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The Transformative Practice of Writing and Teaching Writing

Robbie Clifton Pinter

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.

When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.

—Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir* 18

Transforming Students

This year marks the 33rd year of teaching composition for me. I would not still be teaching if not for the confluence of many pieces of good fortune in many areas: timing, a stimulating and ever-changing profession, and the simple good luck of being at a place with interesting students, classes, and a strong support system across campus. More than any of those pieces of good fortune, though, I am still teaching because of the nature of the writing process and the way it can be taught. The craft of teaching writing asks teachers to be awake in the present moment, to absorb the words students share as they detail divorces, suicides, finding religion, losing religion, and all the many other parts of life that writing challenges them to examine. Students write their lives on the page, and teachers facilitate how those words might work in a different way, after attending to them closely and respectfully. That part alone makes me think of the teaching of writing as a transformative act.

I didn't consider writing instruction as transformative when I began teaching, and I certainly wouldn't have used the words "spiritual" or "sacred" (see Schiller). But now things have changed. Perceiving writing and the teaching of writing as transformative has given me the language to understand better what happens in the classroom, and I believe it helps me do my job better. Perhaps most important, it provides a way of understanding just how significant students' words are. Charles Bazerman, in receiving CCCC's Exemplar Award,

offers a brief but insightful description of the transformative nature of writing instruction when he gives us these words:

Writing has been considered sacred, for it sets us apart from the moment, creates an expanded reflective space where we can be more thoughtful, more persistent in our inquiry, more playful in our statements and actions. Reading and writing are associated with inwardness and personal development. Writing facilitates building a parallel world of knowledge that allows us to monitor, project, and influence the here-and-now world in which we live. Writing makes communion, bringing together people across space and time in shared attention, meanings, imagination, understanding, and action. As teachers of writing, we are bearers of this transformative technology, leading current and future generations into more refined skills, deeper understanding, more complex cooperation, new adventures, greater communion." (571-2)

The nature of writing invites the writer to look at life intentionally, to see it as something that can be explored from other angles. It allows us to see beyond our first impressions and dig deeper into the process of why we say what we say or do what we do. We might ask: why does this point matter? Where's the energy in your writing? Why do you want to write about this topic? In asking these questions, the teacher invites students to become readers—and readers to become writers—in ways that open up their view of the world to themselves and others. I especially like Bazerman's powerful analysis when he ends with the role of the teacher of writing: we are the ones who ask students to explore their perceptions again and again until they see them more clearly; we are the ones who ask students to make connections to old texts, new texts, texts without words, and ideas in ways that produce patterns, themes, insights; we are the ones who get to create the assignments and activities that engender "adventures, greater communion." I like these words because they highlight the role of the teacher of writing as one who is engaged in a special vocation.

But again, as I look to Wendell Berry's "Whatever is Foreseen in Joy" and his metaphor of farming, I realize he could well describe what happens in teaching writing.¹ "Foreseen in joy"—these words tease me at odd times, but especially in spring when the bulbs and seeds I planted years before begin to once more appear and I am delighted, as I would be when greeting an old friend: "The blue woodland hyacinths! I put them in when I first was learning to garden, and now they are back again." Sometimes. Sometimes the things I plant don't come back or are mowed over or just die after sprouting. It's all part of the intricate and often fickle-seeming organic process involved when dealing with a living creation. Yet even when life doesn't return or seeds don't sprout, the process of planting is a transformational act, an act of expectation and acceptance.

I teach writing for the same reason I plant seeds in the fall, as acts of faith and hope. These are living processes that offer few guarantees. In teaching, it's not a foregone conclusion that hard work such as grading the papers, fielding the excuses, and vetting the sources will lead a student to a good paper. But these acts of teaching are an offering and a statement of some basic truths. Chief among the truths is this: something out there is worth teaching, worth writing about, worth doing. That "something" has to do with the writer's connection with her authentic self. I don't have control over the process—

1. Wendell Berry has written over fifty books of poetry, fiction, and essays.

how many seeds have I planted that have not sprouted? I sometimes see those shrunken seeds as students who left my class without bringing their authentic voice to the page. A semester may not be enough time for that. At other times, those withered seeds may be my own tired journal entries that seemingly lead nowhere. It's then that I hear Berry's voice: "The field is tilled/ And left to grace" (ll. 7-8). Ultimately, I work and relinquish control. It's a process that seems all the more mysterious because I invite my students to participate in a similar way every time I ask them to write and then listen deeply to what they write. Writing and teaching writing, as farming, can invite deep and lasting change. It's the transformative part of writing and teaching writing that makes me want to do it. Berry's language invites us to wait, to realize how little control we may ultimately have in writing and teaching. It also encourages us to keep at it.

