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Connecting

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CONNECTING

Widening Circles

Helen Walker, “Connecting” Editor

Here I go again. Just last week, I used these same lines from Rilke to introduce my sabbatical research presentation:

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I do not know if I will complete this last one,
but I give myself to it.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*

I lived and taught at a Kenyan university for the five months of my sabbatical, so Rilke’s lines rang true. What I see clearly in JAEPL’s 2014-15 collection of teacher narratives is just how much teachers must reach out now: across a bridge, a barrier, a culture, a social class—or even across oceans and continents. There is always a distance to navigate, a new place to arrive.

When I was a student in the traditional (product-based) classrooms of the 50s and 60s, teachers knew what knowledge students needed to learn. Students knew, too. They knew they could sit in rows and, if attentive to the authority before them, they would get it. They would also get the grades to prove they got it.

Then a movement washed over us. Its current is so strong now. The surface is not stable; sometimes waves break over it and into our life rafts splashing us square in the face.

This movement became even more palpably present, visible, to me in Kenya as I looked through the eyes of a researcher. The classroom where I taught my section of the required writing course at Daystar University was surrounded by classrooms whose instructors were teaching writing straight out of my 50s-60s Ohio high school. My sabbatical research project was to teach “the new way,” which meant a student-centered, process-based curriculum. Daystar’s faculty was rooting for me. They had asked me to come because their students didn’t like writing, were bad at it, and the whole faculty was complaining and blaming them for the bad papers they had to read. To make a long story short, some of my students crossed the barrier and discovered, let’s call it, the “secret” of the movement. They learned to give themselves to it, as Rilke says, and enter the widening circles to which the movement leads. And because they did, their discoveries led them to write wonderful things.

Other students gave themselves to that movement too, which has brought forth the stories that the authors of these “Connecting” narratives tell: living a life in a widening circle, reaching out across unstable waters with an uncertain destination. Why? Why indeed! This is a new world where widening circles are what we have. This is the new narrative for teachers. We can’t claim to know what we need to know as teachers anymore. Now we must become model learners ourselves because it is how we think and

interact, how we discover and how we share—that is the knowledge that students can learn from us.

The first two pieces in “Connections” are, appropriately, from Kenya. Two faculty from Daystar University—Wandia Njoya and Ann Wachira—tell stories about reaching out to their students, to bring them closer to the uncertain newness of an untried writing pedagogy. Then comes David Bedsole’s wry poem. A dog’s bark may never sound the same to you again, as it shifts from the background to the foreground of Kenneth Burke’s theory of motives, widening the narrow circle of scholarly study. “Connecting” ends with W. Keith Duffy’s tale of the assumptions we make about our place in higher education. His long-ago experience in a grocery store gives us a sharp insight into how we look to people who don’t share the privileges that we take for granted, forcing us to widen our circles even when we don’t want to.



Miracles Happen

Wandia Njoya

By the time I graduated with a Ph.D. in French, I had become a regular writer. I published blog posts commenting on current affairs and historical events regularly on *The Zeleza Post*, which was a website that united a number of university scholars who brought their academic expertise to bear on current events. I had seen the power of writing through meeting people in Kenya and beyond, who said that they had read a number of articles. But somehow, I was never able to make that experience influence my teaching of writing at Daystar University in Kenya.

So, truthfully speaking, I did not quite internalize the rationale for teaching students to write. All I knew was that we were providing students with the knowledge to write term papers in their other classes. In other words, the students were learning to write not for themselves, but for others.

Another reason I did not quite grasp the major impact that a good writing class has on students was that at the time, word was circulating in the university that departments whose majors had few students—especially our department, then called the Humanities Department—were a liability to the university because we were teaching subjects that were “irrelevant” to the “market.” We had already had a scare with staff retrenchment, so we felt that we language teachers had survived by a whisker and were not yet out of the woods. For me, the writing classes were our cash cow, our department life line, and I did not want to rock the boat by questioning the curriculum. So I instinctively felt that we were teaching the classes to all undergraduate students so that we could hang onto our jobs. Again, the focus was elsewhere but not on the students.

As Head of the Department, I was unable to provide academic leadership in really rethinking the curriculum, despite the fact that semester after semester, I was disappointed by the writing projects submitted by students. Frankly speaking, the projects were characterized by boring topics and linguistic expression that made the papers drudgery to read. Despite spending two whole sessions teaching students how to cite

sources, rarely did any get it right. But the structure of the curriculum was just as difficult. The class was made up of about 12 weeks of lectures on topics such as choosing a topic, writing a thesis statement, the APA system, and different types of writing, followed by two weeks of consultation. After all this lecturing, the freshmen handed in a ten-page final project. As I write this, I realize for the first time that the class was also drudgery for the students because during each lecture I had to grapple with students' heads nodding off to sleep. At that time, I was philosophical and self-righteous about it, justifying that the students were dozing because they wouldn't know a good thing even if it hit them in the face—not because the class was just plain bad.

