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WRITING WITHOUT PETER: REFLECTIONS ON PETER ELBOW AND HIS LEGACY

Peter Elbow the Philosopher

Irene Papoulis

On the occasion of Peter Elbow's passing, we read many tributes and praises commemorating him and the foundational contributions he made to the multi-faceted field of writing studies. But as we know, even as Peter's ideas were lauded and embraced, they were also questioned by many, including other renowned members of our profession.

I once asked Peter how he most wanted to be seen in the academic world, and he said, "as a philosopher." Many in our field might be surprised by that. Since Peter wrote about the messy, emotional side of what happens when we write, and since he wrote about feelings, including his own, and listening without speaking, and Rogerian rhetoric, many seemed to view him as a giant neon sign beaming TOUCHY-FEELY. That made them trap him in a box and run away, eschewing what they might have deemed his wacky, and ultimately unserious, worldview. Their dismissiveness hurt him more than most people knew.

My friendship with Peter began through something called Re-evaluation Counseling, also known as Co-Counseling or just "RC." It's a peer-to-peer therapy that people learn about mostly by word of mouth. They take a class in the method and then meet outside of class to "counsel" each other.

It is not a vetted practice. But back in the eighties, when I was a graduate student in English at Stony Brook University and had never heard of Peter, a friend talked me into going to an RC class. Emotions, the teacher told our incoming group of recruits, often prevent us from thinking clearly; she was going to teach us how to "discharge" those emotions with the help of others. There was nothing wrong with emotions in themselves, she added—in fact, respecting them was crucial in the process we would learn for "counseling;" getting the other person to express their emotions in order to "discharge" them. Once we learned how to do that we would meet in pairs, usually with people who were separate from our regular lives, decide on a time window, divide that time in half and, say we meet for an hour, you "counsel" me for the first thirty minutes, then we switch and I do the same for you. If we met someone for the first time in the class, we weren't allowed to socialize with them outside of class or counseling.

"Counseling" was an intriguing process to me at the time, and I participated in it for a couple of years. It taught me to ask good questions, listen carefully, and maybe say back the person's words, or ask them to dig into their emotional valences by repeating specific phrases they had spoken. I was slightly uncomfort-

able about the fact that we did all this without oversight from a “real” therapist, but I found it very interesting to establish close connections with strangers, separate from the rest of our lives, by getting each other to laugh, cry, and shake.

Meanwhile, over in the real world I was beginning my dissertation and teaching various sections of first-year composition. One day, I learned that Peter Elbow was going to become the director of Stony Brook’s writing program. Who? I didn’t know, but got his book, *Writing Without Teachers*, and became intrigued.

We graduate students had our first meeting with Peter in a classroom, and his first move was to insist that we move the desks from their rows into a big circle. What? Even in “discussion” classes, we hadn’t done that unless we had a seminar table. Then he got us to freewrite. What? “This is not to share, just write whatever comes, for yourself, the only rule is that you don’t stop. Repeat, ‘no, no, no,’ if you want, but keep the pen moving.” What? But I’m writing garbage!

No matter. And of course, by now, hundreds of thousands of people have had similar introductions to the pleasures of freewriting, and countless words have been written, stemming from *Writing without Teachers*, about the usefulness of private freewriting and its “garbage.” I quickly became a convert to Peter’s methods, both as a teacher and as a writer.

And one day, I picked up the phone, and it was Peter. “I see that you’re in RC,” I was surprised to hear him say, “would you like to meet for co-counseling?” Wow—in those pre-internet days, I hadn’t known I was in any kind of database. But hey, counsel with the program chair? “Ok, sure!”

Private meetings for “counseling” between a program director and a graduate student might sound creepy or suspect in this post #metoo era, and if that phone conversation had happened today I probably would have hesitated quite a bit, wondering about Peter’s intentions as a 48-year old professor counseling with a 28-year old graduate student. But back then, I saw the invitation simply as an interesting opportunity, which it turned out to be. I did feel a bit awkward in our sessions at first, probably curating my feelings in order to appear more dignified than I knew I was. That wasn’t the best way for me to “discharge” my real feelings, but Peter’s open, non-judgmental spirit helped me come to think of myself as his equal partner when it came to counseling, and we both took the work seriously—it wasn’t creepy at all.

