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Writing as a Liberal Art in an Age Neither Artful Nor Liberal

Doug Hesse

*Liberal, not as opposed to conservative, but as free, in contrast
to imprisoned, subjugated, or incarcerated.*

—Gerald Greenberg

My title, presented as a topic, implies a position. I should have replaced the word “as” with the phrase “should be considered.” Whether in the following pages I can explain what it means to imagine required writing in the liberal arts tradition is the challenge. Is writing a subject like history or philosophy, for example, or is it like, well, First-Year Composition? In other words, is required writing defensible “in its own right” (to the degree any academic subject is these days), or is it an instrumental skill responsible to and warranted by its service to other disciplines? If you locate the roots of contemporary writing/composition studies in classical rhetoric (which I don’t necessarily—though that’s quite another talk), then in the centuries-of-yore days of the Trivium (dialectic, grammar, and rhetoric) writing historically was at the core of the liberal arts. But today?

I’m going to make my case obliquely and inductively, for reasons I hope will make sense.

In June 2017, the University of Wyoming Upward Bound Program hosted a group of low-income and first-generation high school students, many of them Native Americans, as part of college recruitment program. The program arranged attendance at a university theater production of *The Fantasticks*, a venerable musical with the distinction of having been the longest running play on or off Broadway. At one point, the students walked out, offended by the often-controversial scene centered around “The Rape Ballet.” That scene emerges as part of a plot in which two fathers, best friends, want their respective son and daughter to fall in love and marry. Worried that the natural course of things mightn’t work, they engage a mysterious figure, El Gallo, to stage a fake kidnapping of the girl by bad guys portrayed by two actors who costume themselves as Indians, replete with headresses. The boy will save the girl. Love will ensue.

For me, the student walkout raised many questions about this particular play, about the status and obligations of historical works, about the responsibilities of theater companies and of audiences when such productions are staged. I posted to Facebook a link to the story in the *Laramie Boomerang* (Victor), along with the note, “This troubles me immensely. But maybe I’m wrong. Should *The Fantasticks* no longer be performed? That would be a real loss” (Hesse). My message led to a long and complex thread, which is the heart of this story.

But first I’ll note that the musical has resonated with me for deeply personal reasons. It was the first live professional theater I’d ever seen, on a Mississippi River Showboat docked in Clinton, Iowa, in 1973 when I was in high school, a performance I saw with my first girlfriend, Dianne. I’d known and liked the show’s most famous song, “Try to Remember” (“the kind of September, when grass was green and life was mellow”), and it acquired more poignancy in live context. Many years later, my oldest daughter played

Luisa while a high school sophomore, offering a father yet another reminder that girls grow up. In short, I had a personal connection to *The Fantasticks*. That said, there was no denying the likelihood that someone who didn't see the play through my 40 years' perspective and nostalgia would respond quite differently to "The Rape Ballet" and its performers, even if the term "rape" had the old-fashioned cast of "abduction" (as in "Rape of the Lock") rather than overt sexual assault. And there were those actors playing those most stereotypical Indians.

My Facebook posting triggered an extensive conversation. My friend Morris Young, now director of writing at the University of Wisconsin, wrote that he didn't know that play, but he was familiar with controversies in how Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* portrayed Japanese culture. I thought that an apt analogy. My daughter Monica wrote to recall that her high production substituted "The Abduction Song" for "The Rape Ballet." Monica's director (and English teacher), my friend Susie Thetard confirmed.

A current colleague, David, goes on to ask if there was a film version. I point out a bad 1995 one starring Joel Grey, but on the way to searching, I discover that Jerry Orbach originated the role of El Gallo, and I post a clip of Orbach singing "Try to Remember" as part of a 1985 public television broadcast, "The Best of Broadway."

