evening and found two passages I wanted to save. The next morning I was merely copying them into a file when more thoughts came and I followed the train of associations:

Perfect example of “constructed” syntax from Ronald S. Crane, famous sentence from “Critical Monism,” quoted by Bialostosky, 1/3rd through his “Dialogics of the Lyric”:

“a poet does not write poetry but individual poems. And these are inevitably, as finished wholes, instances of one or another poetic kind, differentiated not by any necessities of the linguistic instrument of poetry but primarily by the nature of the poet's conception, as finally embodied in his poem, of a particular form to be achieved through the representation, in speech used dramatically or otherwise, of some distinctive state of feeling, of moral choice, or action, complete in itself and productive of a certain emotion or complex of emotions in the reader.” (p. 96)

One can feel him building. Perhaps this extreme version is characteristic of a classicist, someone who is immersed in reading Aristotle, Aquinas. (Does he read a lot in original classical languages? Certainly when we are asked to write in Latin or Greek (or some non native language in school) we are always CONSTRUCTING. Latin, in particular, seems to lend itself to that—with its free choice word order—invitation to fiddle with placement of words as in a puzzle—there doesn't seem to be a driving force to UTTER words in a particular order. Can it be that the peculiarities of the language's syntax relation to meaning INVITE one, more than in other languages, to, as it were, “formulate a meaning in ones mind first” and then find words for it? Can it be that some languages invite that more than others? Can it be that

languages like English—and even more Chinese—where word order is obligatory and carries much of the meaning—invite UTTERANCE more—for the force of making meaning gives rise to a sequence of words that drives itself forward from the head to the world—the process of FINDING MEANING in itself implies a word order; whereas in more of a language of free-choice syntax, there is an invitation to allow a bigger gap between finding meaning and making words?

The above will make an important footnote in anything I write about voice/freewriting/utterance &c &c.

Try to find the notes I made about UTTERING and CONSTRUCTING language while I was teaching 101. The struggle for students in moving from one to the other. Are they in my “germs” folder? Could there be something in my 101 folders? It was spring 83 that I was noticing it.

Bakhtin evidently says that lyric poetry implies an audience of COMPLETE trust. Yes? Perhaps. But I suspect its more accurate to say that lyric taps the impulse to speak TO ONESELF. And is related to the fact that poets, perhaps more than any other group, are always sticking up for no-audience writing. To write lyric is to get at TRUSTED, INNER stuff. We do that best when we have safety and privacy. I suspect lyric poets are often people who learn to make privacy for selves, write to self, AND THEN LET OTHERS HEAR.

(Thus, it's an instance of my interest in DOUBLE AUDIENCE SITUATIONS. Good lyric poets are people who learn to write to self, but also to others. Perhaps that's the secret of all writers. Learning to deal with double audience.

DOUBLE AUDIENCE PHENOMENON: THIS IS IMPORTANT POINT. MAY BE CLOSE TO THE CENTER OF THE PHENOMENON OF GOOD WRITERS. PEOPLE WHO LEARN TO CREATE PRIVACY FOR THEMSELVES: WHO LEARN TO BE PRIVATE AND SOLITARY AND TUNE OUT OTHERS, WRITE only FOR SELVES—HAVE NO INTEREST IN THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS AND PRESSURES OF AUDIENCE.

YET, THEY ARE ALSO PEOPLE WHO LEARN TO TURN THAT TO AUDIENCE INTEREST. MORE THAN USUALLY INTERESTED IN AUDIENCE—HAM, POSEUR, ACTOR, SHOWOFF.

SO HERE AGAIN, WE HAVE AN ANALYSIS OF COMPLEX DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR, PERFORMANCE, SKILL: WHAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT AND COMPLEX AND SUBJECT TO ARGUMENT IS THAT IT CONSISTS OF ESSENTIAL PARADOX. A GOOD WRITER IS SOMEONE WHO IS MORE THAN USUALLY PRIVATE AND WRITING ONLY TO SELF YET AT THE SAME TIME MORE THAN USUALLY SHOWOFFY AND PUBLIC AND GRANDSTANDING AND SELFPANDERING. THEY SOUND OPPOSITE, YET THATS just WHAT WE SEE WITH SO MANY GOOD WRITERS.

LYRIC POETS; PAUL GOODMAN. who else to name?

I'd thought of "double-audience" phenomenon as an interesting anomaly in writing. (It was during one of my writing-to-myself sessions during one of my bard summers. What occasioned it? I must still have the note I wrote then.) BUT REALLY WHAT LOOKS LIKE AN ANOMALY IS REALLY CHARACTERISTIC THE MAIN THING—RIGHT AT THE CENTER OF WRITING. OR AT LEAST GOOD WRITING.

WONDERFUL:

THUS, THIS BUSINESS ABOUT DOUBLE AUDIENCE IS REALLY THE CONCLUSION TO MY PUBLIC/PRIVATE CHAPTER/SECTION OF MY BOOK. MAKES IT A PERFECT MATCH FOR THE END OF MY SPEECH/WRITING CHAPTER/SECTION

So what's the practical moral of it all? We must teach ourselves and our students to have more than usual privacy in writing; and more than usual publicness. Conventional teaching is just about as bad as it can be on both counts. Almost no privacy: everything a student writes is read by the teacher (usually in a judgmental light); it's so bad that students have come to feel bad if you DONT collect what they write: to ask students to write and not collect it, you have to fight their resentment. YET ON THE OTHER HAND, its always just that ONE teacher—who often doesn't read "like a

person"—"like an audience"—but rather judgmentally to grade and note strengths and weaknesses. It's IN A WAY private writing: doesn't feel like it goes to any "real person." Students don't feel like they are writing to real people. I've discovered resentment from students when I want to share what they write with other students: it feels like private thing between just them and teacher—even if it is about the causes of the french revolution or irony in ["to his coy mistress.["]

Similarly, students are willing to turn in garbage to teachers that they are embarrassed to share with peers. Mistakes. Expect teachers to accept it. "It doesn't matter." Like children with mother: talk in a way or leave a kind of mess they wouldn't do with others. (Oh well, they're use to that garbage.") It reminds me of the passage in Richard Wright's autobiography where he discovers that the prostitutes don't bother to cover themselves, though naked, when he brings in the coffee they asked him to go out and get—because they don't really think he's quite real. Not a real man/person—no need to hide. That's how students often feel teacher as reader: not real person.

