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“If I Didn’t Let It Go It Would Just Stick On My Chest.” From Language to Silence

Mary Jo Finney

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This is the story of what a third-grade child and an undergraduate education student taught me about teaching language arts. While I always look to learn from my students, I am more surprised at some times than at others about what I find. Theo*, in the innocent, matter-of-fact logic of a nine-year-old and Patti*, one of my undergraduate students preparing for a career in teaching, wrote collaboratively once a week for five weeks. Their struggle With writing about September 11, 2001 helped me see that both language and silence should be part of my teaching. (*All names are pseudonyms.)

For the past several years, I have taught reading and language arts methods courses to pre-service teachers. My approach is to spend the first half of the semester helping my students become active writers. Reading the work of such writing educators as Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, Donald Graves, Shelley Harwayne, and Donald Murray, my students experience a writer’s workshop in our classroom. Students must keep a writer’s notebook that includes a range of attempts at various genres, topics, and literary devices. The emphasis in the notebook, as I tell my students, is to write freely, whatever comes to mind as they explore poetry, essay, story, and memoir. I expect my students not to be great writers but to be active writers in order to teach others about writing. Throughout their focus on writing, we have conversations about the integration of speaking, listening, and reading. Each facet of the course emphasizes the use of language and methods for fostering its use in the classroom.

I am no longer surprised by my student’s fears and resistance to writing. Many are convinced they know only how to write academically, for their teacher, in response to an assignment. Few have been expected to manage the freedom of writing whatever is on their minds. They spend the first several weeks complaining they have nothing to write about and stop just short of begging me to assign them a writing topic. I am firm in my refusal. As so many writers reveal in Murray’s Shoptalk, writers write in order to figure out what

is on their minds. If I were to assign a topic, not only would I rob them of the work of the writer, but I would risk having students writing for me feeling little, perhaps no, ownership of their writing. So in order to inspire each writer to write, we read, I share my messiest writing and conduct think-alouds, and we engage in whole class and peer conferencing. Without fail, by the end of the semester, every student has produced a quality piece of writing he or she is willing to publish in our class anthology.

The second half of the semester involves working at an urban elementary school. After learning about themselves as writers, my students are expected to engage in collaborative writing with a third grader. The writing partners, one undergraduate with one third grader, must explore a range of topics and genres culminating in one piece of writing for publication in a class anthology.

As for their field placement, I hear a different, but consistent, set of questions and concerns from my students. Do we really let the children write about whatever they want? Will they have something to write about? How will I get them to write? After the first 45-minute session at the elementary school, my students discover the same joy and struggle they know from their own writing experience but, this time, witnessed through the eyes of a third grader.

Last fall, my class met for the first time on September 4th. The next time we saw one another was the day after September 11th. Though we hardly knew one another, I expected to hear a need from my students to connect and try to make sense of this incredulous event. They were silent. I respected their unwillingness to share their reactions, but it worried me. I know there is a role for silence in both learning and healing. I also know that silence, like a wound left unchecked, can fester and cause even deeper pain.

This language arts class is intended to help students realize the power of language in exploring and understanding oneself and the world. I needed to open the door to writing about the event so I suggested a whole class composition. We created a brief poem that centered on patriotism, and nothing else was said the rest of the semester. My students worked with their third-grade writing partners producing a range of stories and poetry. None of it related to September 11th.

The following semester, a new year underway, a new group of students and the familiar angst of their first weeks of

writing, no one spoke — or wrote of September 11th, When it came time to begin their work with the third grade students, I asked my students to exchange written reflections of their observations about their field work with fellow classmates. These conversations took place over e-mail with students sharing observations, questions, and concerns twice weekly.

During the second week of writing, one of my students reported that she couldn't get her third grader off the topic of September 11th Patti wrote, "Things are going good with Theo except he's stuck on writing about Sept. 11, I don't want to discourage him but I want to move on. I originally thought that this could be our publishable piece but I don't want to dwell on that. Next week I hope to get him on a new topic."

In her e-mail discussion group, Patti's colleagues offered suggestions about how to move Theo away from his chosen topic. One student expressed her belief that "sometimes if someone feels so strongly about something they feel a need to talk or write about it." She went on to suggest, however, that Patti direct Theo toward writing about heroes or firefighters instead. Another student responded, "When you and your students write about Sept. 11, do any other topics stick in your mind that both of you could talk about or relate to?" Each of Patti's colleagues was trying to help her get Theo writing about something other than what he wanted to write about.

I was disappointed in Patti's, and her colleagues', reactions to this third grader's desire to write. Were my students not understanding what I was trying to teach them? Why were they thinking of ways to steer this child away from what he felt interested in writing about instead of helping him put his thoughts and feelings into language? Having a child express a desire to write, and pay sustained attention to the writing, is a dream come true for a language arts teacher! Why was she not encouraging this youngster's interest? Was she silencing him? I decided not to pose these questions to Patti just yet, believing she would learn more if I remained an observer, not a participant, in her writing with Theo.

During the next two sessions, Theo and Patti drafted a poem. As in any collaboration, they negotiated as they wrote and revised trying to arrive at something they both agreed to (see fig. 1). During their last writing session, Theo was absent from school, and Patti was left to make any last revisions and edit the poem for publication. At the end of the five weeks,

Patti and Theo published their poem about September 11th, "Disaster," in the class anthology (see fig. 2).

I decided to interview both writers, separately, about their shared writing experience. I asked Patti what made her uncomfortable writing about September 11th She explained that Theo wanted to write about the sound that the people made when they were jumping from the tower. "I was very uncomfortable with the fact that he was focusing on such a negative thing. I wasn't sure how to get him away from that. Then I just decided that he needed to talk about that so I did and we simply stated it in our poem, not with detail because I told him that was a horrible way to die and we didn't need to focus on that part of the tragedy." She later emphasized that she made revisions to the poem that didn't go into great detail, but everyone got the message and understood how she and Theo felt about the event.

When I asked Theo about September 11th he explained that he was worried about it but expected everything to be okay by Thanksgiving. He had written about this in his journal at school shortly after the tragedy. Theo went on to say that, after Thanksgiving, "I thought everybody would forget about it but they didn't." After seeing a television show about the tragic events, he wanted to write. When asked why he wrote about September 11th, Theo said, "These days nobody will listen if something bad happens. From both these writers, I have a deepened respect for both language and silence. The moms and dads are too busy to listen [...] sometime people will listen to writing." My last query to this child was about how he felt after writing this piece. Theo replied, "I feel glad just to let it go. If I didn't let it go it would stick on my chest."

When considering the different needs of these two writers, I am left wondering about the power of language. Theo, needing to be heard and to let go of the horror of this event, knows the relief that comes from writing about that which is "stuck on his chest." Patti, admitting she wanted to avoid focussing on the detail of the event, understands that writing and reading about something can be almost as real as living through it. In many ways, her unwillingness to put something into words spoke just as strongly about her response to the event as if she had expressed it.

From both these writers, I have a deepened respect for both language and silence. While putting thoughts, observations, and feelings into words offers

solace and healing for some, others find the vividness of language to be too much. I am wondering, for all my advocacy and love of language, whether silence plays an equally important role in my teaching of the language arts. It seems to me that, because words hold such power, silence may have something to teach us about language, as well.

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