Further research turns up a Hallmark Hall of Fame telecast from 1964, complete with commercials and with Ricardo Montalban as El Gallo. Professor friends share their fondness for the musical, along with links to critiques. An ex-brother-in-law speculates how many other period musicals are doomed if *The Fantasticks* is censored. An old friend from my community theater days concurs. Randy Bomer, a former NCTE president, recalls acting in a high school production forty years ago. My youngest daughter, Paige, writes as "a 28-year-old journalist who reads a lot" and who is taken aback by hearing the song on an NPR link someone has shared. She says, "I'm not remotely shocked that a group of high schoolers would be like 'WTF'" (Hesse). She's joined by Angela Haas, an Illinois State English professor, herself native American, and by Debi Goodman, a professor at Hofstra. Sally Hoffman writes about performances at the Miller Park Summer Theatre in Bloomington, Illinois and shares a photograph of the score from which she conducted those shows. The exchange goes on, an intersecting avalanche of anecdotes, links, positions, and artifacts.

Now, this might seem a shaggy-dog story with little payoff, but let me point out a few things. First, writing brought together people from various walks of life: professional friends, past and present; my own children; their teachers; current colleagues, both local and in the wider profession; people with whom I'd done community theatre a lifetime ago; friends in real life and friends in social media; an age range of about 26 to about 65. They got to "know" one another through writing. Second, there were different points of view and perspectives. People shared memories of themselves as actors or audience members. They asked questions or made connections to other plays or productions, shared information and links, took positions and offered reasons. Third, the act of writing raised questions that led to research and reading, to old films, to discovering surprising facts and raising new avenues for exploration. For example, I learned that the Hallmark Hall of Fame production begins with a two-minute commercial about a boy choosing cards to send his parents, to my mind a startling gender portrayal that made me wonder about a) how boys were represented in other commercials at that time and

b) Hallmark's own marketing and rhetorical strategies at the time. Fourth, no one wrote because they had to. They perceived some need, whether in self-expression or extension, social connection, or intellectual curiosity (Figure1).

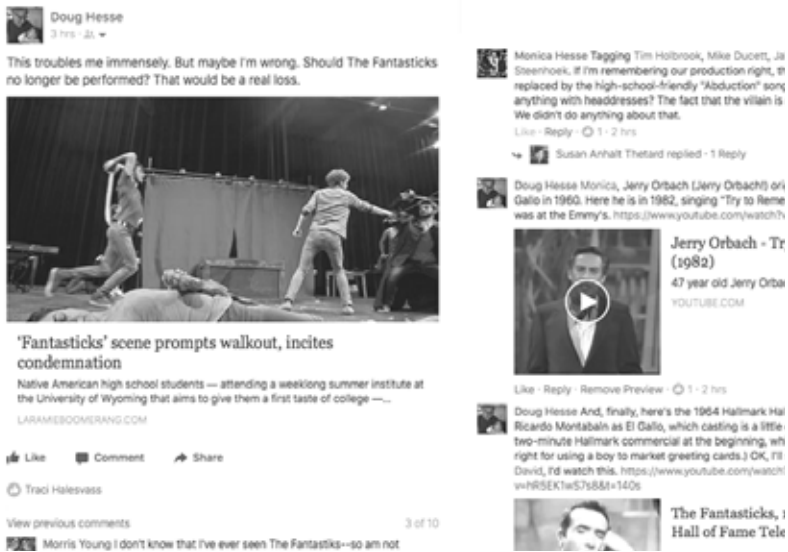


Figure 1. Facebook Exchange

My point is that these are aspects of writing that generally are little represented in First-Year Composition (FYC). College writing potentially focuses on four spheres: the academic, the vocational/professional, the civic, and personal/social. Obviously, just as primary colors yield a vast number of hues and shades, so do these spheres intersect to make various rhetorical pigments. But in most FYC programs these days, the academic and the civic spheres predominate. The most common justification, both current and historical, for required writing is that it helps students with the kind of things they'll have to do in other courses (and helps their professors, too, for not having to teach things). The rise of interest in discourse communities in the 1980s and 90s, bolstered by scholarship in genres (particularly genres as manifested by disciplinary epistemologies and rhetorics), elevated academic discourse as a dominant focus for FYC. From the standpoint of composition's shareholders in the higher educational marketplace, academic discourse is a good investment. (Perhaps even better would be required writing that serves vocational/professional interests. Education as a personal economic investment is soaring high these days, and if any star has seductive potential for compositional wagon-hitching, it would be writing as a job skill.)