So the school setting/context for writing is often the LEAST PRIVATE and the LEAST PUBLIC—when what it needs to be is the MOST PRIVATE and the MOST PUBLIC.

I'd never have been able to work out these ideas if I'd been trying to stay "on track" or know where I was going.

Freewriting as Sociable

Freewriting is always private—by definition, for the sake of safety. But I have come to feel an intriguing link between freewriting and sociability because I so often do this private writing *in the company of others*—with a class or a workshop. Thus true freewriting "by the book," never pausing, has come in certain ways to feel like a companionable activity: one sits there writing for oneself but hears other people's pens and pencils moving across the paper—people moving in their chairs, sometimes a grunt or sigh or giggle. The effect of using these conditions for freewriting (however private) is to contradict the association of writing with isolation. An even more important effect is the palpable sense of, "Look at all these people putting words down on paper without agony. If they can do it, well so can I!" This contradicts a feeling hidden in many of us (not just raw freshmen) that really there's something

impossible about putting words down on paper, and when we succeed in doing so it's some kind of accident or aberration, but next time the impossibility will return.

My experience with Ira Progoff's journal approach has also underlined the social dimension of freewriting. His workshops consist of nothing but private journal writing (though he gives powerful prompts for ways to explore one's life), yet after a long writing session he often asks, "Does anyone need to read out loud what they've written?" He stresses that it's not important for others to understand or even listen carefully, and there's *never* any response; he simply suggests that someone might feel that the writing is not really "finished" till he's had a chance to read it out loud in the hearing of others. I occasionally use Progoff-like journal writing exercises in my teaching, and though I never invite people to read out loud, there is nevertheless this important experience of doing private work *together*.

But the sociable flavor of freewriting is strongest for me because of the times when, instead of regular freewriting, I've used *public* or *shared* freewriting in a supportive community: "Let's freewrite and then read it to each other." In the first draft of this essay I said I didn't do this very often, but over the course of revising I've realized that's wrong. There are many occasions when I do *some* form of public freewriting. This slowness in my memory is revealing: I'm a bit ambivalent about shared or public freewriting. On the one hand I tend to avoid it in favor of private writing. For I find most people's writing has suffered because they have been led to think of writing as something they must always share with a reader; thus we need more private writing. On the other hand I love the sharing of freewriting—for the community of it and for the learning it produces. It's so reassuring to discover that unplanned, unstudied writing is worth sharing. It teaches the pleasure of getting more voice in writing. (And we learn so much by reading out loud—by mouth and by ear.) As a result I try to find occasions for public freewriting and I find students are often more willing to read something out loud if they've just freewritten it quickly than if they've worked hard revising it at home.

Let me list, then, the diverse situations where I use public freewriting. (I make it clear that someone can "pass" even if she really doesn't want to share.)

- I often start a course or workshop with two short pieces of freewriting, one private and one public, in order to give people a vivid sense of the differences: how seldom they really write privately and what a useful luxury it is to do so. Because of this agenda I sometimes start with the public writing and make the task

slightly daunting: "Introduce yourself in writing to the strangers here." This freewriting is thus *both* public and focused: two constraints have been reimposed, namely that the writing be shown to an audience and that it stay on one topic.

- **Process writing.** After the opening exercise I just described, I often ask the students or teachers to write about what they noticed during the private and public freewriting—to write as much as they can about simply what happened as they were writing. Here is another case of freewriting that is both focused and public. (Often of course I invite process writing to be private; and sometimes I say, "This is private, but I hope we'll be able to hear a couple of these afterwards—or at least talk about what people wrote.") Process writing is interesting for being both very personal and also very task oriented and cognitive. People are often eager to share what happened to them and hear what happened to others. I make this kind of process writing a staple of my classes throughout the semester—usually asking for a piece of it to accompany each major assignment.

- In my teaching I sometimes ask us all to freewrite on a topic or issue we are working on, and then hear many of them. Sometimes this is part of a disciplined inquiry (see Hammond); sometimes it is more celebratory—just writing and sharing on an interesting or enjoyable topic for the pleasure of it.

- My work with the Bard Center for Writing and Thinking has provided me a particularly important experience of freewriting as sociable. In the summer of 1981 I was given the opportunity to bring together a group of about twenty teachers to teach a three-week intensive writing program for Bard freshmen. It was an exciting but scary adventure into the unknown for all of us, and I needed to ask from the start that we work together as a community of allies. At our first meeting I had us begin by freewriting with the expectation of sharing. This group of teachers has continued this tradition, meeting at least a couple of times a year. (Paul Connolly has been director since 1982 and the group does workshops and conferences, not just teach Bard freshmen in the summer.) The freewriting and sharing in this group has been very important for me: a paradigm experience of people working together out of enormous trust—trust in our writing and in each other. The question I used in one of our early meetings is one that is often still used: "What needs to be written?" This question sums up a kind of trust in the group dimension of the muse. I have very few other groups where I feel I can ask for this kind of open public freewriting with no topic. But the experience remains a touchstone for one way writing can be—and illustrates a crucial principle: though privacy might seem like the safest possible

condition for writing (since no one will read what you write), the safety is greater when you can share what is private with a full ally—someone who will support you and not condemn you whatever you write. That is, when we write privately we can seldom get away from the condemning judge most of us carry around in our heads, but a really supportive trusting audience can give some relief from that judge. This relates to Britton's (1975) emphasis upon the importance of a "trusted adult" as reader for children. I have occasionally met with a feedback group where as a prelude to giving feedback to each other on writing we brought in, we all did a piece of public freewriting and shared it—here too as a way to try to establish openness and trust. I know some feedback groups that do this regularly.

