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Praisesong: One (Worn) Path through AEPL

Libby Falk Jones

I've walked this path for almost a quarter century. It's a path I'd been on without knowing it, a now-worn path that's offered surprise, insight, connection, challenge, camaraderie. It's a path of ideas and experiences, reading and writing, talk and silence, people and places.

Come, walk with me.

"We're called as teachers to live out on the edge of what we believe and know, to take risks with ourselves and our students."

Richard Graves, co-founder and AEPL Chair, 1992–1994

What does it mean to live on the edge? I think of margins and centers—my own hunger for centrality, stability, safety. I think also of the energy of the edge, of bell hooks' urging us all to live there. I think of Elaine Showalter's concept of the wild zone, place in limbo, place of ferment. A desirable obscurity: skunkworks, the name Boeing Aircraft gave to its 1940s basement lab where experimental scientists created off the grid.

I think of a 1990s AEPL workshop led by Jane Tompkins. She asked us to draw the edge. In the show-and-tell, what a rainbow of designs, what force. AEPL was about the edge before "edgy" became a compliment. We know risks. We know danger. We know success. We know failure. We learn.

River

Sanctuary

Rip-tide¹

March, 1991: I've come to CCCC in Boston last minute, flying up from Louisiana, leaving the bedside of my ill father, trusting he'll be okay. When I show up at my session to speak about the ways teaching listening helped my Basic English students' writing and thinking to flower, tucked into my pocket is a magnolia fuscata blossom from my family's yard. My parents planted that tree when I was a child. Its fragrance is potent, its blooming season short.

1. Editors' note: During the 2014 AEPL Conference at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, the author asked participants in her session to provide words that represented AEPL to them. She has grouped those words here.

After my talk, I scan the program for resonant sessions to attend. A provocative title draws me: “Beyond the Cognitive Domain.” I crowd into a small meeting room, magnolia perfume from my pocket still faintly hovering. The session organizers don’t read prepared papers; instead, they ask us to talk in small groups. What a buzz, electric! We probe possibilities and experiences of teaching, learning, and being that tap into spirit, embodiment, silence, emotions, arts. We draw up lists of good readings and ideas for future sessions. I meet Dick Graves and Alice Brand and Sondra Perl. Magicians, all three! It’s my favorite session of the conference. And Alice types up all our suggestions and sends them out. A network flowers, with perfume strong enough to waft through years, decades.

My work with listening will open and deepen, too, through AEPL, becoming parts of a presentation at AEPL’s workshop at CCC 2000 in Minneapolis, “Knowing and Loving: Deepening the Educational Agenda” and my facilitation at AEPL’s 2003 summer conference at Ithaca College, “Beyond Fear and Isolation: Building a Culture of Listening in Our Institutions of Learning.” In December 2012, *The National Teaching & Learning Forum* will publish my invited essay, “Listening In,” where I argue for the pedagogical and personal value of listening in the academy. In that piece, I name AEPL as a resource for educators interested in this approach.

“AEPL is a wave of the future, a way of looking at what learning, and writing, and teaching, and eliciting, and evoking—rather than drumming in—is all about.”

Gabrielle Rico, 2002

Gaby, AEPL summer workshop, Estes Park, June 2002: energy and wisdom in motion. Passion for the word and the heart. A day of writing, the natural way. Gaby reads poems and prose passages, asking us to recreate them, to mingle our essences with those writers and words. She shows us young people’s clusters, their writing, their art. She reads from the new book she’s written on her approach: *Creating Re-Creations: Inspiration from the Source*. We are indeed inspired.

As one prompt, Gaby reads a passage from Audre Lorde’s “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”:

... poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would once have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention

to the true meaning of 'it feels right to me.' We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared (37).

I hear these words in Gaby's rich voice, snatch some for my page, name my cluster, and, in two-and-one-half minutes, write:

Creation

I can carve a turkey, not well
(my father mastered the art,
my mother prepared the platter)

cobble along a rocky path,
dodging the big ones

train morning glories
to reach for the deck rail

survive a memory

name my cat officially, then find
the other name by which he will be called
for 14½ years

light a fire, a burner,
a birthday cake, a sky

feel numb

house a guinea pig
and a snake

vitalize a class

mean well,
build a well (and cry when the water
seeps through the rocks)—

these ten things I can do.

In re-creating, I have discovered myself. Thanks to Gaby, thanks to AEPL.

Possible

Playful

Radical

“I’ve learned I’m not alone in my thinking,” writes a participant in a day-long AEPL workshop at Cs. And another participant, in a different workshop: “I get filled up with grace, spirit, and a sense of purpose *every* time I get to attend an AEPL function. Thank you for making space for things that I value.” And another, from an AEPL summer conference: “I will carry what I have learned here . . . in my heart, which is quite. . . full.”

“AEPL’s members recognize that knowing cannot be neatly boxed in.”

Regina Foehr, AEPL Chair, 1994–1998

March, 2007: with Mike Heller from Roanoke College, I lead a session at AEPL’s C’s all-day preconference workshop. Our session is titled “Don’t Try To Avoid the Rocks’: Grappling with Discomfort in the Teaching Life.” I share my short essay, “Anger in the Teaching Life,” published that winter in JAEPL’s Connecting section. Working with a student who seemed to be deliberately provoking me, I learned to sit with my anger, to let it teach me. Sparked by our writings, participants write, share, and learn from their own stories.