We in composition have shown a fair amount of interest in civic discourse, too, in writing that advocates decisions, beliefs, and actions, sways policymakers, and shapes those who empower them. In doing so, we've mainly privileged argument as logos, the importance of evidence for assertions. Lord knows we need ethical and effective argument in times when an American president tweets opportunistic lies and his advisors

insist on alternate facts ¹ (Figure 2).

We need it when some college students foment ignorant racism and hate on websites such as *Stormfront*:

As a student at a major university in the SEC, I see firsthand the kind of culture that students are surrounded by. . . .

Why are girls rushing to blacks?

It is because youth today are OBSESSED with glorifying negroid culture such as their MUSIC. Starting at a young age in middle schools, whites everywhere listen to the negroid music. . . .

So that is my challenge to you: celebrate the power of your race and listen to more classical music. There are not many activities that can be take part to be ‘pro-white.’ But this is not only one of them, but in in my honest and humble opinion, this is one of the best. Do not doubt the power of music how it effects [sic] people. Remember the Third Riech [sic] and Richard Wagner. (Karajan)

We should surely teach civic discourse when careless misreading—or ideologically driven reading—results in careless allegations, as for example when art professor Sarah Bond’s scholarly article explaining how Renaissance sculptures were whitewashed in the 18th century is mischaracterized as Bond dismissing classical art as racist (Figure 3). We need to teach it when there’s more than a trivial chance that some event might get exploited into totalitarian order, as Masha Gessen explores in her essay “The Reichstag Fire Next Time.”

Facing a decision between organizing First-Year Composition to serve academic discourse and organizing it for civic discourse, I’d surely choose the latter, which falls more in the liberal arts tradition. But let’s pay careful attention to the complex ways that ethical writing actually functions most effectively in our 21st century culture, something a lot more complex and nuanced than thesis and support. We need a view of writing that enacts John Duffy’s call to “construe writing and rhetoric as constructive arts” and “understand our work as the teaching of what Allen calls ‘trustful talk among strangers’” (244). I suggest that’s the kind of talk happening in *The Fantasticks* Facebook exchange that I reported above. Duffy calls for “an ethical vocabulary that speaks beyond the practices of skepticism and critique to address the possibilities of opening dialogues, finding affinities, acknowledging interdependencies, and talking to those strangers we most fear and mistrust” (244). To do this kind of work, those of us who teach writing have to cultivate a more complete view of its possibilities, including how writers use



Figure 2: Trump Tweets

1. Kellyanne Conway went on to receive the ignominious 2017 NCTE Doublespeak Award for her coinage of “alternate facts.” (NCTE)

interest and experience to create identities that connect them to others, including people with different points of view.



Figure 3. Bond Response to National Review

To explain what I mean, and to illustrate that this is nothing new, I'll ask you to join me in the archives at The University of Denver, looking at materials not long after its founding in 1864. Herbert Howe was its first astronomer, and the university has an extensive collection of his papers and correspondence, which offers a richly varied portrait of the man's professional, personal, and civic writing life.

Extensive letters, for example, report astronomical observations—as in an October 18, 1882—a list of measurements of that year's Great Comet, addressed to "Friend Howe" (Figures 4 & 5).