The Difference between Private and Public Freewriting

Here is an example of each audience mode in freewriting—one written right after the other—that illustrates the difference I've come to notice fairly frequently between my private and public freewriting. The scene was a workshop for English teachers from primary grades through university. The public freewriting came first and the topic was "What do we have in common?":

What do we have in common? Seems to me we're all involved in helping people have *power* over language. And power over themselves. ~~To-wh~~ Whether it's kindergarten or graduate school, it's the same struggle—and potentially the same triumph—figuring out what we have to say, what's on our minds, and figuring out how to *say* it to readers.

~~Then-the~~ "Dare to say it," I find myself muttering to myself. Because what so often gets in my way when I'm trying to find my thoughts and find how to say them is a matter of *courage* and *confidence*. Even more for my students. When ~~we~~ I feel brave and trust myself, I am full of good stuff. When I'm scared and doubting myself I am continually tongue-tied and stuck.

And what's interesting ~~is~~ to me is that I have to keep learning that over and over again. I get brave—I ~~was~~ felt brave in getting out WWT [*Writing Without Teachers*]. Yet then over and over again I feel scared or doubt myself. And so I think I see it in my students too. From kindergarten to grad school, we keep having to *re-learn* ~~how~~ this lesson.

Why should that be? Perhaps because life continually buffets

us. Perhaps because as we learn or get brave ~~we continually~~—
as we get more slack in the rope—we take on harder scarier
tasks.

The topic for the private writing was “What divides us?”—but I immediately fell into talking about what I noticed about the difference between public and private:

What divides? I was kind of pollyanna as I wrote that. I was on a soap box. It kind of helped with my syntax: a kind of belly full of air keeping pressure on my diaphragm so that there was more resonance in that writing. I was “projecting” more in my public writing. Making my words kind of push themselves forward ~~over a~~ out and over to readers. Somehow—once I got going—it made it easier to keep writing. In an odd way it *helped* me find words. It was as though I was standing in front of a small group of people listening and I had to keep talking. I couldn’t just fall dumb and perplexed. The *pressure* of the audience situation forced ~~me to f~~ words upon me. However they felt a little bit just that—“forced”—a little bit as though I don’t trust them.

Odd fact. As I get ~~myself~~ in to this piece of writing—in the middle of the last paragraph—I find myself thinking, “this is interesting.” And I’m looking for little bits of process writing ~~for~~ to use in a textbook. I say, “maybe I could use this.” And before I know it, I’m feeling the presence of audience and slightly “fixing” or “helping” my words.

You *might* say that shows there’s no such thing as really private writing. It’s *always* for an audience. And I know there are strong arguments there.

But I still disagree. And even this piece is evidence for me. For I could feel the *difference*. It felt different as I gradually drifted into making my words ready for readers.

I’m not saying I know the words-as-product were different. But *to me*—the process of finding and putting them down was different ~~to~~ depending on whether I wanted them for just me or for others. [Written by hand]

I hope my public freewriting doesn’t always succumb to the slightly “public,” tinny quality here, straining for something “meaningful” to say, but this example does illustrate a potentiality of the effect of audience. (Obviously it is nicer to start a workshop with private writing, often leading people comfortably to a strong

honest voice in their public writing. But I sometimes move from public to private writing, perversely as it were, in order to illustrate more obviously to people the frequently strained effects of the fact that they *usually* start with public writing.)

Using Freewriting to Write Responses or Feedback

When I write responses to papers by colleagues and students, I don't freewrite strictly (never pausing), but I sort-of-freewrite. As a writing teacher, I have so much responding to do that I've gradually given myself permission to write quickly. In doing so I've discovered a "door" that "opens" when I get steaming along: my perceptions get heightened, my feelings somewhat more aroused, and my language feels more fluid and "at the fingertips"—as though no "translation" is required. I can almost "think onto the paper" with no awareness of language. For me, this condition of "getting rolling" seems a good state for responding. For some reason, my special condition of writing—both more open and more intense—seems to lead to a better condition of reading: a heightened awareness of how the words were affecting my consciousness and more hunches about what was going on for the writer as he or she was writing. Yes, I often write too much and the writing is not judicious, but I do it on a computer so I can delete my worst gaffes. In addition, this somewhat more intense condition makes me write more *to* the writer—makes me talk turkey, not hold back, not tiptoe around. An example—to a freshman:

Dear Lisa,

This is long and interesting. It has problems as a piece of writing because there is so much in it, but all the things in it are rich.

Here's what I notice:

—I love the way you start out for much of the opening in a mood of *questioning*. Terrific. I say, "Here's an essay/paper that says, I'm baffled, I'm troubled, I want to try to figure something out." And that's a terrific thing to do. Perplexity absorbs the reader. (And of course it's a deep and interesting issue.) And I say to myself, "I hope she doesn't somehow tie it up into some neat tidy package of "wisdom" with a ribbon around it—neater than life.

—But then you drift into a long story of you and Stacey. What's interesting to me here is the change from last time. Last version the mood was primarily "pissed"! Here it's kind

of held-back-pissed. It somehow doesn't work for me for much of it. I say, "why doesn't she just admit how mad she is?"

—But then at the end of the story you really do some hard thinking about her and you seem primarily analytic and probing and NOT angry; you are really trying to take hold of it and figure out how to build some stability. And your thinking and probing are convincing and interesting to me.

