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FINDING A FAMILY, FINDING A VOICE: A WRITING TEACHER TEACHES WRITING TEACHERS¹

ABSTRACT: "Finding a Family, Finding a Voice" explains how and why a paradigm shift occurred in Professor Bloom's way of teaching new TAs to teach writing. The three crises, one life-threatening, two institutional, that converged at the beginning of the semester freed Bloom from teaching conventionally. In the two months the class had changed, utterly, from students in the process of reading about teaching in order to teach writing, to students in the process of becoming writers in order to teach writing. As students and teacher became a family, a community of writers, each person in that community found a voice.

A paradigm shift, says Thomas Kuhn, arises in response to a crisis. Old ways don't work, old explanations don't fit, and a crisis makes apparent the need for a new paradigm that fits better. This is the story of how three crises (two new, one of longstanding) converged to precipitate a paradigm shift in the way I teach writing teachers to teach writing. In the twinkling of an eye, the class

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metamorphosed from students in the process of learning about teaching in order to teach writing, to students in the process of becoming writers in order to teach writing. Having effected the change, quite by accident, I can't go back; the new paradigm has supplanted the old.

I had taught "Teaching Composition," a graduate course in composition theory and pedagogy required of all new TAs, on and off for a decade, and I was looking forward to teaching it again at Virginia Commonwealth University. Following a widely accepted paradigm that was familiar, workable, and comfortable, I knew exactly what I would do. My students would read enough central works of rhetorical theory and composition research to enable them to sail, rather than stagger, through their first semester in the classroom. They would chart their course according to the principles and practices of such master mariners as Lindemann, Shaughnessy, Tate and Corbett, and Graves; their own teaching would mirror mine, which would of course model the best available information.

Initially the TAs would write an analysis of their own composing processes, to help them understand the process-oriented composition course they were teaching. They'd analyze a master's style. Later on, they would compile an annotated bibliography of current research and use these sources in a term paper of their choice. But whether or not these new teachers of writing wrote much or cared much about their own writing except to produce the requisite papers in appropriate academic form was beyond the expectations of myself or indeed of any of our graduate offerings other than writing workshops. Even though I write all the time (a day without writing is a day lost forever), I would not impose that additional burden on my students. They already had enough to do.

In my role as instructor I would provide an exemplary model of a professional writing teacher: always prepared, always able to anticipate their questions and answer them, always cheerfully in control. I could do no less. So I launched into the first day's ritual introduction to the course, but as I enthusiastically outlined what we'd do and why, it became apparent that something was wrong. The students seemed perplexed when I asked what writing assignments they were giving their freshmen. They looked unhappy when I suggested they bring in a sample of the diagnostic freshman essay to discuss in class, and finally, when I asked them to prepare a syllabus for the first two weeks of class they admitted that only two of the fourteen somber students around the conference table were actually teaching. Some were tutoring in the writing center; some were grading papers for professors in literature courses; some

had fellowships that freed them from other work; some were just taking the course for fun. Furthermore, the second edition of Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, which I had intended as the core of the course, was delayed by the publisher; it wouldn't be available for a month, maybe longer. By the end of this very very long 90-minute session, I knew I would have to discard my well-wrought, carefully refined semester syllabus and redo the whole course.

In the two days between class sessions (we met twice a week) I began the walk along the tightrope that stretched from experience to innocence. Being by nature a risk-taker (no I don't ride Harley-Davidsons or dive off the 15-meter board), I am always trying new things: jobs, book ideas, and now—the riskiest of all—some creative nonfiction and poetry. (In the process of learning how to do it I am finally finding the welcome, personal voice I have for a lifetime been too scared to use—which balances the discomfort and vulnerability of public exposure.) So I moved headlong toward the innocent, the unknown end. In risk-taking I would do risk-teaching.

Because my students had no students of their own, I decided to ask them to examine their own writing. For a decade I had been asking students in virtually all my classes to write a first paper on “How I Write,” as a way of helping themselves and me to better understand their composing process(es), and to anticipate and correct pitfalls. However, such papers, which I used to find fascinating, were becoming predictable to all of us; “How I Write” was the equivalent of “What I Did on My Summer Vacation” to these students, who had come of age in a process-oriented curriculum. Then, after all these years, I finally recognized the obvious—what good was a process without a compelling motive to use it? “Why I Write” had to precede “How I Write.” And I knew that it would be far more difficult to write such a paper than “How I Write,” but there was no alternative.