More urgent professional matters, there were telegrams, as for example, in a 1918 message "for immediate depatch [sic]" in which Edwin Frost, the famous director of the Yerkes Observatory, wrote from a field station in Green River, Wyoming, to have Howe to "please get Nipwantler to observe Barnards Nova tonight with our spethograph" [sic; spectrograph?] (Frost, Figure 6). The Western Union agent's handwriting notes that he phoned Mrs. Howe at 2:38 AM. She was no doubt thrilled.

In the sustained network connecting astronomers from Chicago, Harvard, and elsewhere with Denver, fortunately located in the then-clear mountain air, the personal inflects the professional, as in the heartbreakingly stoic apology in a letter from F.R. Moulton: "The reply to your letter has been greatly delayed by the long illness and death of our little boy."

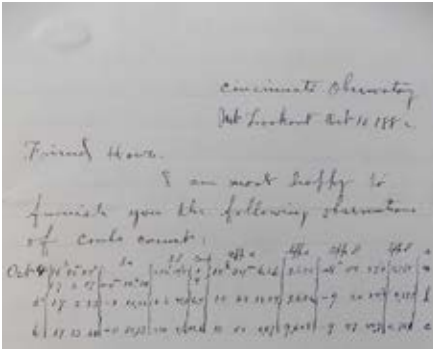


Figure 4. Note on Comet Measurements.



Figure 5. Great Comet of 1882

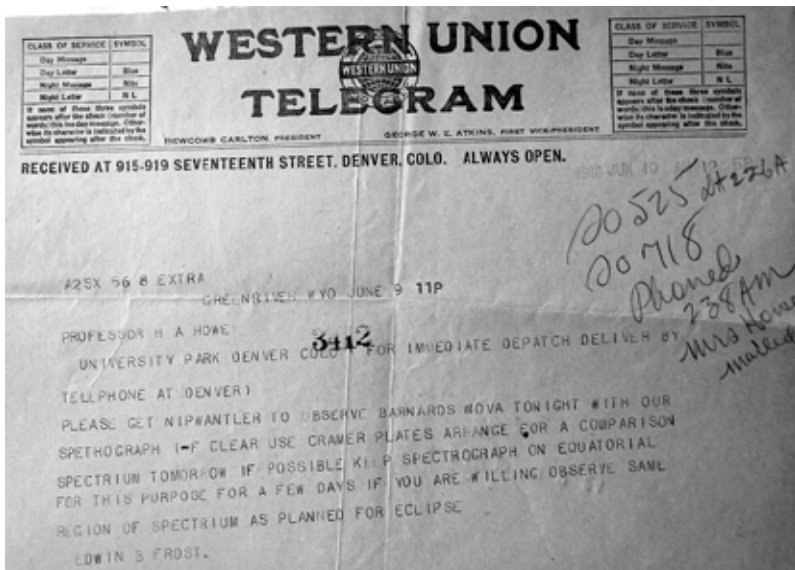


Figure 6. Telegram, Nova Observation

Some correspondence is purely personal, as in Howe's delightful letter from The Grand Union Hotel in New York to Ernest in Denver (Figure 7), thanking the boy for sending him pencil leads (though they arrived broken), given Ernest permission to use his pen, and telling him about New York boys playing baseball in the streets.

Other correspondence is fascinating for the way it melds the civic and the professional. Howe had been charged with raising money to build the university's first observatory, the Chamberlain, which still exists in a park three blocks east of campus, though light pollution has rendered it fairly useless, as it mostly also has DU's current observatory, America's highest at 14,193 feet on Mt. Evans. Howe's efforts were facilitated by the regular correspondence he maintained with citizens and business leaders of Denver. These no doubt helped with "the ask" when it came time to make it.