—So then I finally conclude that the main problem with the long story of you and Stacy is just the length and the lost focus: it makes me forget what the paper is really about—or at least I lose track.

So in the end, I feel these things:

—The paper is *trying* very much to be an extended meditation on the question of where do we get stability from—and why instability. And I love that. And I like your thinking about Stacy. But somehow that doesn't solve your larger problem: not everyone has had such a hard life as she has had. (However maybe your generalization would still hold true for the rest of us: I think it really is hard to trust people; and your conclusion is strong. But don't sound so smug and tidy with it. It's only a hypothesis and it may not fit everyone. But if you present it that way, I'd call it interesting and useful.

Talk to me about some week toward the end of the term perhaps using a week to try another *major* revision of this. There's so much here and you are really trying to deal with something important and hard. I'd like to see you get this bucking bronco under control. Let it rest a few weeks.

best,

Peter [On word processor]

There is an important connection between my love of freewriting and my love of giving feedback in the form of "movies of my mind"—a narrative of the mind reacting. That is, freewriting *can* lead to objective description or to analysis (as it sometimes does for me), yet freewriting naturally *invites* an account of the mind reacting. For if you have to keep writing, the only inexhaustible source of material *is* a story of what's happening in your mind at the moment. You can't run out (indeed, like Tristram Shandy, you often fall behind).

Freewriting about Freewriting

I freewrote the following piece in a class I was teaching in 1987,

using the occasion to reflect on having recently filled out a questionnaire from Sheryl Fontaine about my use of freewriting. As I filled out her questionnaire I was perplexed to notice that though I use freewriting a lot in my teaching and in workshops, I don't so often do *pure* freewriting on my own, by choice.

Freewriting. Sheryl. You're making me think more self-consciously about freewriting. Freewriting. Am I fooling myself about it somehow?

Do I not *use* freewriting? Am I guilty of not practicing what I preach?

Actually an old story with me. I used to feel that way a lot after *WWT* [*Writing Without Teachers*] came out. And in truth I couldn't [double underline] do, then, what I'd figured out in thinking through that book was a good thing to do. It ie, to relinquish control. It took a year or two. But ~~th~~ it's not so unusual: we the human (mind) often works that way: we figure out in *theory* what we cannot do in *practice*—we learn to “act” with neural impulses acts we cannot yet get our ~~min~~ bodies to do. (Except when it goes the other way round: really clever people learn from their *behavior* and then get the wisdom in their minds. Sometimes

But And I even felt it many times after *WWP* [*Writing With Power*]. Am I a fraud?—is the archetypal question. Will people look beneath my surface to my reality and find out I'm no good—wrong—dishonest?

~~But~~ actually, I think I do practice what I preach. (Though I wouldn't be surprised to discover that I ~~preach~~ forget to preach some important things that I practice.)

This is like a letter to you—but calling it “fw” gives me permission to be sloppy about it.

I forgot to remember that *letters* are another place where I use freewriting. [By hand]

So do I or don't I use freewriting in my own writing? I guess the answer is that I don't use it so often “by the book” or “by the clock” when I'm writing substantive pieces on my own. And I don't do daily freewrites or regular warm-up exercises. But I make journal entries when something is confusing me in my life and I rely heavily on what I like to think of as my “freewriting muscle” in all the ways I describe in this chapter. This “muscle” seems to me in essence to consist of the ability to write in fairly fast and long bursts at early stages of any project—later stages too—when I get an idea or hunch (or fruitful doubt): to blurt as much of my thinking on paper

as I can. In general, when I am not revising I have learned to lessen control and accept thoughts and words as they come.

Process Writing When I'm Stuck: Articulating Resistance

As I noted at the start, I drifted into something like freewriting when I felt stuck in my life. One of my most frequent and consistent uses of freewriting is when I feel stuck in my writing. *Writing without Teachers* grew from little germs of stuck-writing. Here is one of the many stuck-writings I did while working on this essay. I found myself going back and forth in my head about where to put a projected section about control and noncontrol (and even moving my note about it back and forth in my file)—*instead of starting to write it*. I freewrite in capital letters here not because I am shouting but because I want to be able to distinguish this metawriting from the rest of my text.

HERE I'M WORRYING ABOUT WHERE TO PUT THIS SECTION ON CONTROL/NONCONTROL—AND THE UNCERTAINTY IS REALLY GETTING IN MY WAY, AND CAUSING A KNOT IN MY STOMACH AND MAKING ME FEEL BAD BECAUSE I KNOW I'M LOSING TIME AND I'M BEHIND SCHEDULE HERE. WHEN I HAVEN'T EVEN WRITTEN A DRAFT OF THIS SECTION YET. IN THE BACK OF MY MIND I KNOW THAT IF I'D JUST STOP WORRYING ABOUT THE OVERALL RHETORICAL STRATEGY AND JUST PUT MY HEAD DOWN AND START TO WRITE WHAT I WANT TO WRITE, I WOULD NOT JUST FEEL BETTER ABOUT GETTING SOMETHING WORKED OUT—ALMOST CERTAINLY THE PROCESS OF DOING IT WOULD SOLVE THE STRATEGIC QUESTION OF WHERE IT SHOULD GO OR HOW TO CONSIDER IT. (AM I THINKING OF IT AS PARADOX OR AS MY MAIN COMMITMENT?)

