

**WRITING TRUTH IN CLASSROOMS: PERSONAL REVELATION AND PEDAGOGY****Dr. Carl Leggo***University of British Columbia*

*In sharing these dark shards, I hope to encourage others to bite open the bullet of pretence in which we live. Telling the truth is powerful medicine. It is a fire that lights the way for others. (Chrystos, 1995, p. 130)*

*Knowing what is true, what is valid and reliable, and what to predict should come from listening to as many stories as you can and deciding how to act responsibly. (Pelias, 2004, p. 9)*

I often write about family, always seeking to know who I am, to gain a clear sense of identity and positionality in the midst of memory, desire, heart, and imagination, especially in relation to others. One of the ongoing challenges I face in my writing is trying to sort out what is true and what is not. This is, of course, the central question of epistemology, and certainly a question that all of us ask all the time. As I write about family and personal experiences, I realize that I am always keeping so much secret. For every experience and emotion and event that I write about, I also hold back so much more, as if I am not yet ready to share most secrets. Nevertheless, I hold firmly to a conviction that writing truthfully is integral to good health, and that writing truthfully invites productive communication among people, and that writing truthfully opens up possibilities for creative living. But at the same time, I also know that I hold so much back. There is a careful winnowing of the stories I am willing to tell. And then, even with the stories I am willing to tell, there is a great deal of selection, fabrication, manufacture, and interpretation. I know that I am never really telling the whole truth. In my autobiographical and poetic writing about family, I am encouraged by Keefer's (1998) wisdom in *Honey and Ashes: A Story of Family*, where she writes: "I do not claim to know or tell The Truth about my family; what I am doing is sieving memory and retelling the stories that make memory material, and public. The difference between what I was told and what I heard; what memory hides and what imagination discloses—all this is part of the book I have written" (p. 5).

In school classrooms, teachers are always asking their students to tell stories about their lives in the contexts of family and neighbourhood. But what are the conventions and expectations that govern the stories that are told and written in classrooms? In what ways are students encouraged and constrained in writing the stories of their lives? Why is it valuable for students and teachers to write their stories? We are always engaged in a meaning-making process of becoming human. We write and tell stories as part of a hermeneutic process of truth-seeking. In *Students on the Margins: Education, Stories, Dignity*, Hutchinson (1999) provides valuable direction for all educators. Informed by the perspectives of philosophers, including John Dewey and Charles Taylor, and feminist scholars, including Megan Boler and Sara Ruddick, Hutchinson spells out a comprehensive and cogent case for the significance of students' autobiographical writing: "Two things schooling can do are, first, to reflect the narrative nature of the self as it develops and, second, to provide a place for students to come to know many different stories as well as articulate their own stories. Both endeavours sustain dignity and hence, the creation of

lives” (p. 72). I am especially encouraged by Hutchinson’s claims for the moral responsibilities of story-telling:

*Story is relational and reciprocal and, as such, entails moral responsibilities. As we tell stories and listen to stories, we stand in a moral relation to one another. The process itself is reciprocal, that is, I tell a story and you listen, and then you tell a story and I listen. But the notion of reciprocity extends beyond this. Reciprocity does not simply mean that we share stories back and forth, but that we have an obligation to listen and tell in ways that will sustain the dignity of one another and avoid domination. (p. 93)*

I agree with Hutchinson’s view that “being the author of one’s own life implies a sense of authenticity, because it ascribes voice to the one whose life it is. Authenticity enjoins one to speak to how life is experienced by oneself” (p. 61). This is the heart of autobiographical writing. When I write my stories, I am seeking to understand my lived experiences, and I am seeking to understand my connections in the world, connections to others and to the earth and even the universe. Out of the practice of autobiographical writing, and a keen personal investment in writing stories about my life, I agree with Hutchinson that “education as paying attention to the stories or the meaning that children are creating in their lives means valuing their *autonomy* as primary ‘authors’ of their lives, encouraging *reciprocity* in relationships, providing *recognition* for the self, and viewing education as *freedom to imagine* things as they could be otherwise” (p. 125).