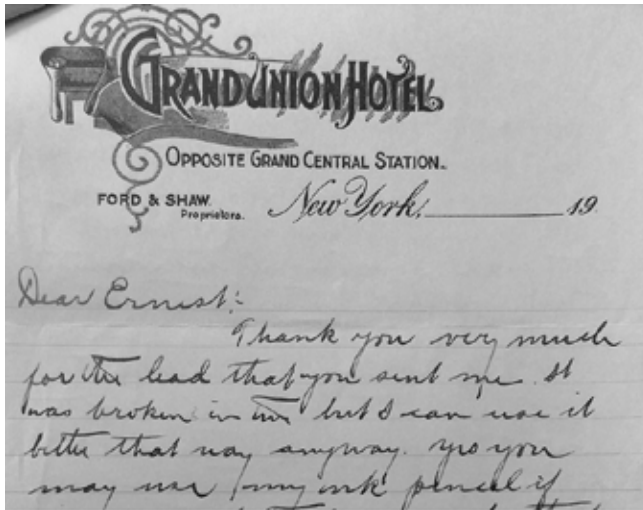


Figure 7. Letter to Ernest

My favorite is an 1882 letter from Charles A. Roberts, a Denver hardware dealer that begins, “You may have noticed that Denver has no standard time. Every jeweler has a time of his own and in their different stores here, all within a distance of two hundred feet, the chromatic [?] time varies from three to ten minutes” (Figure 8). The letter goes on to ask Howe and his colleagues to establish an official time for the city, announcing it each day with a bell at noon.

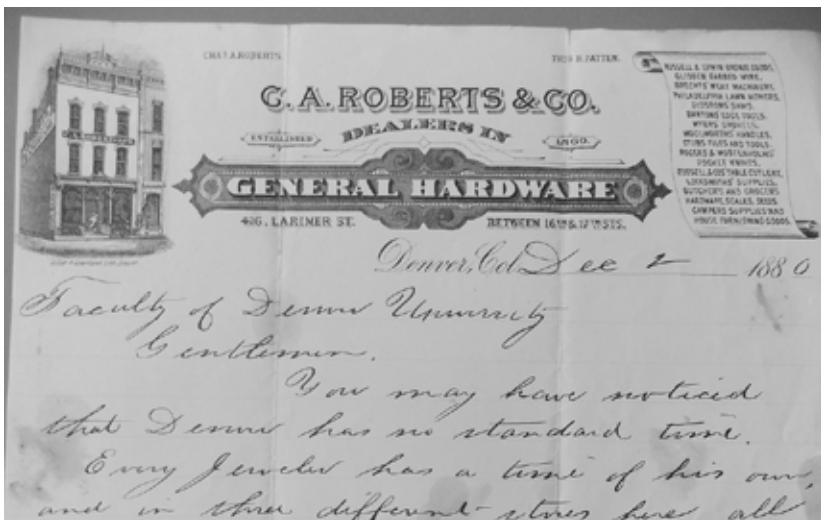


Figure 8. Letter to Denver Faculty

Other letters pose astronomical questions; one from E.C. Reybold describes “an effect I have never seen,” which he encountered on a drive from Longmont to Denver;

in good multimodal fashion, Reybold includes a drawing of the “radial bands” in question (see Figure 9).