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO JUST DO THIS IF I KNOW IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO. I CAN FEEL THE ANSWER. THOUGH IT'S MORE EFFICIENT AND SMARTER TO PLUNGE IN, THERE'S SOMETHING THAT HOLDS ME BACK AND THE METAPHOR OF "PLUNGING IN" IS JUST RIGHT FOR "EXPLAINING" WHY: THERE'S SOME KIND OF JUMPING IN TO A DEEP AND SLIGHTLY SCARY ELEMENT THAT'S INVOLVED HERE. [on word processor]

Where there had been intense strain in trying to control my thinking and language all afternoon—unsuccessful planning and inept

steering (leading to awful writing)—here was a rush of letting go and just allowing words to take over without much steering. It is a mere blurting, but the effect was to help me see more clearly what was happening and to gain some power over my writing process.

Heightened Intensity

What I value in freewriting is how it can lead to a certain *experience* of writing or *kind* of writing process. The best descriptors of that experience are perhaps the metaphors that have sprinkled this essay so far: “getting rolling,” “getting steaming along,” “a door opening,” “getting warmed up,” “juices flowing” or “sailing.” These all point to states of increased intensity or arousal or excitement. In these states it feels as though more things come to mind, bubble up—and that somehow they fall more directly into language (though not necessarily better, clearer, nor more organized language). And sometimes, along with this, comes a vivid sense of knowing exactly to *whom* I need to say these things.

I know this is dangerous territory I’m wandering into. So many students have talked about how wonderful it *felt* while they were writing something—leaving us the job of telling them how bad the writing was that grew out of that feeling. Excitement doesn’t make writing good. But freewriting doesn’t pretend to be good. So if we have to write badly—as of course we do—I find it more rewarding to be excited while doing it. This intensity can lead to bad writing, but it usually leads to better material and more pleasure.

In short, though it is dangerous to defend excitement or heightened intensity or “getting carried away” as conditions we should strive for in writing—and readers will no doubt fear renewed talk about that dangerous concept “inspiration”—I find myself deciding it is time to take the risk. I know I produce a lot of garbage and disorganization when I get wound up in freewriting or freewriting-like extended blurts, but at these times it feels as though I can see more clearly what I’m thinking *about* and also experience more clearly my mind *engaged in* the thinking. They are the times that make it rewarding to write and make me want to return to the struggle of it. I doubt whether many people continue to write by choice except for the periodic reward of some kind of intensity of this sort. For example, Louise Wetherbee Phelps writes:

Throughout my daybooks I have tried repeatedly to capture the feeling of the generative moment. It is not a cool, cerebral experience but a joyous state of physical excitement and pure power felt in the stomach and rising up in the chest as a flood

of energy that pours out in rapid explosive bursts of language. It is a pleasantly nervous state, like the feeling of the gymnast ready to mount the apparatus who is tuned tautly and confidently to the powers and capabilities of her own body. Ideas compel expression: I write in my daybook of their force shooting and sparking through my fingers onto the paper. ("Rhythm and Pattern" 247)

Phelps says she is engaged in phenomenology. She is trying,

to approach the level and quality of phenomenological description, which involves not only intuiting, analyzing, and describing particulars of composing in their full concreteness, but also attempting to attain insight into the essence of the experience. (243)

The nascent interest in phenomenology in the profession is a good sign: a respect for the facts of what actually happens in writers. We've had a decade of protocol analysis and TV cameras trained on writers—all fueled by a devotion to the facts about the writing process. But feelings are facts, and until this research shows us the powerful effects of feelings on a writer's thoughts and choices, I will have a hard time trusting it. My own investigations show me that feelings play an enormous role. When we get more careful phenomenological research, I suspect that one result will be to give us more respect for this suspect business of being excited, aroused, carried away, "rolling." (For a few leads into the use of phenomenology and study of feelings in writing, see Brand, Flisser, Gleason, McLeod, Perl and Egendorf, Phelps, Whatley.)

A KIND of Goodness in Writing

Because freewriting produces so much careless, self-indulgent, bad writing, I am nervous about defending it as good—and, as I've just said, it's not the product that I most value it for. Nevertheless freewriting has come to serve, I now see, as a model of what seems to me an important *kind* of goodness in writing. That is, even if I spend much less time freewriting than I spend trying to control and revise, freewriting has come to establish for me a directness of tone, sound, style, and diction that I realize I often try to emulate in my careful writing.

For example, freewriting sometimes helps me as it were to break free from what feels like the heavy mud and clinging seaweed that are clogging my ability to *say directly* what I already feel I know. As

I was working on the preceding section of this essay I found myself having written the following sentence:

But it strikes me if we only stop and think about it for a moment, I think we'll have to agree that we better take the risk of sounding sophomoric or ridiculous in other ways—that is of talking turkey about what it actually felt like during the important moments of writing—because that is exactly what we haven't gotten much of in fifteen years of people saying they are investigating the composing process.

When I looked back and notice what a *soggy* thing I'd just struggled hard to produce, I was dismayed. In frustration I stopped and forced myself to freewrite my way through to more direct language:

WE BETTER RISK TAKING OUR CLOTHES OFF AND DESCRIBING WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS WHEN WE WRITE—WHAT IT FEELS LIKE—THE TEXTURE FROM MOMENT TO MOMENT. BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN LACKING FROM ALL THESE YEARS OF PROTOCOL ANALYSIS OF WRITERS. THEY'VE SUPPOSEDLY GIVEN US PICTURE OF THE WRITERS MIND, BUT IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE MY MIND. IT'S TOO SANITIZED. IT LEAVES OUT FEELINGS.

I GUESS IT'S NO ACCIDENT THAT WE LEAVE THEM OUT. THE FEELINGS ARE SO SOPHOMORIC OR ODD OR STUPID OR CHILDISH. WRITING BRINGS OUT FEELINGS THAT MAKE US FEEL LIKE WE'RE NOT GROWN UP, NOT SOPHISTICATED. PERHAPS WHAT MAKES SOPHOMORES SOPHOMORES IS THAT THEY ACTUALLY ADMIT WHAT THEY ARE FEELING.