I admire Hutchinson’s vision for schools, a vision built on the promotion of the dignity of every member of the school community, a vision founded on a profound conviction in the dynamic and efficacious practices of story-making and story-telling and story-listening. I fully support her vision, and I highly recommend her book. My intention in this paper is to address some questions and practices regarding autobiographical writing in schools, especially by exploring, discussing, and interrogating the concept and function of truth in writing. Influenced by postmodernist writers and theorists, I am committed to challenging the conventions that govern and frequently constrain the practice and pedagogy of writing in school classrooms. My main concern is to address how we, as teachers, remind our students that in all their writing, truth is always a complex concatenation of courage and wisdom, fact and fiction, process and pedagogy.

When I was a student in school in the 1950s and 1960s, my experiences with writing were essentially similar from grade to grade. Most of my writing comprised written answers to questions, answers that were embedded in the prose of the textbooks we read and that required a simple effort of excavation. Or I wrote notes, essentially wrote the words that the teacher wrote on the blackboard or dictated. Only seldom was I invited to write where the writing was not a simple exercise of copying. Only seldom was I invited to write a story or a poem or even a composition that required a thoughtful collection and selection and inscription of thoughts and ideas. But even on those infrequent occasions when I was invited to write a story or a composition, the approach that I was required to take was largely counterproductive. I remember that the teacher always presented the class with a list of potential topics. We chose one. I do not remember students, even once, suggesting topics. The composition that I wrote was written quickly because the assignment was typically completed in one class period of forty minutes. This meant that there was usually time for only one draft. Errors were corrected with a rubber eraser. Since compositions always had to be written in ink, the composition could look like a scuffed rug by the end of the class period. If compositions were assigned for homework, there was at least the opportunity to write a clean, neat final copy. Writing was a very private affair.

When I wrote a composition at home, I would occasionally ask a parent to read it, but not often. I did not have a sense that writers sought advice from others. I did not see writing as dialogical or communal. Instead I almost always perceived writing as a private affair between the teacher and me. I wrote exclusively for the teacher who waited expectantly for my composition with the red pencil in hand. I submitted the composition to the teacher who read it, circled the mistakes, and wrote a grade as well as a word of commendation or complaint at the end: *excellent work, needs improvement, very good work, shows progress*. I learned in this experience that writing was a product that I produced for the teacher's consumption and evaluation. And I learned that writing in school was always practice writing, never real writing. The only purpose for writing was learning to write. Writing in school was akin to pushing a big rock up the hill, like Sisyphus, only to see it roll back down again, and only to continue the effort time after time. Not once in school did I ever write to an audience other than the teacher, not even to my classmates unless one counts the occasional surreptitious note. Writing was not integral to our lives; writing was an activity that we engaged in because we were required to and cajoled with promises that this kind of school writing would one day be beneficial in our lives outside school. But writing in school needs to be a part of an extensive experience of writing outside of school. In other words, writing in school is not only a preparation for writing outside school. Instead, writing in school is an integral part of the fabric of writing in a person's life experience as a wide-ranging and powerful literate activity of engaging with words and the world.