That which is "foreseen in joy must be lived out . . . , vision held open in dark" (ll.1-3). These words point to something outside our sensory perceptions, just outside a human's intellectual capacity to understand, but what we trust exists as we wait in the dark for the new life that we sense. Applied to writing, Berry's words point to the mystery of a writer's process as she gets an inkling of what to write but knows deep work is waiting to be done.

How so? A student recently wrote to me that his draft would not be strong, because in writing it, he discovered what he really wanted to say. This assignment only asked students to write a non-fiction narrative; it did not ask for the writing to focus on his transformation, although the process that called forth the writing could be defined as meditative. I invited the class to close their eyes and reflect on their topics, dwell in their topic, remember their topic. This student realized the transformative power that the assignment offered him when he wrote:

In writing this paper, I have questioned myself, 'What is most sacred to me in life?' I have tried to find some sort of connection or touch point that I can revolve my entire way of life around. It was a difficult search, but I think I found it late last night. I had one of the largest *AHA!* moments of my life. It was astounding, and I want to get it on paper. It is going to redefine me and accomplish what I thought the story I had already written was trying to do.

Here the student offers something like a confession as he explained why his assignment was not finished well. How many of these explanations have all writing teachers seen? Yet he was not doing so superficially:

. . . I have a mediocre paper that I'm going to turn in to you today. I did work hard on it, but it is still just mediocre. The ideas are there, but not the way they should be. Part of the story is there, but not all the parts that matter. I am going to rewrite this story the way it's supposed to be. I want you to read it when it's done, because it's no longer a matter of academics to me. This is a matter of discovering who I am, and where I want to be.

I am not writing you pleading for anything really, but because I am genuinely excited. . . . I just wanted to share that with you and thank you for enabling me to make this discovery. In the end, I think this is what education is about. It is a process that inspires someone to do greater.

Our writing may result from a particular exercise or assignment, but good writing usually transcends the simple confines of an assignment to become something more individualized, unique, surprising. Waiting for that mystery, just outside of our logical understanding, is something that the writing process can incubate. The student who wrote the above excerpts was part of a class that used drafts to discover and create meaning. The class was also encouraged to experience their lives in writing as part of a strongly intuitive exercise that involved making lists of important life experiences and then dwelling in silence as they turned towards these past experiences and away from the rest of their busy thoughts—they were portioning off part of their lived experience to both create something from it and then something to reflect upon. This creative, introspective practice allowed them to refine their work, sifting back and forth across what was written for what needed to be culled, what needed to remain. Such activity, akin to the practice of working the soil, is a living process, one that often allows for an idea to take root and flourish.

Seeing the teaching of writing as a living process leads to further implications about how and why teachers want to teach writing. We learn there is “something in there” as Mary Rose O’Reilley says about students—something that awaits the opportunity to be transformed (*Peaceable Classroom* 58). O’Reilley reminds teachers that what we do is very hard, but very much worth doing if we can. What is “in there” cannot be reached easily—“you need strong practice” (58). We recognize it when we meet words on the page that point to students’ authentic lives. The students may have not yet found the precise words to express that authenticity yet, and we often see our students struggle in the darkness and despair of revision. But if we look closely, we can see that “something” when students finally write the words that express a part of themselves they didn’t know, a discovery of who they are and what they feel or believe.

As teachers of writing, we also create space for our students in which they can be open to re-seeing what they write. They are often misled by all the cultural practices that masquerade as authentic voice: texting on iPhones or posts on Snapchat and Facebook can become activities that direct us away from our own authentic selves and voices. Nicholas Carr expresses it accurately:

What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I’m online or not, my mind now expects to take information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski. (6-7)

Stripping away the white noise of daily living, preserving class time for writing and the discussion of writing can be a first step for writers to engage in a direct experience with that self they may not know. When teachers hold open the possibility that there is something beyond the technological gestures that students use to “connect” themselves to others, it can lead students to write beyond their expectations as they lean into what surprises them. Such direct experience is truly countercultural, truly beyond what Nicholas Carr describes.

The challenge in teaching is how to introduce students to their inner depths, to their own authenticity, when the world they inhabit does just the opposite. But by asking students to listen more deeply to their own thoughts, narratives about so many of their

concerns emerge: a friend's death, a broken dream, or a life-changing trip. We see this deeper listening when peers listen to the stories that each other's words create.