WHAT I WANT IS MORE PHENOMENOLOGY OF WRITING. PHENOMENOLOGY IS PERHAPS JUST A FANCY WORD TO MAKE US ALL FEEL A LITTLE SAFER ABOUT BEING NAKED—AND Fancier word for going naked. BUT IF THAT HELPS, SO BE IT. BESIDES, IT'S MORE THAN THAT. THERE IS THAT ENORMOUS AND COMPLEX DISCIPLINE THAT PHENOMENOLOGISTS TALK ABOUT—IN THEIR GERMAN JARGON—ABOUT TRYING TO GET PAST THE OVERLAY OF WHAT IS CULTURALLY OR LINGUISTICALLY DETERMINED AND HABITUAL. A MESS. BUT WORTH THE EFFORT. LET ME GIVE A FOOTNOTE THAT MENTIONS THE PEOPLE I KNOW WHO ARE TALKING ABOUT FEELINGS AND PHENOMENOLOGY.

I confess I *like* these short bursts of freewriting. They are too careless, too casual, too whatever—I can’t “hand them in” that way. (This essay is an excuse to hand in a few pieces for credit.) But I want to get as much of that quality as I can in my acceptable writing: the energy, the talkiness, the sense of a voice, and the sense of the words or the writer reaching *toward* a reader.

For some reason freewriting also seems to elicit crass analogies and physical metaphors, and I find these help my thinking. I’ve come to call this kind of discourse “talking turkey.” My freewriting tends to be more like a speech act and less like the formulation of impersonal truths. Thus even though I can seldom use my freewriting as it is, I think my history with it has put a kind of *sound* in my ear and a *feel* in my mouth—a sound and a feel that guide me in my revising.

Relinquishing Control—Not Striving for Mastery

There is another experience that is central to my involvement with freewriting and that is the sense of *letting go*. I don’t know whether this is the cause or the effect of the heightened intensity I’ve just been talking about—or perhaps the two conditions simply go along with each other. At any rate, when I am writing carefully or revising I usually experience myself as trying to plan or control: to figure out what I want to say, or (knowing that) to *say*, what I want to say, or (having done that) to get my words clear or coherent or organized. It feels like trying to steer, to hold things together, to juggle balls. I usually experience this as struggle and strain. When I freewrite I let go, stop steering, drop the balls and allow things to come to me—just babble onto paper. It’s the difference between Linda Flower’s emphasis on always making a plan and trying to follow it vs. plunging along with no plan; between trying to steer vs. letting go of the steering wheel and just letting words come.

Not that it’s always relaxed. Freewriting often makes for an increased tension of sorts. It’s as though writing were a matter of my head containing a pile of sand that has to pour down through a tiny hole onto the paper—as though my head were an hourglass. When I freewrite it feels as though someone has dumped an extra fifty pounds of sand in the top chamber of my head—so the sand is pressing down and coming through that tiny hole in my mind with more pressure (though faster too). But despite the pressure, there is a kind of relief or comfort at the very no-stopping rule that *causes* the pressure—to see if I can really bring all that sand down through the small opening.

I sometimes think of it as a matter of *translation*. That is, it feels

to me as though the “contents of my mind” or “what I am trying to say” won’t run naturally onto paper—as though what’s “in mind” is unformed, incoherent, indeed much of it not even verbal, consisting rather of images, feelings, kinesthetic sensations, and pieces of what Gendlin calls “felt sense” (see Perl). Thus it often feels as though writing requires some act of translation to get what’s *in mind*—into *writing*. (Some social constructionists like to say that all knowledge is verbal or linguistic. It’s hard for me to believe they really believe that, but if it were true we would find it much easier to articulate ourselves.)

Let me put it yet another way. It feels as though my mind is messy and confused and unformed, but that writing is supposed to be clear and organized. Therefore writing really asks for *two* things: to get my meanings into words *and* to get those words clear and organized. What’s really hard here is trying to do the two things in one operation. Freewriting shows me I can do them one at a time: just *get my mind into words*—but leave those words messy and incoherent.

What a relief. For it’s not so hard to neaten up those messy words—once they are on paper where they stay still. For—and this is another central experience for me when I try to write normally or carefully—the words and ideas and feelings in my head won’t stay still: they are always sliding around and changing and driving me crazy. Interestingly enough, I find that it’s easier to clean up a mess I produced by galloping freewriting than to clean up a mess I produced by careful composing. The freewriting is crudely jointed so that all the sections and elements are obvious, whereas the careful mess is delicately held together by elaborate structures of baling wire, and once I fiddle with it, everything seems to fall apart into unusable or unlinkable elements. (And sometimes, of course, the freewriting is *not* such a mess.)

In fact I often experience an additional relief in this very messiness and incoherence. That is, sometimes it feels as though there is a primal gulf between my experience and what can be communicated to others: as though I am trapped inside a cavern of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that no one can ever share—as if I am in a Fellini movie where I shout ineffectually across a windy gulf and no one hears—or in a Faulkner novel where I talk and move my mouth and no sound comes out. I find great relief in coming up with words that embody or express the very *incoherence* or *unformed* quality of my inner existence. (What I appreciate about reading novels by people like Woolf, Faulkner, and May Sarton is the relief of finding someone who articulates the texture of experience and feeling that sometimes seems trapping.) In short,

where everything about the process of normal writing tells us, "Plan! Control! Steer!" freewriting invites me to stop planning, controlling, steering.