All my teaching of writing, both in school and university classrooms, is informed and generated by my practices as a writer of poetry, fiction, and scholarly texts. Hence, the ways I teach writing is connected phenomenologically to my own experiences as a writer. In turn, I encourage my students to pay attention to their writing processes in order to understand the complex ways that writing unfolds in individual practice. When I read many influential books about teaching writing, I find myself nonplussed by the advice that is provided because I just don't see my own processes and practices as a writer and teacher in the typical textbook advice. Take, for example, the important work of Stewart (1986) who was an influential scholar of rhetoric and composition. I have paid close attention to his books, and I have always learned from him, but, nevertheless, I also have many questions about Stewart's views and advice. In *The Versatile Writer* he contends: "Writers settle for nothing less than absolute honesty in their work. This requires a special kind of writing discipline because you have to learn to throw away whatever is false, no matter how much it pleases you. Dishonesty in writing is insincerity, hypocrisy, a representing of yourself as something you are not. It may project what you would like to be, not what you are" (p. 19). I have read this kind of proclamation about writing over and over in books about rhetoric and composition, and while I agree with it in many ways, I am also always concerned that this kind of advice misrepresents the experience of writing as many writers know it, certainly as I know it. Perhaps Stewart's perspective is trapped in a philosophical conundrum of Cartesian essentialism that promotes self-consciousness and self-knowledge and self-expression. For Stewart writing is the way by which I can reveal to myself and to others who I am because my existence as a human being is assumed to be sustained in a stable and single and sentient self. Stewart warns writers about being lead into "a kind of phony individualism" (trying to be somebody that you are not) (p. 21). Stewart also argues that "the development of an authentic voice is a natural consequence of self-discovery. As you begin to find out who you are and what you think and to become comfortable with the person you are, you learn to trust your own voice in your writing" (p. 8). But in middle age I have discovered myself, finally, after a journey of decades through several long straight tunnels with the seductive light of truth beaming from distant endpoints. I have discovered I am a poet who sees his reflection constantly in a house of mirrors, each reflection different and diverse, images and

colors without end, a mutable and shift-changing nexus of word-drawn lines, embodied subject positions, and multiple narratives.

Like Stewart, Lindemann (1985), another significant scholar of rhetoric and composition, pronounces: "Good writing is most effective when we tell the truth about who we are and what we think .... When we tell the truth, we risk the possibility that people may not like us. But writing truthfully is the only way to discover what we know about ourselves and our world" (p. 161). I certainly agree with Lindemann that the challenge of truth-telling is that "people may not like us." Any one of us who has written about our lived experiences can almost certainly also tell more stories about offending others. I once wrote a fictionalized story about an autobiographical experience with a fundamentalist church community, and a colleague in a writing group took me to task for being critical about fundamentalist church adherents. (Of course, he was an adherent of a fundamentalist church.) I wanted to argue that the story was a lot more fact than fiction; I wanted to impress on my colleague that this was my lived and living truth; I wanted to explain that I felt a strong need to address this experience in my life. But I remained silent. As I have often remained silent out of fear of offending, irritating, unsettling, and frightening others. And I could tell many more stories about how my efforts to be truthful have led to problems and difficulties.

In all my writing, I am seeking, not Truth with a capital T, but a truthful exchange with others. As Bakhtin (1973) understands, "the truth is not born and does not reside in the head of an individual person; it is born of the dialogical intercourse between people in the collective search for the truth" (p. 90). My hope is that my words will invite others to enter into dialogical relationships of word-making founded on risk-taking, trust, truth-seeking, courage, encouragement, nurture, desire, and unwavering commitment to the power of words for singing our worlds into creation. To write or speak is to invite a proliferation of other texts. Writing is an animating process. I write my stories in order to engage with others in ongoing conversations, all of us always seeking possibilities for understanding, possibilities for meaning. All of us need an environment where we can write tentatively and boldly and interrogatively. We need an environment where we can express our doubts, our hurts, our joys, our jealousies, and our questions.

I disagree with Tompkins (1987) who claims that "knowing that my knowledge is perspectival, language-based, culturally constructed, or what have you does not change in the slightest the things I believe to be true" (p. 172). Knowing that my knowledge is perspectival, language-based, and culturally constructed encourages me that the things I believe to be true can be altered. They are not printed indelibly in a master text. I can interrogate the things I believe to be true. Therefore, all my writing, including my autobiographical, narrative, and poetic writing, is part of a lifelong, intense, pedagogic practice and process of exploring, learning, and transforming. I am heartened by Gass' (1983) perspective that "one's complete sentences are attempts, as often as not, to complete an incomplete self with words" (p. 175). We are all in process, none of us are complete, and therefore we all need to write, and we need to write with courage and boldness and imagination in the pursuit of truth.