I began the next class, my once-elegant and comprehensive syllabus, embodying the old paradigm, now reduced to a few tentative key words, by announcing the first writing assignment, “Why I Write.” “Here I am,” I said, “trying to model for you the Right Way to Give a Writing Assignment, and I'm doing it all wrong. I usually like to talk an assignment through with my students, focusing on useful key words” (major ideas, primary traits) “and appropriate rhetorical strategies, anticipating the problems, and offering suggestions for How to Do It. We look at some sample papers to see what other students have done.

“But I can't do these things with this assignment. I've never given it before” (How could I, in thirty years of teaching, have

overlooked the obvious?) “so I don’t know what to expect. I don’t know why you write, but I do know that if writing is important to you your paper will be very revealing and it will be very hard to do. It’s not fair,” I continued, “to ask students who don’t know the teacher and whom the teacher doesn’t know to expose themselves on a personal level before the class has had time to create a community of trust and understanding, and yet I’m asking you to do this.” (So much for the exemplary model.) “We can read why George Orwell and Joan Didion and Elie Wiesel say they write” (I distributed copies of their essays for the next session), “and we can see what the writers in *In Praise of What Persists* and *The Paris Review* series say, and we will—but maybe their reasons aren’t your reasons. I tell you what” (I hesitated before taking the plunge because I knew the water would be cold and that I would be vulnerable, even, to drowning), “I’ll go first, and we’ll see what we can learn from my experience.”

I had always been reluctant to impose my writing on my students. The focus of our classes should be properly on their work, not mine. I suspected I could write better than they could, and I didn’t want to establish a climate of competition. (But this class contained a published poet and a prizewinning novelist, so the students could set the competence level for their peers.) Yet I could think of no other way to establish a climate for teaching writing as a process than by examining the question fundamental to that process—not “Why do it?” but “Why do *I* want to do it?”—and now I believe there is no other way.

“Teaching Composition” was getting tougher, unpredictable and therefore potentially out of control, though the students seemed very willing to explore “Why I Write,” especially since I’d volunteered to test the waters. Our class, myself included, had also agreed to keep notebooks of reactions not only to the assigned and eclectic readings, but to what went on in class; we’d see what we could learn from the writing in progress and the teaching in process.

The character of the course—an unstructured, off-balance, ad lib response to a crisis, like street theater in comparison with a scripted play on a proscenium arch stage—was becoming a metaphor for my personal life. My husband, also a professor and writer, and always cheerfully healthy, had begun waking up with headaches. After he woke up earlier and earlier and sometimes did not sleep at all, he consulted our usually cheerful dentist who said, “Nope, it’s not a toothache,” and sent him off to our usually cheerful internist, who suspected sinus problems and prescribed ten days of decongestant. But the headaches got worse, and the internist, no longer cheerful, sent my husband, who was having difficulty reading by this time, to

the local ENT specialist. Ordinarily a dramatic joker who treated even accident victims with puns and funny faces, this doctor said, impassively, "I can see something in there, but I can't tell what it is," and sent him to a specialist at the state's major medical center, the Medial College of Virginia. By this time I was driving my husband everywhere he needed to go, for he could not see well enough to drive, though with blind faith he continued to teach.

In class I felt like an Easter candy, with a eggshell veneer over a liquid center; poke it and I'd collapse, the interior running out. I was terrified that I would become a widow. At home, I masked my tension in Girl Scout good cheer and after one long sleepless night I couldn't cry any more and forced myself to eat and to swim and to go to bed and even to play hostess to a succession of houseguests, some from overseas, invited months before. "We don't have anywhere else to go," they announced from Dulles Airport, "you have to take us in." As so we did.

In this context I wrote "Why I Write." For the first time in my literary life I could be uninhibited (graduate school training had made me such a self-effacing writer that I'd never before written anything except poetry in the first person). In relation to the mortal combat being waged in our household, everything else became a trivial pursuit. I was finally free to say what I wanted; our existential crisis was, at least, liberating.