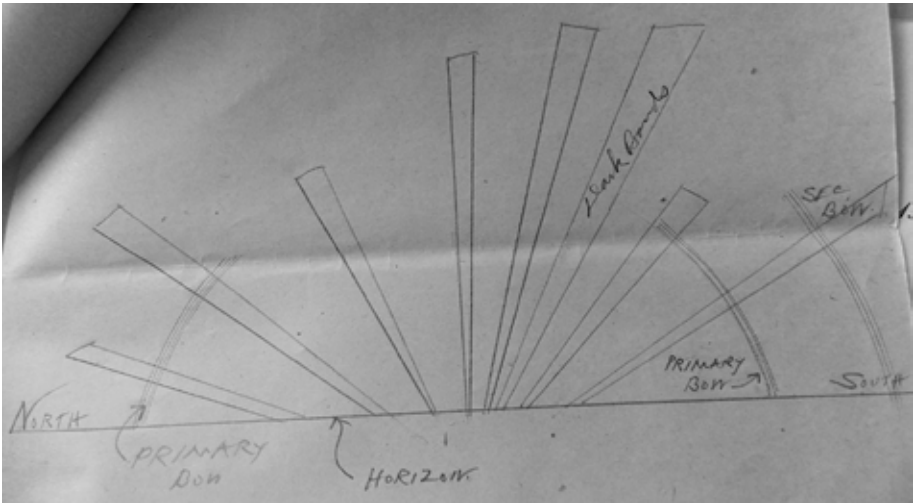


Figure 9. Reybold's Diagram of Bands

One last example. In 1918, Colorado was in the path of totality for a solar eclipse, but the fateful day was marred by clouds and rain. H. Martyn Hart, Dean of St. John's Episcopal Cathedral, send a consoling note: “I just write this line to drop my tear into your bucket that ‘the waters which are above firmament’—should have drowned all your long & arduous preparations” (Figure 10).

No doubt, Herbert Howe's success in raising money for the Chamberlain Observatory was facilitated by this extensive correspondence with friends, acquaintances, and townspeople around Denver. Rhetoric might reduce Howe's efforts to ethos-building, and it wouldn't be wrong for doing so, but there's something more subtle and sustained going on. Howe wrote as professor and scholar, certainly, but this writing was suffused with personal relationships with other scholars. He wrote for the civic good, directly and indirectly, and he wrote as a family member and friend. This century-old example, using the written social networks of the day, offers a model for the liberal arts of writing that we should offer students today.

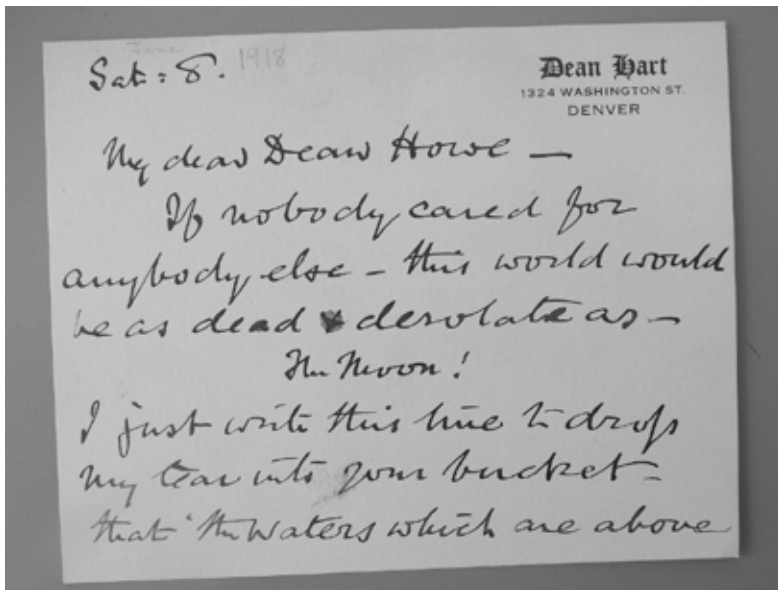


Figure 10. Hart's Eclipse Condolences

But I worry that we're serving only a portion of the writing menu. For example, Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs's writing pedagogy, writing about writing, has rightly earned praise for demonstrating how and why students should learn certain concepts about writing, why teachers should have them practice certain analysis and research strategies. Their case has been compelling now for a decade. But I have a reservation that we're closing the frontiers of writing narrowly and prematurely. The table of contents for Wardle and Downs's *Writing About Writing: A College Reader*, 3e, offers a smart who's who of composition studies scholars organized under five sections:

- Threshold Concepts: Why Do Your Ideas about Writing Matter?
- Literacies: How is Writing Impacted by Our Prior Experiences?
- Individuals in Community: How Do Texts Mediate Activities?
- Rhetoric: How is Meaning Constructed in Context?
- Process: How Are Texts Composed?