A rule of RC is that everything in a session is confidential, but I can say that Peter and I learned quite a bit about each other’s emotions. That felt somewhat strange to me when I saw him in the halls of the English building; it put us outside the usual norms of director/student interaction. But I appreciated the fact that both Peter and I were comfortable with our resistance to those norms, in the name of personal growth. We were both drawn to RC for its outsider-ness, I’d say, before going on to become captivated by the power of its basic tenets.

I never took a class with Peter, since I was done with coursework by then, but I attended various writing and reading groups he led, and I read all his writings. As a result of that study, my teaching improved dramatically.

After I left Stony Brook, and RC, in 1986, Peter and I stayed in touch as friends, colleagues, and later participants in a longtime three-person writing group with our friend Don Jones. Although we no longer “counseled,” our friendship was fueled by the way we had gotten to know each other.

A few years into my first teaching job, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I was part of a summer institute for teachers sponsored by SCWRIP, Southern California’s branch of the National Writing Project. Peter was an invited speaker, and the teachers were excited to meet him and see what he was like in person. Someone he loved had recently died, and he told me before his talk that he was feeling emotionally raw. Soon after he somewhat shakily began his presentation, sitting at a desk at the front of the crowded room, he suddenly stopped and looked into the audience with his characteristic quizzical squint.

“Irene,” he said, “would you mind coming up here as I give my talk?” Who me? Yes. I stood up and walked awkwardly to the front of the room. He said, “would you hold my hand as I give the lecture?” Um, okay. I pulled up a chair. Peter took my hand and proceeded. As I sat up there, I felt a mixture of emotions: embarrassment, as I imagined people thinking, “what is *she* doing up there?”; pride, since I was flattered to be recognized as someone Peter would single out for comfort; and a little bit of judgmentalism: how could he not be able to give the lecture *by himself*?

I know enough to realize that that latter feeling was about me, not him. Ironically, given my theoretical belief in the importance of vulnerability, part of me felt that Peter’s blatant example of openness in the context of a lecture was somehow inappropriate, a violation of the unspoken academic code of calm rationality. In other words, he scared me by being so open about his emotions, and that fear expressed itself in me as secret criticism of him.

Exploring that fear of mine gives me insight, I think, into the attitudes of so many people in our field of Rhet/Comp who judge Peter harshly, assuming that his association with “feelings” encourages students to “contemplate their navels” and thus be prevented from critiquing their own subjective stances, and/or engaging with the rigors of analytic thinking and writing in the academy. Peter had responses to that false assumption (see all of his writings) but many people didn’t take the time to explore those. Could their judgement at times have been a result of their ambivalences about their own vulnerability? Were they, in a sense, scared of the desire to, say, admit to wanting someone to hold their hand in an academic setting when they were feeling fragile?

Those of us who were active in the field in the 1980s and 90s remember the chasm that opened up between “expressivists” and “social constructionists.”

Most of us probably took a side and fought to defend it against the other side. I myself was always comfortable on the expressivist side, but I can tell you that Peter himself chafed against the idea of being called an expressivist. He thought it was unfair and reductive, and he hated the bin it threw him into, one that was filled with all the emoters and none of the sophisticated thinkers. Yes, he believed in emotional risks and self-investigations. But—along with most so-called expressivists—he *never* left it there. He always took it to, “and what can my emotions help me learn about other people, other ideas, that are different from mine?” He always advocated, and lived, the practice of embracing the contraries—allowing ourselves to move between extremes in order to get to truer insights, and then keep moving further, to more contradictions, more questioning, and more insights into ourselves as well as others.

Peter *was* a philosopher, one who began with a bodily refusal to view the world of ideas as independent of the world of lived feelings. He was radical, in the sense that he truly, not just in theory, wanted everyone in every room to have a voice and be able to speak. He did everything he could, in his life and teaching as well as his writing, to make that happen. He loved jokes, yes, but he was dead serious about ideas. Faced with peoples’ characterization of him as lightweight, he often said, in frustration, something like, “I’m not touchy-feely, well maybe I am, but I’m also the other side more.”