A recent example comes from a student who wrote about her early life in American Samoa. As she wrote, she recognized her conflicting responses to the beauty of the place and the horror of its practices:

This small island, in the middle of the South Pacific where I resided a mere four years, would impact me greatly throughout the course of my life. Although somewhat westernized, in many ways, the culture still reflected the historically primitive nature of the Samoan people. After all, cannibalism was widely practiced, and it is uncertain as to when it was actually phased out. The presence of a ritualistic, souvenir brain fork that rested on our bookshelf served to remind me of this. Being exposed to the culture's brutality, abuse, and corruption, no doubt stemming from these tribal practices, quickly stole from me much of my childhood innocence. I regularly witnessed parents beating their toddlers in public and even came to understand that you could get away with murder occasionally. The juxtaposition of this barbarianism set on the backdrop of a beautiful island paradise educated me in all the cruelty and beauty the world could simultaneously offer.

This writing offered a strong experience to her readers as well. One asked, "Did you say 'brain fork'?" Others wanted her to tell more about tribal practices. In an attempt to make meaning from her conflicting perceptions, such a process allowed the class to act in community as they heard, responded, and made suggestions. But as the student shared her reflection, it held the potential for going beyond her attempt to make simple meaning from her conflicting perspectives about another culture. It provided a way for her and her peers to wonder about our *own* culture and its similar brutalities, abuses, and corruption, its own historically primitive nature, where people like us have also engaged in barbarianisms and gotten away with murder. When a student attempts to sift through what shapes her own identity in this way, without stroking her ego or sentimentalizing a story, the process is akin to what a farmer does to make crops grow instead of wither.

Such classroom experiences also return me to Berry's words about "Vision held open in the dark." That's what writing and the teaching of writing asks both teacher and student to do. We know a vision is there, we sense it, we know it's not completely ours as if we could set our intention upon a perfect paper, and then make one come forth. It requires those "ten thousands days of work," and even then it must be "left to grace." Teachers of writing encourage students to sort through their thoughts, write them, listen to them alone and with others, and then hear what the words can say anew, even if it's not what they want to hear.

In writing, we want students to engage in the mystery of writing because it gives them a way to ask, "What if?" "Why?" "What does it mean?" These questions serve as touchstones for transformation, as Berry notes: "And yet no leaf or grain is filled/ By work of ours." We sense, and we allow our students to sense something larger than ourselves that can be reached. As Bazerman states: "Writing facilitates building a parallel world of knowledge that allows us to monitor, project, and influence the here-and-now world in which we live" (571-2).

These thoughts make me recall a middle-aged dancer who reflected on a career that she began as a first-year college student. She recreated her life through the memory of

that experience and allowed herself to consider how that experience affected her life several years later:

My body whispers to me in dance class, and mornings after long rehearsals. The language is often subtle, but with an edge of admonition—a sharp but fleeting pain in my lower back, an aching knee, hips that pop during leg swings, an ankle that doesn't want to bear the crushing pressure of one more jump. 'Is it worth it?' she poses. 'You know a lifetime of dance has its price.'

This writer, through the metaphor of her body “whispering” and “admonishing,” was not defining but evoking, to me and her classmates as well as to herself, a strong example of “embodied” writing gained through what Sondra Perl calls “felt sense.” This kind of writing leaves even more room for the “vision held open in the night.” This kind of writing happens when teachers let their students connect with topics, arrange their papers to match their purposes, and revise. It is the continual sifting-through of drafts that allows students' words to become embodied, to make their language live.

To teach students to write with language that is alive is, again, to understand that there is something our words suggest. The underlying principle of learning how words can transform is to pay attention. Language is organic, growing, changing. It lives in our minds and the minds of those who read each other's words. When I spend a day teaching, I often return home still buried in my students' words. Only when I see a startling image—a flock of robins breaking their grounded perch, flying across the road—do I wake up and notice my goal is to create an environment for students to be able to do just that: break from their grounded perches and fly.

Transforming Ourselves

I don't always remember that writing and teaching writing can transform students, especially at the end of a busy term that seems to include “ten thousand days of work.” When the papers come, so do the student excuses: too many other papers, no real understanding of the assignment, and a few jabs at me personally—“You didn't tell us we needed eight sources.” It's only after years of teaching writing that I can begin to realize the depth of authentic living connected to it.

To continue to have the energy and focus to follow Berry's admonition and “hold open the window in the dark,” teachers of writing have to have strong support from various sources. In the same way that writing is transformative, teaching writing is also a transformative process, a process of “what ifs,” and “I don't knows” that often cannot be easily accounted for through reason. What I think we must do for our students, if we are to be true to what we do, is to offer ourselves as whole human beings.