Out of this conviction about human learning and becoming, I turn to Vanier (1998), the philosopher, educator, and spiritual leader. Vanier asks: "Is this not the life undertaking of us all ... to become human? It can be a long and sometimes painful process. It involves a growth to freedom, an opening up of our hearts to others, no longer hiding behind masks or behind the walls of fear and prejudice. It means discovering our common humanity" (p. 1). I think that Vanier's perspective on human becoming is an apt description of the process and aims of pedagogy: "To be human is to create sufficient order so that we can move on into insecurity and seeming disorder. In this way, we discover the new" (p. 13). One of the foundational principles

that motivates Vanier's service is that "maturity comes through working with others, through dialogue, and through a sense of belonging and a searching together" (p. 14). Also, Vanier contends that "human beings need to be encouraged to make choices, and to become responsible for their own lives and for the lives of others" (p. 15). And "in order to make such choices, we need to reflect and to seek truth and meaning" (p. 15). I am deeply attracted to these principles, and I think they can be well-served in writing classrooms. Vanier notes: "To name something is to bring it out of chaos, out of confusion, and to render it understandable" (p. 25). Then, Vanier asks: "Where does a broader sense of belonging come from?" He answers his question, "I believe it begins with human contact, with friendship, and as we listen to each other's stories" (p. 62).

I never forget how complicated this business of writing and revelation is. I claim that I write, at least in part, in order to tell the truth, and in order to grow in truthful living. I claim that we all need to be open and to take risks in our writing. But I also know that when I invite people to write about their lives, I invite the opening of Pandora's box. I know that when I invite people to write about their lives, I invite them to write about the death of loved ones, the loss of love, the brokenness of homes, the abuse and loneliness and despair that characterize many lives, young and old. I know that when I invite people to write about their lives, I invite hot tears and overwhelming hurt and unsettling questions, but I am convinced that whatever there is of hope and wisdom and goodness in our world is known as we write our lives truly. I tell my students that I am a writer trying to make sense out of chaos, and I invite them to join me in wording our worlds together.

In this commitment, I am encouraged by Rule (1986) who notes that "the autobiographical writer must believe that there is enough value in what is being said to justify whatever discomfort is caused" (p. 35). But I especially appreciate Winterson's (1995) advice: "The question put to the writer 'How much of this is based on your own experience?' is meaningless. All or nothing may be the answer. The fiction, the poem, is not a version of the facts, it is an entirely different way of seeing" (p. 28). How do I make the decision regarding what stories I want to focus on. I have written about terrible things. How did I decide to write about those terrible things? And not write about other terrible things? The questions that the writer needs to ask frequently are: When is silence ethical? When is silence unethical? There are many challenges in autobiographical writing in classrooms. I know I must temper my optimism with many actual and disappointing experiences in my teaching that remind me how hard it is for people to speak considerately and to listen attentively. I have been a part of many classes and schools where I have felt an abiding sense of danger, where I have learned to be silent. But even so, while acknowledging the potential for danger, I am committed to creating classroom experiences that I anticipate will be vital and transformative. To invite students to write truthfully is to invite the possibility of healing as well as harm, and I certainly do not wish to minimize the challenges that many students live daily in and outside classrooms. I am constantly concerned about students' personal, emotional, and psychological well-being, but these concerns can be, and must be, successfully addressed in classrooms.

There are many pressing challenges involved in promoting autobiographical writing in classrooms. What are the ethics of writing our life stories? How can autobiographical writing be evaluated? Is there a danger that autobiographical writing will become a kind of therapy that most teachers are not trained to respond to? Will autobiographical writing endanger students who write about marginalized experiences such as homosexuality? Will some students express racist, violent, sexist, homophobic views? Will some students become the focus of criticism for spiritual beliefs? Will some students become the objects of verbal and physical violence for writing about marginalized identities?