His phrase “embracing contraries,” also the title of one of his collections of essays, describes his way of being in the world. Things are one way, but in fact they’re also the opposite. It’s useful to *believe* people, but *doubting*, he always said, is a crucial skill, and of course, is fundamental to the academic world. Writing is cerebral, but it’s also emotional. Teachers are friendly and nice, but we’re also authorities who judge and then wield grades. I love the title of his essay (printed in *Embracing Contraries*) about the latter paradox, which he called “The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled.” Do what you want, teachers say, but wait, not *that*!

To Peter, embracing the contraries never meant smushing them together, as some people may have assumed. It meant letting them exist as they are, in a way that allows us to see them more clearly. Our field has embraced “both/and” these days, which I’d say Peter would appreciate, but he’d also caution us not to use that stance to give up too quickly on particularities.

I’ve been thinking about the relationship between Peter’s academic work and a fundamental rule of RC counseling: when someone is telling their story, and feeling its emotions, you should step out of the way and listen. Don’t tell them about the time you felt the same way; don’t give them advice; just listen. There is a lot of freedom in that principle, which leads the person being counseled to the beautiful feeling of being heard and accepted, no matter what. That’s the essence of Peter’s teaching, I’d say: Let everyone have a voice in the room; respect all voices; always listen to outsiders. So simple, and yet so vexed.

But you *can't* respect all voices. You *have* to make judgements about them. Our vantage points limit us. Peter, as many people pointed out, was a privileged white man, not fully able to appreciate the kinds of pressures he never had to deal with. That's true, and if Peter were here, he would want to continue discussing and writing about the ramifications of that. He loved to pull at the nuances of everything, and he had an impressive ability to consider ideas from many angles. Yes, it's true, he'd say, but the opposite can be true too, no? Argue *for* your position, he liked to advise, not against. Maybe you'll learn something, and it will probably make you more convincing to the other side. The Believing Game, as he conceived it, never meant just belief! It meant taking time to embody the other side. "What would it mean," he'd ask, "to believe what people on the other side believe. Can you imagine yourself into their perspective?" That process insists that we take responsibility for our whole-body experience, not just our intellect. It doesn't mean *staying* in the other perspective, nor flipping over to their side. No, it can help us to understand the foundations of our own perspectives more deeply, even as we become more open to adjusting them. And it certainly helps us to engage with the other side more productively.

I think it's important for our field that we continue to explore and honor Peter's ideas and their ramifications for bodily, not just intellectual, experience. Our commitment to social justice could falter if we don't.

At the 2025 4Cs conference, I went to a large, very popular ballroom session on responding to writing. Panelists talked about reflective writing, process letters, collaborations in peer review, and ungrading, and they didn't mention Peter Elbow's name once, even in their lists of references. I stood up to point that out, and one of the panelists quickly said something like, "oh yes, he wrote about responding back in the day."

Okay, and fortunately, many of the panel's ideas did grow out of work that Peter did for decades. That made me think about how much our field continues to be shaped by his thinking, even for those who don't know, or associate themselves with, his name. His ideas about freewriting and pedagogy, as well as voice, language, assessment, student-centered classrooms, responding to writing, and the academic subject of English are indelibly embedded in the teaching of college and high school writing everywhere. Does it matter that his name is getting lost in the overflowing heap of forgotten, albeit influential, "expressivists"?

Of course, Peter did also feel the love from many in our field and beyond, including those of us affiliated with AEPL and JAEPL. He got countless recognitions and awards, and wherever he went, strangers came up to thank him for his work. He knew that he had a long-lasting influence on the way thousands and thousands of people teach, talk, and write.

There's so much more to say about you, Peter, and about your impact on our field, and on anyone who knew you personally, or saw you do one of your very

quirky, funny, rambling, digressing, unforgettable, powerful, deep, and thoroughly unique lectures, many of which were at 4C's conferences. Most who heard you lecture said they'd never seen anything like it before, nor since.

In our quirkiness is our power, you taught us, and also in our feelings, our listenings, and our openness. You lived your ideas, and there were always more angles, questions, asides, and sinews to them. Your insistence that each of us strive to be our own selves is so powerful, and is what the world needs. Your impact on writers, on teachers, on friends, on our field of writing studies, on the academy, and on the world, is vast, and when you let yourself really feel that, I know it made you very happy.