Anger, fear, ennui, jealousy, despair—like the Savage in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, we teachers—we AEPLers—must embrace them all.

“A home. A sanctuary. A magnet for kindred spirits who believe that learning goes beyond the cognitive—or ‘rational knowing’—to include the senses, spirituality, emotional and moral intelligence, intuition, body wisdom, creativity, and other ways of knowing. That’s how founding and current members of NCTE’s Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL) describe their community on the occasion of its tenth anniversary.” Peggy Harris, 2002

Spontaneity

Innovation

Grace

Baltimore, November 2001, the Special Interest Group meeting of AEPL at NCTE. Marian MacCurdy, co-editor of *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice* and co-organizer of the coming AEPL summer conference, leads us in a memory exercise. After some have shared their writing, Marian notes that most people have more to say about their sad rather than their happy memories, since sad memories are the ones we typically store. She gives workshop guidelines on writing to heal:

1. Take the process in pieces. Focus on a single moment. Ultimately, writers have to get to single moments.
2. Focus on techniques that bring material out of the subconscious and into consciousness where we can control it. Don't focus on a particular topic.
3. Never ask writers to do something specific. Invite them to work with their material in open and non-judgmental ways.

Marian's words resonate. Four years earlier, I curled on the sofa in my father's hospital room, companioning him on his final passage, my journal by my side. I have lived what Marian tells us: that writing can help us to recover our voices, to begin to integrate our fragmented selves. When we can name our experiences, we can recognize them, lift ourselves out of the blankness Emily Dickinson writes about feeling "after great pain."

Seven years later, I'll publish "Songs for My Father"—a cycle of poems from my father's last four days—in *Caduceus: the Poets at Artplace*.

November, 2002, AEPL workshop, NCTE, Atlanta: Bruce Novak, AEPL Co-Chair, has invited me to keynote. I don't want or feel ready for the limelight, but Bruce encourages me. I develop a presentation on "The Pedagogy of Hope: Teaching as an Act of Faith," drawing primarily on my work on appreciative inquiry—exploring ways to affirm ourselves and our students. I begin by reciting the opening lines of a poem that has shaped my teaching life, Galway Kinnell's "St. Francis and the Sow":

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness

I'm still—always—walking this teaching path, investigating ways to create a culture of affirmation and abundance in the classroom and in our and our students' writing lives.

Contemplative

Holistic

Energizing

Standing behind my camera on its tripod, I watch the early light turn the lake's smooth surface—pink, then gold. It's a chilly 5 a.m. in late June 2014. Participants in AEPL's summer conference, "The Art of Noticing Deeply," held at Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, have gathered for a dawn lakeside concert. From one shore of the

lake, a flute calls. On the opposite bank, an oboe answers. We notice with our eyes, our ears, our skin. In concert, in silence.

In my presentation that afternoon, I share a selection of my photographs of water, earth, and sky, geometries of light, along with words from photographers and poets. The practice of photography has sharpened my awareness of the world, even when I'm not behind my camera. Incorporating visual exercises into my contemplative writing courses has helped students see—and think and feel—more deeply and widely. How joyful to spend three days in an AEPL community, exploring deep perception!

Reconciliation: to bring together opposites; to understand, even embrace, what is other and strange and difficult. Reconciliation is more than a mending of fences, of enlarging of our normal world. Reconciliation means creating a new reality, a new beginning for our lives.

AEPL's 2006 summer conference, held in Berea, Kentucky, explores the role of writing in achieving reconciliation within ourselves, our institutions, and our communities. I serve as conference organizer, developing the theme in consultation with author and teacher bell hooks, featured conference speaker.

In an introductory writing exercise, hooks invites each of us to craft a personal ad. Reading these aloud, we discover that important dimensions of ourselves and our desires emerge through play. Here is my ad:

Wanted, by writer
hungry for inspiration:
a consistent muse. Will provide
comfortable accommodations,
including morning woodpeckers,
Lipton's Black Label tea,
bicycle access. Excellent
working conditions:
requires presence only,
no light housework,
not even dusting of poetry books.
Equal opportunity employer:
women, minorities, and
cats especially urged to apply.

Organizing a conference is demanding and rewarding. I think the 70 participants had as much fun as I did. "The conference has *completely* made me feel alive again!" writes one participant in the final reflection. And another: "I have begun writing more; I'm encouraged to do what I've always said that I love to do." Amen!

Stretch

Unfold

Renew

In 2004, ending my four-year term as AEPL Chair/Co-Chair, I write a poem of appreciation and gratitude. In 2014, 20 years after AEPL's birth, these words still ring true:

I want to praise AEPL,
For affirming and nurturing deep parts of my being
For not backing down or away from our truth
For holding to wholeness amidst fragmentation
For providing shelter that supports gradual growth, challenge that builds strength
For honoring the tentative, the contradictory, the neglected
For inviting unlikely partnerships, for dancing with everyone
For offering constancy that fosters deepening, difference that leads to insight and expansion . . .
For allowing me to be of some use—I have gained much more than I have given.

As AEPL begins a third decade, I look forward to continuing to contribute. May we keep talking, writing, laughing, dancing, making our path by walking, and, in Dick Graves' words, finding mountains to climb.



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