But, even while acknowledging the many pressing challenges, my primary concern is simple. If we do not learn to write truthfully and personally in school classrooms, where will we ever learn to write in the ways that foster the heart of education as questioning, researching, learning, and transforming? Writing truthfully is a practice. We learn to write truthfully, or we learn silence. Of course, personal and autobiographical writing is not the only kind of writing that will be done in classrooms, but it certainly needs to be a part of the experience of classrooms. I seek to nurture writing experiences in classrooms where all students and teachers can engage in a wide range of productive and meaningful writing projects in which we can continue to learn the many ways that language discloses and constructs the world for writers and readers. We read, write, think, talk, listen, view, imagine, represent, and know ourselves and others through language. When we write stories about our lives, we bring our experiences into connection with the lives of others, and in these connections there is a dynamic dialogue, a polyphonic conversation. We learn about ourselves, and we learn about others, and we learn about the world, all through words. For this kind of education to be effective, we must be willing to engage in the dialogic connections that will almost certainly sometimes unsettle us and disturb us as we confront the experiences of how identities are composed and sustained.

I once asked a group of grade ten students how they felt about the whole issue of censorship in the classroom. Their replies reminded me that, as teachers, we need to be careful that we are not always imposing our own sense of what are appropriate parameters for writing in the classroom. As one student observed, "every person is an individual with a unique personality who should have the right to express his or her views, and the classroom should give the chance for this." Another student suggested, "everything should be talked about in class. If people talked about really deep subjects, there wouldn't be so much prejudice in the world." When I invite students to write, I cannot control the responses. I do not expect that I will like or agree with everything students write, but I do not want to control the writing. I want to invite students to write, to express their views, to participate in a collaborative venture of exploring issues and making sense of their experiences in the world. Classrooms need to be created as emancipatory environments for students and teachers to dialogue and collaborate in the formation of identities as they seek together more politically, culturally, and socially just ways of living in the world. I also know that any pedagogical enterprise that invites people to tell their stories, to question the status quo or the cultural perception of normativity, to contravene the kinds of identities that are socially acceptable and valorized will cause immense trouble. For example, some students might write the kind of autobiographical recollections that only sustain and perpetuate a position of power and dominance and privilege. There might be a strong opposition to undermining that position with too much questioning. Nevertheless, if students are going to investigate how identity is socially and culturally defined, then they need to confront with courage and conviction and compassion experiences of identity, including their own. In her provocative poem "ITCOTU" Chrystos (1995) describes "this dangerous disease, whose anagram stands for *I'm The Center Of The Universe*" (p. 5). Characteristics of this disease include: "inability to listen to others for longer than 3 minutes; the false concept that one's own ideas are superior to all others; the pitiful belief that control of others is paramount to one's own sanity" (p. 5). Though it is not possible to throw off one's identity, as if it were a costume, it is possible to interrogate how identities are created and the positions of domination and privilege that are frequently taken for granted as part of one's identity. Since identity is constructed, it can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Instead of an emphasis on closure and resolution, we need an openness to multiple possibilities expressed in writing that honours tension, conflict, contention, complexity, and diversity. Above all we need wide-ranging role models that remind us of the boundless possibilities for living in the world.