I acknowledge that of course we cannot, strictly speaking, get the "contents of mind" onto paper as they are. And of course there is probably no such thing as truly unplanned speech or uncontrolled behavior. The human organism seems incapable of randomness. To relinquish conscious control, or plans, or goals is to allow for unconscious plans, "unplanned" goals, tacit shapes and rhythms in our thinking—and for more control and inscription by the culture. Nevertheless there is an enormous difference between the experience of planning one's words and thoughts beforehand (whether carefully planning large chunks on paper in an outline, or just rehearsing phrases and sentences in one's mind before writing them down), and the experience of letting words go down on paper unrehearsed and unforeseen. Obviously freewriting does not always produce this latter experience, but it does tend in this direction with some reliability: to that undeniable experience of the hand leading the mind, of the emerging words somehow choosing other words, of seeing what comes when one manages to invite the momentum of language or one's larger mind or whatever to take over. Freewriting is an invitation to stop writing and instead to "be written."

Of course there is a sense in which whenever we write "we are written." But when people are too glib or doctrinaire about this, they obscure the crucial empirical difference between those moments when we have plans, meanings, or intentions in mind and keep to them, and those other moments when we proceed without conscious plans, meanings, or intentions. The difference between these two conditions is something we need to investigate rather than paper over. The most graphic example is surprise. That is, even if there is no such thing as uncontrolled or unplanned writing, there is a huge difference between knowing what one is writing and being startled by it. I'd guess that this kind of surprise is another of those rewards that make people who write by choice continue to do so. One way to sum up freewriting is that it increases the frequency of surprise.

In our culture, *mastery* and *control* are deeply built into our model of writing. From freewriting I learn how writing can, in contrast, involve *passivity*—an experience of nonstriving, unclenching, letting go, or opening myself up. In other cultures people do more justice to this dimension of writing—talking in ways we call superstitious or magical, for example about taking dictation from the muse. My hunch is that many good writers engage in lots of "wise passivity."

Some writers acknowledge this and talk about consciously trying

to relax some control and engage in a process of waiting and listening. (Donald Murray sounds this note eloquently.) For example, distinguished writers often talk about creating characters and then consciously waiting to see what they do. But what's even more touching is the testimony of writers who *try* to stay in control but fail—giving thereby a kind of backhanded testimony to the importance of relinquishing control. Barbara Tomlinson has collected fascinating examples of what she calls the theme of “characters as co-authors” in the phenomenology of writers writing.

[C]haracters “demand” things (William Faulkner . . . , Reynolds Price, Barbara Wersba), reject things (William Inge, Joyce Carol Oates . . . , Sylvia Wilkinson), insist on speaking (Robertson Davies, Joyce Carol Oates . . . , Harold Pinter), refuse to speak (Paul Gallico, Cynthia MacDonald), ignore authors’ suggestions (Katherine Anne Porter), “resent” what has been written about them (Saul Bellow . . .), confront their authors (Timothy Findley . . . , Margaret MacPherson) and so forth. (Tomlinson 8)

John Cheever is troubled by this kind of talk and insists that “[t]he legend that characters run away from their authors—taking up drugs, having sex operations, and becoming president—implies that the writer is a fool with no knowledge or mastery of his craft (Tomlinson 29).” Surely Cheever is wrong here. Surely a writer *lacks* knowledge and mastery of his craft unless he has the ability to allow himself to develop—even subversively, as it were—the gift for relinquishing control, for example by unconsciously empowering a character to take over and contradict his conscious plan.

Does it sound as though I am against planning and control in writing? I am not. What is probably the *majority* of my writing time is taken up trying to establish and maintain control, to steer, to try and get the damn thing to go where I want it to go. But my struggle for control rests on a foundation of shorter stretches of time when I manage to relinquish control. And I’m not just saying that my freewriting produces more material or fodder for my planning or control. No, when my writing goes well, it is usually because the plan itself—my sense of where I’m trying to get my material to go—*came* to me in a piece of noncontrolled writing. In short, freewriting doesn’t just give “content,” it also gives “form.”

Dwelling in and Popping Out

Because freewriting is an invitation to become less self-conscious about writing, to stop attending consciously to the

choosing and forming of words, it helps me enter more easily and fully *into* my writing and thinking. To use Polanyi's terms, it helps me make writing more a "part of myself" or to "pour myself into" writing. He speaks of writing and language as tools and he is interested in the process by which one "pours oneself into" the hammer while one hammers—focusing attention on the nail rather than on the hammer.²

But while this effect of freewriting is important, I am beginning to notice the opposite effect (see Pat Belanoff): how often freewriting is not just a pouring myself into my discourse but also popping myself out of it. For some reason, freewriting has the capacity to increase our awareness of what we've written—what we are doing. Notice, for example, in one of my early journal entries how I wrote, "But when I get this down on paper I see that. . . .": the act of writing down a feeling made me more aware of it from the outside. Here is a more extended example. My freewriting during a stuck point in writing this essay led me to make a metapoint about the structure of my essay—and then even to reflect on metadiscourse itself:

I SEEM TO BE MAKING TWO POINTS: MORE EXCITING INTENSE STATE; AND RELINQUISHING CONTROL. HOW DO THEY RELATE? DO THEY WORK AGAINST EACH OTHER?

METAPPOINT: FREEWRITING HAS LED ME TO MAKE MORE OF THESE META POINTS AS ABOVE: MORE ARTICULATING MY DILEMMA—TRYING TO PUT THEM INTO WORDS. NOT ALWAYS WRITTEN NONSTOP, BUT USUALLY QUICKLY. BUT IT'S OF THE ESSENCE OF FREEWRITING (FOR ME) TO BE AN ARENA FOR TALKING ABOUT A METAPPOINT—A COMMENT ABOUT A DILEMMA—AN ATTEMPT TO FIND WORDS FOR A DILEMMA OR PERPLEXITY.