When Professor Walker came, she said something that changed my life. In her discussions with the faculty, she often said that most students want to write well. Frankly speaking, I did not believe her, and I may have responded with something to the effect that Kenyan students were different. But the idea of students writing for themselves out of themselves had changed me.

That next semester, I approached the class differently. During the first class, I gave the students a free-writing assignment that would launch their final research essay. That assignment freed us from the syllabus which I had previously followed like dogma in all the previous writing classes. One of the most dreaded topics was the thesis statement because students were not allowed to continue writing until I had approved their thesis statements. I now told students not to worry about it because the thesis would be easier to frame once they decided what they knew they wanted to write. For the first two weeks they wrote about a personal experience, and for the next four weeks they refined the essay and added reflections on how that experience fit into a larger picture. Their thesis statements were written when the projects were halfway through, and by that time, I was just pointing it out to the students who were surprised to find that the thesis statement was already in the essay.

I'm a little sad that in successive classes, students still grapple with writing, citation and grammar, and I regret that the huge class sizes prevents me from putting in more time in mentoring the students individually. But while the essays have several structural weaknesses, they are powerful in terms of their spirit and content, for the simple reason that the essays reflect the personal journeys of the students, rather than my effectiveness as a teacher. My students are empowered, and that empowers me. Because of the students' writing, I am now more conscious of learning being a process that affirms our humanity, and of the students as human beings and even friends, rather than as customers and vessels to pour knowledge into.

So yes, miracles happen.



Using a Model

Ann Wachira

In most high schools in Kenya, where I have spent most of my teaching career, teachers go to class and tell the students what, not how to write. First, I would ask them to write a narrative essay after an introductory session that did little to prepare them

how to do so. In my mind, I knew what I wanted. But I was never able to successfully pass that idea on to them. Moments like these were very frustrating to me as a teacher.

The second writing project was no better. Now the assignment was to write an expository essay. The drill was the same. Most times I was more bored with the writing classes than my students, as I felt I had nothing much to offer. I was under the impression that if I showed my students how to write in a fashion that more closely imitated examples of expository essays, I would be encouraging them to copy my writing or someone else's.

It was worse when I joined the university where I had contact with students only for a semester and had very little time to encourage their own writing styles or help them develop. This situation was all to change when I met Professor Helen Walker, a visiting faculty from Messiah College.

In one of our interactions, she talked about modelling writing to students as a way to teach writing. I decided to try it in one of my classes. It worked like magic! I went with an essay to class and read it through with the students. We reflected on its strong points and its weak points. Finally, I highlighted phrases which were to act as guidelines for the students to use as they wrote their own essays. The end product was excellent for most of the students.

The feedback I got from them was so encouraging that for the first time in my very many years of teaching, I felt I had delivered a writing lesson successfully. I went away, singing silently in my heart.



To the Dog Next Door Who Barks All Day

David Bedsole

This is not a hate note, dog next door—after all, you are a dog, and barking is to dogs as squeaking is to wheels or, dare I say it, babbling is to humans. And you could not know that I am trying to read Kenneth Burke, and to keep his lines of thought straight is hard enough without the constant Yip! Yip! Yip! you offer. I read somewhere, once, that the closest human translation for a bark might be something like Hey! Hey! Hey! Which makes a lot of sense, because what else could a dog be saying? A bark is a plea for connection, for notice, for touch, for consubstantiality. But here I'm back to Burke, and you are back to barking. My student thinks his cat uses rhetoric; there was a time, in my late twenties, when I wrote a poem about my wife's dog, accusing her of the same. But I doubt rhetoric is the right word for barking, for this poem, for any of it—it's just what we've got, a bark at a blank wall, a quiet neighborhood, an endless, merciless ticking of the wall clock. So, dog next door, though I doubt you can read, and Burke is making me wonder if I can either, I hear you. Hey.



Aisle Four: Ice Cream, TV Dinners, Humility

W. Keith Duffy

I stood there in Kroger's freezer section, frozen in place. "I didn't mean it like that!" I insisted. My voice went up an octave. "But . . . but I'm not even like that!"

These emphatic declarations didn't matter though. My words were bouncing off the back of his head. He had already turned and walked away, already dismissed me. Slowly kneeling, he continued stocking the shelf with frozen peas. A nearby shopper furtively glanced over the top of his Fudgesicles box, trying to determine why I was yelling, and who the hell I was.