Only I wasn't free. At least, not on the first draft, or the second, or the third. The first time through I wrote the easy part: "I write because I can't not write. From the moment I learned to read, enamored of the joys of Dr. Seuss, I knew I wanted to write. I thought at the age of six that to delight readers with words was the most wonderful thing in the world. I still think so." Only later did I have the courage to add, "To write is to touch one's readers, to make friends and risk enemies, to become a member of the human family—to belong, even in exile."

That first version was a piece of cake, six pages in two hours—a lost faster than I usually write, even with the computer. Maybe what I was asking my students to do wasn't so hard after all, though as I commented at the time in my teacher's/writer's notebook, "The metamorphosis from child reader to adult writer dashing off book after article after book makes the act of writing seem pretty simple, and pretty simple-minded, and unbelievable."

Indeed, the reasons for writing that we were discussing in class didn't make it sound that easy. George Orwell's "Why I Write" is a political manifesto: "My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. . . . I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention

...” (394). Orwell’s motive resonates in Joan Didion’s claim, in another “Why I Write,” that all serious writers say “*listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*” (17). The message of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel is unfailingly moral; in “Why I Write: Making No Become Yes,” he explains that he writes as a witness to the memory of the Holocaust victims:

I owe them my roots and my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself. . . . Why do I write? To wrench those victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death (24, 27).

The day before my paper was due I started at 9 a.m. to polish it—an hour’s task, I anticipated. By 4 p.m. I needed a break; at 9 p.m. I was still writing; I finally finished, drained, at 1 a.m. The resulting nine-page version wasn’t much longer than the original draft, but the substance had changed considerably as I imposed a grid of the hard stuff over the original text. Why I write—as Orwell and Didion and Wiesel know full well—is who I am, and when I had plumbed “the deep heart’s core” I knew I had said enough.

In elementary school, I told my students, I wrote to distance myself from conventional classmates—I wrote satires (about them) while they wrote yet again about their summer vacations; writing was social criticism. In high school I wrote to find a voice, to distance myself from my overbearing “*paterfamilias* of four good German names (and a nickname of ‘Odd’),” who sought to impose his pompous, professorial style on my writing as on my life; writing was rebellion. In college I wrote to learn what I had to say and in graduate school and afterward I wrote to understand what others (writers, especially) had to say and how they said it. Writing was profession. So I wrote my way into job after job, too often filling others’ demands for reports, reviews, encyclopedia articles, critical essays, textbooks, chapters of other people’s books. In writing so much as somebody’s professor, somebody’s colleague, somebody’s friend, I was losing my voice.

I was also writing, however, in hopes that my parents would be once again proud and “would invite me, the published author, back into the family they had thrown me out of, stunned, at 24 when I married out of their non-religion, a Jew.” But “my father carefully misread my major books, the ones the reviewers especially liked, and ignored the rest. He never praised one syllable.” I said all this in the essay for my students; I told them what I had never told anyone in public before, more even than my sister and brother knew. How

could I make myself so vulnerable to the very students, whom I still didn't know very well, whose authority figure I was supposed to be? How could I live with them for the rest of the semester? But—I took a deep breath—how could I not write “Why I Write” without being as candid with them and tough with myself as I expected them to be in their own writing?

So I concluded the essay: My husband, “best critic and best friend,” and the job security and independence that have come from doctoring and mastering academic writing have enabled me to regain my voice. I love being back where I started, with writing that is risky, daring, subversive, the writing “that most engages my heart and soul, the writing that is about families, parents and children,” in biography, oral history, autobiography, poetry.

My father is dead now, and whether he ever loved me or my writing enough is beyond change. . . . In writing about families, in creating and re-creating them, I rejoin the family of my own choosing. I am part of them. They cannot throw me out; I take them in. I write to remain a member of the human race, the family that encompasses us all.

The morning after I finished “Why I Write” my husband and I saw films of the CAT scan. We could not talk about the clenched-fist white spot under his right eye, bigger than a golf ball, pressing against his brain. Indeed, we said very little on that very long drive to school that morning, for the diagnosis was a malignant brain tumor. “I’m prepared to die,” he told me matter-of-factly. “I want you to know I have no regrets about our marriage, all 29 years. None.” Just as matter-of-factly I replied, gripped the wheel so I wouldn’t crack us up, “Well, I’m not prepared for you to die, and I want you to fight this.” And so I went to class, with “zero at the bone” burning in my brain, to read the essay that I decided to give my husband for his impending birthday. We make our own presents, future or no.