BEFORE I GOT ACCUSTOMED TO FREEWRITING I DIDN'T WRITE THESE THINGS OUT; I WOULD SIT AND PONDER—PERHAPS WORK OUT NOTES—PHRASES. BUT THESE "FREEWRITING LIKE DISCOURSES" ARE A KIND OF ACTUAL "TALKING TO MYSELF" IN SPEECH—NOT A MATTER OF BETTER BOILING THINGS DOWN INTO NOTES. THE MOVE TO NOTES IS A MOVE FROM THE TEXT FURTHER AWAY—FROM THE DISCOURSE OF THE TEXT INTO SUMMARY AND ESSENCES—THAT'S THE POINT OF NOTES: THE PERSPECTIVE THAT COMES

FROM ESSENCES. BUT THIS MOVE I'M MAKING NOW IS A MOVE FROM THE TEXT IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION—MORE TOWARD SPEECH. TALKING TO MYSELF. IT'S MUCH MESSIER—IT DOESN'T HAVE THAT LOVELY PERSPECTIVE OF NOTES AND ESSENCES—BUT SOMEHOW IT OFTEN HAS THE JUICE OR BUBBLING ACTION (ALKA SELZER) TO CUT THROUGH PERPLEXITY THAT I CAN'T WORK OUT WITH NOTES AND ESSENCES. I NEED TO “HAVE A LITTLE CHAT WITH MYSELF”—A KIND OF HUMAN TRANSACTION AS WITH AN UNDERSTANDING AUNT—RATHER THAN TRYING TO DO FREEZE DRIED SUMMARY TRANSACTION WITH ANGELS OR GOD.

When Bob Whitney said to his student, “Nothing begins with N” (he was trying to nudge her on in her freewriting when she had said she had “nothing on her mind”), he was really popping her *out of* her stream or plane of thought—which was after all mere emptiness or blankness of mind. For of course no matter how deeply I insist that our minds are never empty, I must admit that we often enough *experience* our minds as genuinely empty. Whitney, then, was coaching her to step *outside* that blankness of mind and to write a phrase such as, “Nothing’s on my mind” or “Nothing going on here.” To write such a phrase is really to *comment upon* one’s mental state.

If we reflect for a moment we can see why freewriting invites metadiscourse. When I am writing along in normal conditions I commonly pause: my thought has run out or I wonder about what I’ve just written or I can’t find the word I want. But when I freewrite the “no stopping” rule won’t let me pause. What happens? If I cannot find the next word or thought, the natural next event is to write down a piece of metadiscourse. Indeed the ticking clock has probably *put* a piece of metadiscourse into my mind (“Oh dear, I’ve run out” or “I don’t know what to say next”). Freewriting also invites metadiscourse because, as blurting, it often leads to something that surprises or dismays us: “That’s not the right word” or “Do I really feel that way?” or “What a nasty thought.”

It is intriguing that freewriting should help me move in these two directions: to “indwell” or pour myself *into* my language, thinking and feeling; yet also to step outside or at least *notice* and comment on my language, thinking and feeling. Yet I don’t experience this metadiscourse as a distancing or stepping *outside* my language or thinking. I feel just as “poured into” these pieces of metadiscourse. Indeed it feels as though the capacity that freewriting has for making writing more a part of myself comes

especially from these metacomments—this experience of finding language for these reflections on language. Perhaps the paradigm mental process in freewriting occurs in that moment when Bob Whitney's student uses a *word* ("nothing") for what had till then been a nonlinguistic feature of her consciousness (emptiness).

We might be tempted then to argue that freewriting helps us move to "higher" cognitive realms of metadiscourse (and so is particularly important for weak students). But I am reminded of Shirley Brice Heath's saying that she refuses to use the term "metacognition" because of its connotations of being something "higher" that only skilled students can do (discussion at the English Coalition Conference in 1987). Pat Belanoff shows that there is more metadiscourse in the freewriting of skilled students than of unskilled students, but she suggests that the unskilled students probably have just as much metadiscourse *in their minds* ("How do you spell that?" "Oh no, I can't write anything intelligent"). Indeed both Sondra Perl and Mike Rose give good evidence that what gets in the way of unskilled and blocked writers is *too much* metadiscourse. But these weak students don't feel they can bring these metathoughts *into* the text, make them *part* of the dialogue. So instead of saying that freewriting helps move us up to higher cognitive levels, I would argue that it helps us do *in writing* what we can already do perfectly well in our minds.

A Different Relationship to Writing

In conclusion then, freewriting has gradually given me a profoundly different experience of and relationship to writing. Where writing used to be the exercise of greater than usual care and control (especially in comparison to speaking) freewriting has led me to experience writing *in addition* as an arena of less than usual care and control: writing as an arena for putting down words and thoughts in a deeply unbuttoned way. And when I make progress toward something "higher" in writing—towards clarity of thinking or effectiveness of language or toward metaawareness—I experience this progress as rooted in freewriting, the "lowest" of writing activities.

Notes

¹ This started before I knew of Ken Macrorie and learned the name and

the self-conscious technique from him. And also before an M.I.T. colleague brought back from a summer's teaching in a rural southern college a different but comparable writing exercise: fill up a legal-sized sheet with nonstop writing; write as small or large as you wish. Here too was the essential germ: a task or even "ordeal" but with extenuating circumstances to guarantee success.

² "Our subsidiary awareness of tools and probes can be regarded now as the act of making them form a part of our own body. The way we use a hammer or a blind man uses his stick, shows in fact that in both cases we shift outwards the points at which we make contact with the things that we observe as objects outside ourselves. While we rely on a tool or a probe, these are not handled as *external* objects. We may test the tool for its effectiveness or the probe for its suitability . . . , but [when we actually use these tools], they remain necessarily on our side . . . , forming part of ourselves. We pour ourselves out into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them. . . . Hammers and probes can be replaced by intellectual tools" (Polanyi 59). He goes on to talk about language—noting specifically how hyper-consciousness of the language in one's mouth or in one's hand can ruin the smooth use of it.

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