Perhaps the first step toward such an offering is to acknowledge that the expectations of others do not have to become our own expectations. I require more of myself because others do, and that's not always a sustainable choice. Once again, the poet helps me find a way through this muddle as I reread: “By work of ours; the field is tilled/ And left to grace. That we may reap/ Great work is done while we're asleep.”

Perhaps we need to leave some things to grace, to relinquish—to let go of having to meet every challenge or to accomplish what is not ours to accomplish. For teachers, as for students, we may have to let some things go in order to fulfill the greater good that

writing and teaching can offer. Specifically, how does a teacher do that in this age where we are held accountable for so many things other than teaching?

Maybe relinquishment begins when we admit that we can't do all that's required of us. A system that asks too much from its members is skewed. What would the practices of relinquishment look like for writing teachers as well as overwhelmed writers? At times, whether in a faculty meeting or on the commute, we must take our emotional temperature and realize our need for self-care. Whether it's intentional breathing, meditation, or taking a pause, we must recognize when we need to engage in a practice that supports us. Engaging in such practices can be an easy way to remember we are transcendent creatures in temporal bodies. Such practices help us remember the world outside of the faculty meeting, class, or tutoring. Relinquishment might mean asking insightful questions, such as "What is mine to do?" Meditative practices of all kinds can go a long way towards restoring our sense of self, allowing us to see the work of teaching with a wider view. Along with Berry, O'Reilly offers wisdom on this point when she writes: "The great test of this time is to maintain an open heart, not to close in cynicism and self-protection . . . the best and perhaps the only utterance one is capable of at such a time is the prayer that one's heart be opened, one's compassion increased" (*Garden* 71).

Embedded within the call to relinquishment is another call—a call to rest. Berry calls it "a Sabbath mood" that "Rests on our day, and finds it good." Not all teachers are granted that rest. Yes, there can be summers and long holiday breaks, as well as sabbaticals for some. But the call for relinquishment is also a call for replenishing—the job cannot be done if it's seen as one measured by numbers of students and sections taught. To perform a role so tinged with the sacred, teachers must have ways to honor and support themselves, and they must organize with others to help themselves do that.

We must look to each other to realize that we are not alone in wanting to see our work life through a larger lens. We must become "open to all those interested in exploring the boundaries of teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and methodologies" (see AEPL website, <http://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/>). Together, we can recognize the many aspects of transformation that relate to teaching writing: "aesthetic, emotional, and moral intelligence; archetypes [for learning]; body wisdom; care in education; creativity; felt-sense theory; healing; holistic learning; humanistic and transpersonal psychology; imaging; intuition; kinesthetic knowledge; meditation; narration as knowledge; reflective teaching; silence; spirituality; and visualization" (AEPL). Also pertinent are retreats that provide teachers a space for hope, clarity, and sustainability—where trained facilitators can help them rediscover and claim their authentic selves (see <http://www.couragerenewal.org/>). Such retreats offer renewal through the acts of reading, writing, and reflection—replicating on a professional level the kinds of meditative and contemplative methods we can practice with our students. Such retreats can also help us recognize the high call and power of teaching as a vocation (see <http://www.contemplativemind.org/>).

A great thirst for authenticity arises from the teaching life. Growing numbers in our profession share the same need for and conviction about the transformative power of teaching writing. Although recent trends in higher education tend to measure education as an "investment," requiring measurable outcomes, others argue that these trends are misdirected. Johansson and Felten argue that the purpose of a college or university

should not be to “mold students into a specified form, belief system, or mind-set [Instead,] colleges can play an important role in cultivating transformation, understood as an ongoing process of intentionally aligning one’s actions and behaviors with one’s evolving sense of identity.” (1-2). This argument offers a sustaining point of view about how to respond to the changes in student demographics and the economic crisis facing higher education.

As Wendell Berry reminds us, “The thing being made in a university is humanity. . . . The common denominator has to be larger than either career preparation or preparation for citizenship [if it is to form] a fully developed human being (*Home Economics* 1).

Transformative. Intentional. Sacred. When done with the care and attention that Berry’s poetry highlights, writing and teaching writing can be acts of transformation. Although Berry’s and others’ words may carry perspectives on life that some consider dated or impractical, their message is timeless.

There is “something there” in writing and teaching writing—a mystery just beyond the human ability to create. It’s worth the work and the wait. Writing teachers construct classes and assignments for students to engage in that mystery. Especially in “the technological age” where we live, we can return to the truths in our roots as we continue to “hold open the vision” for others, as well as for ourselves. To do that, we must find ways to support our students *and* ourselves. We must grant ourselves the rich, supple time to wait, to rest, to take Sabbath. We can and must foresee in joy. It’s just across the horizon, tinged with the hope that brought us to this work.



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