My voice began trembling and my hands started shaking long before we got to “Why I Write,” which I saved for the very end. The good reason for this was, of course, the pedagogical decision not to take up too much class time with my own work. I cannot remember what we said, that day, about Corbett and Aristotle on invention. I think we talked, that day, about Eudora Welty’s concept of “confluence” in *One Writer’s Beginnings*, and Tess Gallagher’s “My Father’s Love Letters” and the *Paris Review* interview with Thurber: “I’m always writing. I write even at parties. Sometime my wife looks over at me and says, ‘Dammit Thurber, stop writing’” (96).

Finally I took a deep breath and told the class about how I wrote

the essay, that it had taken all my life and one week and would take more. I know I did not tell them about the CAT scan. I know also that although I am usually careful to make eye contact with my students, and to vary the pace of my presentation and allow for interruptions and relevant digressions and questions, I clung to the paper and without looking at anyone read the essay straight through in one gulp. There were tears in my eyes as I finished, as indeed there are as I write again about this day of days, and there was silence in that room.

No one said anything, but the time was up anyway. On their way out, however, several of the students said it was a good class, some shook my hand, and one gave me a hug. That had never before happened so early in the semester. It was like leaving church.

For the rest of the term I heard about that class, from the students in person and in their notebooks. In risk-taking, risk-teaching, showing them how much I cared about writing, I had complicated their lives. They had to care too. A writing center tutor wrote, "All over Richmond I run into lynn bloom [sic] students moaning about their papers—they all want to put a lot into it; they feel the paper is demanding a lot of them." An ex bass-player corroborated: Damn you, Lynn Bloom. Have you let me in for a life of writing, for a life of struggle to create, to express, to move from a state of knowing less to a state of knowing more or less what I want to say?"

Nevertheless, the class was, as one student said, "charged up and full of energy." The novelist observed: "Here I am on a dismal rainy day, with my family life falling apart (and yes that makes me cranky, yes that makes it harder to get something done) and *this class cheers me up* and helps me believe I am a writer." Another analyzed her experience as a graduate student in this way:

Although I went through four years of college and posses a bachelor's degree [in business administration], I am attending college for the first time. . . . I am now in school for the sole purpose of learning and I can't seem to get enough. . . . For the first time ever I have understood the idea of getting satisfaction from the project itself rather than concentrating on the grade.

A first-time composition teacher, whose term project was research on "ways to make students care about their writing," said:

There is an atmosphere where everyone cares about their writing. . . . I have tried to think back over what may have prompted this atmosphere in our class . . . it was Lynn Bloom's reading her paper on why she writes. She took so

many chances in that paper—invested so much confidence in our class—went out on a limb to make us feel like we were a gathering of writers with whom she wanted to share her work. [Before that] the risk had gone out of my writing . . . but when I heard her read, and when I heard some of the other students' papers, I realized that this class was going to take a different turn from my other graduate classes, and that maybe it was going to give me the ability to earn the distinction of calling myself a writer.

There's not much more to say. Through taking risks, through letting my students see me as a writer-always-in-process who cares deeply about what I write and can admit vulnerability and change, I effected a paradigm shift. Within two months' time, my class had changed from students in the process of learning about teaching in order to teach writing, to students in the process of becoming writers in order to teach writing. They learned about teaching writing as they wrote, and as they read—research essays, finally Lindemann—and each other's writings—while they wrote. As a student writer-in-process said, "I am grateful that the class was structured (de-structured?) to allow us to answer our own questions." Another exulted, "[This] has turned out to be a writing boot camp for me." Even the single holdout, the elementary teacher who never wanted to write, succumbed to the new paradigm within a month:

I surrender! I'm just going to let myself be surprised with the directions this class takes. Risky voyages can take you where you never thought of going. Safe voyages are limited. Dr. Bloom has decided on the risky voyage and I admire her courage for picking it. I can be game enough to cast off my mooring ropes ("But I thought this class was supposed to . . .") and sail on down the river with her.