But because a classroom which operates with a pedagogy that is student-centered, collaborative, creative, and dialogical depends on the exchange of views and experiences and ideas, de Castell (1997) warns that many students will resort to lying and posing in order to avoid the dangers that can characterize such a classroom. Therefore, students and teachers engage in "active simulation, a ritual enactment of institutionally sanctioned roles in the name of an empowering authenticity" (p. 30). De Castell's indictment of autobiographical and personal writing in the classroom is a strong warning about overestimating the good will of educators who are committed to issues of justice and fairness. She questions the capability of educators to effect "a kind of safety and respect for difference which is, at the present time, nowhere in sight" (p. 30), and because she believes that safety and respect for difference is not available in classrooms, de Castell proposes that writing teachers reclaim pedagogical practices that emphasize objective discourse and critical analysis, not subjective responses and autobiographical reflections. Instead of the classroom as a community where students and teachers respond publicly to texts out of their personal experiences and views, de Castell argues for literacy experiences in the classroom that involve "an active, engaged, *and private* practice of self-formation" (p. 31). But I think that de Castell is calling for a reactionary return to a safe kind of writing in classrooms that simply renders secret or hidden the real lived experiences of students and teachers. How can there be only a private practice of self-formation? Surely, self-formation is collective and collaborative and cultural and dialogical. Classrooms need to be created as safe locations for students and teachers to explore together the significant issues that shape our lives. So, while I am challenged by de Castell's perspectives, and while I take her warnings seriously, I am not convinced that the kind of classroom I promote must be thrown out. In other words, I think there are possibilities for a liberatory classroom, even while I know I must temper my optimism with many actual and disappointing experiences in my teaching that remind me how hard it is for people to speak considerately and to listen attentively. I have been a part of many classes and schools where I have felt an abiding sense of danger, and have learned to be silent. But even so, I am committed to creating classroom experiences characterized by lively dialogue.

I write my stories, my living stories, but I am also written by others. I am part of a network of people that contributes to constructing my sense of personal and social identity. The two most used words in the English language are *you* and *I*, and these words are connected in inextricable ways. We each need to be mirrored by others in order to grow well. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* hooks (1994) writes: "The first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring" (p. 7). Hooks claims that "as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (p. 8). Therefore, she notes that "there must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community" (p. 8). In *All About Love: New Visions*, hooks (2000) calls for "honest and open communication" (p. 5).

In a similar way, Noddings (1992) develops an innovative approach to curriculum in *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* where she calls for "engrossment" (p. 16): "When I care, I really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey" (p. 16). Noddings proposes that "education should be organized around themes of care rather than the traditional disciplines. All students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world, and ideas" (p. 173). Everyone involved in education needs to work together to create schools as caring places where the curriculum is the ongoing process of the school's

life, a dynamic process that celebrates the diversity and creativity of the people who live and shape the curriculum, who are the curriculum. Kolbenschlag (1988) observes: "We know that social institutions like the Church, the corporation, the local schools, exist to enable human flourishing, but we experience deprivation within them" (p. 8). She proposes that "the refusal to relate is the sin of our times: the refusal to recognize and respect another's existence; the refusal to speak, to negotiate; the refusal to confront; the refusal to touch one another and cherish the flesh of the 'other'" (p. 41). As Kolbenschlag declares, "the challenge to both men and women is to invent new myths. People are changed, not by intellectual convictions or ethical urgings, but by transformed imaginations. We must begin to live out of new myths" (p. 179). Needed are teachers and students who are devoted to interrogation and critique and discovery, who are willing to be challenged and surprised, who are eager to enter into relationships founded on diverse perspectives and experiences, who are seeking through dialogue and story-making to live together. Phelan (1989) suggests that "we need to focus our imagination again on our differences, actual and potential" (p. 159). By acknowledging and celebrating diversity we can create communities where security and dignity and compassion and care are all joyfully present.

What is school? School is primarily a place for gathering together to explore experiences of the world, to discuss what is being learned about life, a place for sharing and growing, a place for experimentation and exploration, a place for examining the dynamics and processes and influences which shape the lived experiences of being human and becoming human. My ideal classroom would be modeled on a summer camp complex with a fireplace and big, old chairs for sinking into. People would read and write and talk, teaching one another, learning together, celebrating unity in community by celebrating diversity in community. I have lived for over half a century, and all my life I have been a teacher or student, and perhaps the one theme that has been consistent in my life is hope, the anticipation that we can learn to live together well in the world. I think that the real curriculum of school should be a curriculum based on life-affirming activities, including celebration, conversation, cooperation, community, creativity, collaboration, compassion, and caring.