I question nothing there, and yet what's absent, especially, are concepts from the belletristic tradition, what might come under the broad umbrellas of creative nonfiction or literary journalism. This writing is done not in response to a rhetorical situation but rather to engage readers who didn't even know they needed to read something—audiences neither addressed nor invoked but seduced. I contrast this table of contents with writers' statements about their own works, such as those collected in the *Paris Review* interviews for the past sixty years or in volumes like *Writers on Writing* (Smiley). I think of writing advice offered in Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom's *The Subject is Writing*. That tradition is pretty much occluded in composition studies these days, for example, signaled by Gary Olson's pointed critique of Bishop's lament that "the writer-teacher and/or teacher-writer" was disappearing. Olson contends that, "What Wendy is really

saying is that a substantial portion of the field does not share her own values and priorities. It's not that few of us write anymore; it's that we don't writing the kinds of prose that *she* wants to read. It's not that we don't read anymore; it's that we read different kinds of texts from the ones *she* enjoys reading" (35). Now seventeen years later, it looks like Olson was mostly right. The kinds of reading and writing enjoyed—or at least privileged—in required writing is primarily academic discourse and a somewhat idealized civic discourse prizing assertion and evidence. Nothing bad about that, of course, except it undervalues the kinds of writing we increasingly need in the popular social sphere.

As an example, consider Rebecca Solnit's essay "Occupied Territory," published in the July 2017 *Harper's*. The piece begins with Solnit hiking the King Mountain Trail above San Francisco Bay and meeting a woman who refuses to control her unleashed dogs. She reflects, "Physical places, as well as economies, conversations, politics—all can be conceived of as areas unequally occupied" (5). Walking further, Solnit sees San Quentin State Prison across the bay and remembers a recent visit, one of many, with death row inmate Jarvis Masters, which she narrates with some detail, including snippets of conversation. Then she returns to the trail, telling us more of its geography and history before observing, "You can start at any point and make connections that constitute a story about where we are and why, though the pursuit of those connections can feel like bushwhacking through a thicker" (6). With this comment, Solnit makes explicit her structure and logic. Now a third of way in, she departs into the essay's most explicit exposition and argument, summarizing readings, deploying facts, and developing assertions such as "Feminism has long been a campaign to open closed spaces" or "the domination of space by the powerful might be called structural violence" (6). She refers quickly now and then to her own experience, but this middle third is "the serious stuff of the essay," which she exits with an anecdote from twenty years earlier when, leading a friend's pit bull, she parts a sidewalk of men. She meditates further on that incident, on Jarvis Masters, on who's entitled and who's not, before concluding, "As a writer, I've been given more and more space to occupy." Then she goes on to explain her space as devoted to advocacy.

Solnit is writing, of course, in the tradition of the personal essay, that combination of narrated experience, reflection, assertion, reading, and anecdote that may seem to meander but has a tight narrative logic and rhetorical effect. In Ed Hoaglund's parlance, the essay exists on a line between "what I think, and what I am." Essayistic writing is more than idle fluff, especially in a political age when, as Elizabeth Svoboda and others have concluded, "...our opinions are often based in emotion and group affiliation, not facts" (1). In a time of *tl;dr* ("too long; didn't read"), terse facts and deft observations seem perversely less to change viewpoints than to harden established positions. In contrast, stories and personal experiences open communicative possibilities. These ostensibly aesthetic moves have a compelling and necessary rhetoric, not only in their effects on readers but also on writers. George Orwell recognized as much in his famous essay, "Why I Write:"

What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art.' I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some

fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience.