In becoming writers, the class was becoming a community of writers, as well. The depth of their investment in their own writing mirrored a receptivity to the work of their peers: "When [someone] reads a paper aloud, intelligent and instructive discussion follows. When a teaching problem is presented . . . we solve it as a class and we learn." Thus the students' engagement with "Why I Write" and their own emerging commitment to writing (two-thirds of them enrolled, the next semester, in my graduate workshop in Writing Nonfiction, including the formerly resistant teacher), to each other, and to teaching writing enabled me, two weeks later, to tell them that if I had to miss class because of my husband's impending

surgery and its potentially terrifying aftermath, they could teach themselves until I returned. Just as they were already doing.

The operation was swift, the outcome sweet. The surgeon's grin stretched above his mask when he came to give me the news. He repeated, over and over, what a lucky man my husband was. My own good luck was obvious. (The biopsy revealed that the cyst the doctor had just removed was the most benign of possibilities, composed of the same cells that form teeth, and the most rare—so rare that he might encounter only one such case in his career.) But although the surgeon has since become a kind friend, he could not know then or even now, how doubly lucky I have been in finding a new voice as a writer, and a new paradigm of teaching writing teachers, themselves a new family, as I have weathered this watershed experience.

Coda

After my husband's good health had remained stable for a year, I finally had enough perspective on the class and on my own still-emerging commitment to the risky realm of belletristic writing to attempt this essay. I had put it off as long as I could, but I had agreed to read it at a professional meeting—my first public appearance in my private voice in fifty years—and the deadline was fast approaching. From the safe distance of time (and a move to Connecticut) I began to wonder whether I was romanticizing the experience, investing it with as much of an impact on the students as it had on me. There was only one way to find out.

I sent the sixth draft to the students, and on a rainy March afternoon went to Virginia to find out. "Did I get it right?" They knew I was as vulnerable to them then as I had been the year before, and as we huddled together in a small room in the writing center it was clear that they had remained a community of writers and teachers and that they regarded me as part of that community. "Yes," they said, it reflected both the letter and the spirit of our class—which they demonstrated over and over again as they told me about their teaching and their own writing.

My students were teaching their students to write the way their experience told them that real writers learn to write. "Writers read a lot," they said, "and pick up vocabulary and sentence patterns, a sense of style, as they read." "Writers learn from reading aloud, paying attention to the sound." "Writers learn from copying texts by hand as Corbett recommends, from getting the feel of their sentences, from imitating texts." "They learn from writing and revising work that really means something to them, and from

submitting multiple drafts for portfolio grading." "Writers learn from reading their works to each other." "Writers learn from teachers who write, who are part of a group of writers."

Indeed, my students were real writers, in process and in product. Two students had switched from the M.A. to the M.F.A. program in creating writing. One student was trying, with some frustration, to control his sprawling style and vary his repetitive vocabulary. Another was in the process of transforming a collection of personal essays into a bildungsroman. A poet was experimenting with prose, to see what he'd learn. The prizewinning novelist had completed another novel and won honorable mention in the AWP (Associated Writing Programs) contest. And the most resistant student, the elementary schoolteacher, had edited a book of the uncollected writings of her favorite author, E. B. White, and submitted it to Harper & Row.

Another student, a high school teacher who took "Son of Paradigm Shift" last summer, told me simply, in a letter last Fall, "you made me a writer. I'm getting up at 5 every morning to write for an hour before school." A letter in February said that on the strength of an essay he'd written about fatherhood, he had been invited to become a magazine home repair columnist. In May his short story won first prize in the Writer's Federation of Nova Scotia contest.

I have begun the most difficult writing of my life, about my life and the lives of others close, distant, compelling. It's risky, but exhilarating, to invest so much and care so much, but there is no other choice. I have been invited to share drafts not only with my students, one kind of community, but with an informal network of essayists, another community, whose work is so good that the prospect of their criticism terrifies me. There is no other choice here, either. For this is the way to find our voices, find our families, find ourselves.

Note

¹ Dedicated, with love and respect, to my English 636 ("Teaching Composition") class at Virginia Commonwealth University, Fall 1987: Sara Brown, Linda Burmeister, Linda Christian, Becky Dale, Christian Gehman, Warren Hayman, Karen Johnston, Joan Lanzillotti, Jay Looney, Mark Morrison, Kathleen Reilly, Dana Smith, Judy Taylor, Karen Weatherspoon; and to my husband, Martin Bloom.

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