I last taught high school in 1990. Armed with three graduate degrees in creative writing, English curriculum and instruction, and rhetoric and composition, I taught a writing course to a grade ten class. I had last taught high school four years earlier, and I was eager to serve my students well with my newfound experience, expertise, and enthusiasm. During the school year I did everything but play spoons to invite my students into the pleasures of writing. I used numerous prewriting exercises designed to prime the pump; Natalie Goldberg and Peter Elbow and Donald Murray and Nancie Atwell and Donald Graves and Tom Romano were part of the chorus of writers and teachers of writing that I invited into that grade ten class. I sought to make writing relevant and real and riveting. I wanted to create a writer's workshop environment where students kept journals and engaged in the process of writing with peer editing and conferencing, everybody working on different projects at their own paces. I encouraged writing for audiences that we wanted to write to. I invited writing about subjects and issues that meant something to us. So, when some students complained that there were too few recreational facilities for young people in our small town, we wrote to the mayor to discuss the concerns with him. We wrote about gun control and divorce and drugs. I explained that the conventions of standard English usage were important, and frequently interjected mini-lessons on grammar into our writing workshops, but I always insisted that correctness was not the heart of writing because the heart of writing pulses with desire for word-weaving and word-connecting with other word-weavers.

But in spite of my committed efforts I limped through my experience in that grade ten class with a sense of growing disillusionment and frustration. From September to June most of the students showed almost no progress. Many of them continued to write as if they were writing



schoolwriting, that bland, listless prose that students write for the teacher's red pencil. Most of them wrote only enough to satisfy what they perceived were my expectations even though I tried to link my expectations to their desires. Most of them engaged in peer editing and conferencing as if it were some bizarre ceremony that I had invented to bore and embarrass them. Most of them continued to ignore the mini-lessons in grammar and repeated the same errors of usage over and over. From September to June I limped through class after class, three forty-minute periods every six-day cycle. In the end I felt wounded and bruised and defeated. I had tried my best, and my best did not meet with much success. I wondered if perhaps I should have been more traditional, even tougher, in my approaches, more directive, more demanding, more dictatorial. Then on the last day of the school year, Virginia, one of the students, stopped me in the hallway, and said, "I have a gift for you." She gave me copies of the writing she had done during the year and a note which concluded with the following words: "You really got me feeling good about my writing. I thank you for that." I realized that I had done okay. I did not know who had benefited in their own quiet ways. I did not know who had grown in confidence about their writing. Perhaps I wanted to be SuperTeacher with a bright capital ST embroidered on my chest, but what I had done was offer my students an experience with writing that they had seldom, if ever, known. Few of them were prepared or able to accept the opportunity in the ways that I had hoped, but some grew, and I am hopeful that none were impaired by my efforts. A few weeks ago, I met Virginia in a local shopping mall. Fourteen years have passed since I taught her. My brief conversation with Virginia was full of encouragement. The adolescent I knew had grown into a young woman full of maturity and wisdom. She spoke fondly of the writing class, and remembered the experience as a highlight of her schooling. As a teacher I seldom know the impact of my efforts. My vocation as an educator is to offer a humane and creative environment for students in hopeful anticipation that teacher and students will enter into an ongoing energetic and ethical engagement with words and the world.

I know when I invite students to write about the experiences and ideas and people who are important to them, I invite them to engage in a journey that is potentially fraught with danger. A graduate student informed me recently that as a result of the writing she had done in my course, she had decided that she would divorce her husband. Another middle-aged student broke down in tears as she recounted the childhood experience of watching her grandfather die, recalling memories that had been hidden away for forty years. Another wrote about his history of sexual abuse. My writing classes echo with tears, but there is much laughter as well. I have learned that my writing classes are not meticulously orchestrated dramas, but improvisational and unpredictable human experiences where wonder and mystery, surprise and emotion, regeneration and transformation abound. Conducting a writing class in this open, flexible way can be something like dancing on the rim of a volcano, but I have learned to be willing to dance with danger. I once thought that I had to be a counsellor to my students. I believed that when they spoke about their pain and their fears, I needed to be Ann Landers, always ready with the wise, strong words that can solve any problem. Catherine, a high school student I knew a long time ago, taught me that I am not Ann Landers and that I do not need to be Ann Landers. She was a skillful wordsmith, but she used words like weapons. She had a history of emotional problems. I entered her life as a wordsmith who shared her desire for words. I was convinced that the solution to her troubled and tempestuous emotional heights and depths could be formulated in words. Eventually I was tangled up in the labyrinth of her depression and anger. Eventually I felt like a marionette manipulated by a puppeteer.