The tradition of writers who practice Orwell's imperative is both long and ongoing. In "On a Florida Key," E.B. White spends a couple pages desultorily describing his beach cottage during a Florida storm, eventually fixing on a bag of oranges stamped "Color Added." The label makes him muse both about the hubris and fraudulence of oranges not being orange but also about the desire to enhance mere nature. He segues into an observation about the two movie theaters in the area, one of which allows "colored people" only in the balcony, the other not at all. White describes people in the latter clapping heartily after a patriotic newsreel showing a waving flag, but says, "I could not clap for liberty and justice (for all) while I was in a theater from which Negroes had been barred." He writes that he'll follow southern tradition to a point, "but although I am willing to call my wife 'Sugar' I am not willing to call a colored person a nigger" (177). This leads to reflection on the Jim Crow South, and he imagines a parade float that "would contain a beautiful Negro woman riding with all the other bathing beauties and stamped with the magical words, 'Color Added'" (178). The essay concludes with a stylized meditation on the struggle between the artificial and the natural in Florida, about cities "conceived in haste and greed," about "the sound of the sea [as] the most time-effacing sound there is" (179).

Or consider Kristen Iversen's fine book *Full Body Burden*, which juxtaposes two kinds of material. One is a journalistic account of the construction and operation of Rocky Flats, a cold war plant between Denver and Boulder that built all of the plutonium triggers for America's nuclear arsenal between the fifties and the eighties. It was an environmental disaster. The other is a memoir of Iversen's growing up just east of—in the shadow of—Rocky Flats, riding her horse Tonka around Standley Lake, watching her parents' marriage fail, friends die of cancer, her life as a grad student crumble, her own marriage fail, her own cancer. The book's message is intricately personal and political—and teachable. I've had first year students emulate Iversen's strategy to great effect:

Write an essay using the approach of Kristen Iversen in *Full Body Burden*, juxtaposing two kinds of materials. The first is your own lived experience, whether from childhood or high school or right now; you'll be writing about yourself, narrating scenes, reflecting. The second material is research that ties thematically to your experience. This can be primary (for example, the interviews that Iversen did or accessed through archives) or secondary reading about what others have written.

Students have written about growing up in conservative churches, about childhoods spent skiing, about going to grade school next to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, about playing soccer, about working fast food. In doing so, they experienced (the evidence is in the paragraphs), a profound aspect of writing as a way of being human: an instrument for connecting, for impelling exploration, for understanding how we fit in the world and the world in us.

When I call for writing as a liberal art, I'm saying we must invite students to cultivate relationships between their experiences and ideas and others' experiences and ideas, to use writing not only to connect with others but also to connect with themselves. I've tried to show three possibilities, in a spirited but charitable Facebook thread, in the

complex writing life of a long-dead astronomer, and in the work of writers using personal experience for political purposes by focusing on aesthetic possibilities. I'm not saying the kinds of writing I've celebrated should displace academic or conventional civic discourse in writing classes. That writing is vital, too. But writing is vaster than tidily circumscribable rhetorical situations that demand it be produced—and fit certain features or earn sanctions. Writing ought additionally to be a way of inscribing ourselves in the world and a way of inscribing humanity, beyond school or work or politics, in ourselves.

In a spare bit of white space in *College Composition and Communication* from 1964, editor Ken Macrorie ran the following exchange with Janet, who I expect was the daughter of one of his students (Figure 11). Neverminding that I little expect our now-serious journals to indulge such whimsy these days, I hope we might still see a place in college for encouraging “writing because I feel like it,” as well as an appreciation for all the ways that might be.

✦ CCC 1964

THREE LETTERS

Dear Susan,
 I wish we had stayed out in the rain longer. I wish we had gotten a cold. It would have bin fun.
 I love you Susan. Don't forget to call me. My foghn number is DA 7 9987. Today Thersday I cannot play with you. Mom is at collig.
 Love,
 Janet (Bowman)

Dear Janet:
 May I have your permission to reprint your letter to Susan in CCC, the magazine I edit?
 Sincerely,
 Ken Macrorie

Dear Mr. Macrory,
 You may use my letter. I don't think it is very good. I am writing because I feel like it.
 Yours truly,
 Janet

✦

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