The answer: I was a fourth-year doctoral student in the rhetoric program at Bowling Green State University trying to survive the lean, mean Ohio summer. Other than the constant grind of reading and writing, life during the fall and spring semesters was relatively easy. There was always teaching, always a meager (but welcomed) stipend to buy food, pay rent. However, when the summer came, the sidewalks were rolled up, many classroom doors were bolted shut, and that teaching assistant's paycheck evaporated. I dreaded the onset of summer. Doctoral students were still required to take courses to complete the Ph.D. on time. And occasionally, one or two leftover, first-year writing courses were tossed into the pit where we grads would scramble for them like ravenous dogs. But if you weren't feisty enough, too bad. Yes, summer always brought a nervous uncertainty in the "grocery money" department.

Jesus, I had no idea how incredibly privileged I was. Having entered into the dissertation stage of the program, I was spending most of my days reading books of my own choosing and writing paragraphs of my own design. The grand title: *The Role of Spirituality in Re-envisioning Writing Pedagogy*. How I actually convinced my dissertation director to agree to that topic, I'll never know. Yet I had enthusiastically embraced my role as a lowly teacher of remedial writing, as a rugged representative of the most ghettoized specialty in English studies—Composition. Some called it "Bonehead English," but to me it was the most important discipline being taught at the university level. I was a member of the underdog pack and damn proud of it. And the dissertation work was cracking me wide open as well. I was breathing in the ideas of spiritual thinkers and leaders from a variety of doctrines, becoming freer and less prescriptive in my teaching, seeing my chosen discipline in a completely new, transformative way. I was slowly relinquishing my judgmental habits, confronting my will to control students' writing, acknowledging my fragmented nature, and understanding a central paradox: wholeness and strength comes from embracing weakness, honoring brokenness, and speaking our stories. And all of these insights being given to me would change my way of *being in* the writing classroom in powerful ways. Heady times, indeed.

But I still needed to eat. That's why I was in the freezer section at Kroger's grocery store looking for cheap dinners. Summer was a month away still, so my cyclical fear over being penniless from early May to late August was not yet a reality . . . but I was getting nervous.

Looking up from the frosty Banquet Salisbury Steak packages, I saw one of my grad school colleagues, who was a year behind me in the program. We struck up a conversation—frankly, the only conversation that ever seemed to happen this time of year:

“Hey! How’s the dissertation coming?”

“I hope this doesn’t sound like bragging, but it’s going really well. It just seems to be happening on its own, as long as I get out of its way, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s good to hear.” A pregnant pause, a raising of the eyebrows, a little grimace, then: “Hey, what’re you gonna do this summer?”

I knew what he meant. This was the same question on all our lips. I just didn’t want to have to think about the answer yet. So, I played dumb: “You mean for work?”

“Yeah. What’re you gonna do for money?”

I exhaled deeply, and glanced over my friend’s shoulder. Six feet away, a thirty-something man, black hair, in tan khakis and an apron (sporting a characteristic blue “K” for Kroger) was kneeling down. He was methodically stocking shelves. I focused back on my friend and shook my head.

“Oh hell, I don’t know. I may be doing THAT this summer.” I motioned casually to the shelf-stocker, sighing and laughing a bit at the same time. “Who knows?”

My friend nodded. “Okay. Well, I’ll catch you later.” He wheeled his cart away.

I started to return my attention to the frozen rectangles of dinners, but I already knew something was wrong. It was a sharp, tight, angular feeling. Something was terribly, deeply, disturbingly wrong.

And that something was me.

But before those thoughts had really coalesced, before I had articulated the problem internally, my peripheral vision caught an image of that tan apron with a blue “K,” that 30-year-old man with black hair, rising and advancing toward me. I turned to him, all of it in slow motion and out-of-focus. I tried to smile, but my face didn’t seem to want to work that way. And then, I got what was coming to me:

“Listen, buddy.” His voice seethed, barely a whisper. He was standing within inches of me. His index finger pointed at my chest. There was spittle on his lower lip. He peered directly into my eyes. He wanted to punch my lights out. In one unbroken sentence, he said: “I may not have a lot, but I have two daughters and a wife who I love, and I provide for them just fine by doing this job and doing it right. But having to hear uppity shit like yours doesn’t help at all.”

His eyes narrowed further. Then he spun on his heels and walked six feet away. That was it.

As I watched him kneel and grab a bag of frozen peas, I struggled to breathe. Slowly, as the world came back into focus. I knew things were no longer the same. I knew my place in the universe a little better . . . certainly more than any dissertation was ever going to teach me. I still blurted out my idiotic protest: “I didn’t mean it like that! I’m not even like that!”

But I knew I was lying. I *did* mean it like that, and I *was precisely* like that.

I’ve carried this humbling incident into the classroom for 15 years. I can relive and re-feel that sense of shame and despair on cue. That vacuum where I had no way to salve the wound that my words had made. That irony of thinking I was enlightened and free, when in fact I was just blind to my own privilege.

The sting of this incident brings me clarity. It makes me small. There's one vital lesson I've learned: when I recall that this life is truly not just about me, then real learning can take place inside and outside the classroom.

For this, I am grateful.