At least I learned a sturdy lesson: I am not a counsellor, a priest, a pastor, or a guru. I am a teacher and a writer, and as a teacher and a writer I invite others to join me in wording our worlds with truth and passion and purpose. Consciousness-raising takes place in our writing

classes. Sometimes our classes are like self-help encounter groups. The spirits of both Carl Rogers and Mr. Rogers pervade our meetings marked by affection and support and risk-taking. But each of us recognizes that we must look inside ourselves for the direction, wisdom, courage, and energy to grow confident and seek joy. Writing about our lives, our personal and emotional experiences, will inevitably generate a creative energy. I agree with Pelias' (2004) conviction: "What we decide to remember says who we are now. It is our ongoing testimony, our work as witnesses. What we commemorate each day by the telling of our tales is our necessary history and our moral mandate. In the chew of memory, we only have our contested pasts and plausible accounts, continually told and retold in good faith, to lead us to the future" (p. 58).

We write, think, talk, listen, read, represent, and know ourselves and others through language. When we write, we help construct our identities and the identities of others, and we learn about the world, all through words. In the process of writing, in the journey of finding our way in the world in words, we will write many stories, and some will be happy and some will be sad, and most stories will linger in the spaces between joy and sorrow. Just as I learned from Catherine that I am not a counsellor, a priest, a pastor, or a guru, I learned from Lora that each of us writes our own unique and autonomous stories. Lora was one of my favourite secondary school students. She was a poet who opened her arms to embrace the world, to know the world with insight and concern. She brought me her poems. She came to me with tears and laughter. We filled the air with words, and the world was filled with colour. My dreams for Lora included degrees in English and creative writing. Lora graduated but decided not to leave home to go to university. Her parents had always been protective and were reluctant to see her move to a big city. Lora enrolled in a journalism course at the local community college. She met Eric, more than twice her age, married, a father, often unemployed, occasionally in trouble with creditors and police. Lora and Eric fell in love and ran away together. Eric's wife tried to go crazy, but couldn't. Lora's father was more successful. Lora and Eric began to build a new life. Lora stopped writing poetry. She quit the journalism course. She did not go to university. She now works nights behind the reception desk of a big hotel. Eric serves drinks in the bar. Lora and Eric have been together for a long time. Friends say they are happy. Lora has disappointed the hopes of many people, including mine, but she taught me that she makes the decisions concerning her life. Perhaps she was reminded in my writing classes that she has the authority to write her own stories. I hope so.

Writing opens up the possibilities for identity formation and plural truths. Truth is always multifaceted and diverse and kaleidoscopic and prismatic and organic and ever changing, and, therefore, students and teachers need a classroom environment where they can explore truth creatively and comprehensively. Above all, the classroom needs to be a location where teachers and students know vibrant experiences with words and word-making. The classroom is an integral part of the larger world that teachers and students live and grow in, and, therefore, the classroom needs to promote engagement with language and literacy that intersects with and extends beyond the world outside the classroom. If young people cannot learn to write about their lived experiences in classroom contexts where they can count on respect, care, and attention, then when and where will they ever learn to write truthfully? The classroom environment ought to be constructed, not as an escape from the heart, but as a heartscape—an expansive and energetic and enthusiastic space where people can connect heartfully in writing truth.

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