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Gator Bait: On Teaching, Writing, and Growing Up on the Bayou

Elizabeth H. Boquet

Fairfield University, eboquet@fairfield.edu

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*Gator Bait:
On Teaching, Writing,
and Growing Up on the Bayou*

Elizabeth Boquet

I myself flew into fragments, and yet I was unhurt. I cried out. I called to the girl, "My body is burning up." She opened her coat a little and showed me the marks of fire. They seemed to be forming the first shapes of a vague language.

Blanchot, "The Last Word," 47

On a recent Louisiana trip to visit my parents, I poked through boxes of old family photos, searching for a few that I could take back to Connecticut to grace the walls, mantle, and tabletops of my new home. One of my favorites is a black-and-white photo of me when I was about 6 years old, splashing around in the marsh grass near our family camp, posing for my father, who stands above and behind me with the camera. This is one of a sequence of shots—me on my back, me on my stomach, me kicking my feet in the shallow water. Though I never say so to my parents, this picture really speaks to moments for which I am nostalgic in my childhood—a time when I felt only well-loved, happy, and secure. Shortly after this time I came to understand how contingent such security was—not in any dramatic way, just in a growing-up-and-learning-about-the-world way. But there's no trace of such knowledge in this picture, and that is one of the reasons I love it so.

Back in Connecticut, I stuck this particular picture in the corner of an antique mirror, along with an army photo of my dad, a picture of my brother and me riding my new tricycle, and an engagement photo of my mom. Later, as I passed through the hallway just as the morning sun shone on that spot, a shadow in that childhood photo caught my eye. I stopped, plucked that picture of me in the marsh grass from its assigned spot, and examined it. At first glance, the shadow seemed to be simply a ripple in the water near my feet. But upon closer inspection, I could see the faint outline of an alligator, lurking just below the surface. Not a very big specimen. Maybe a five-footer. Also probably only about five feet away from me the whole time I splashed around in the marsh.

Evidently no one noticed the alligator that day. And no one, it seems, ever noticed the alligator in that picture. I had never noticed the

alligator in that picture before—not until the light hit it just right and my eye caught it just so. And now I can't *not* see it. An image that originally intrigued me for crystallizing a moment of such unselfconscious innocence now captivates me for entirely different reasons. The internal coherence I initially found so compelling about that photo now seems shattered. Dangers I thought were held at bay by a family so skilled at shielding me actually lurked quite close. I now faced what I suspected all along: that I never really possessed such self-possession; that I had dodged dismemberment and disfigurement, literally and metaphorically, on more than just this one occasion; that the freezing in time of this particular frame was (like the different time-freeze that would have occurred had the gator taken hold of me) simply an accident.

* * *

In May 1999, Patrick Hartwell stood before colleagues, students, friends, and family in Leonard Hall at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and delivered his retirement address, entitled "How We Learn (and Other Stories)." Pat had been among the founding scholars in the field of composition, and he spent the last fourteen years of his career teaching at IUP.

When I began looking at Ph.D. programs in 1991, Pat Hartwell's place on the faculty there sealed the deal for me. His "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," photocopied and distributed as part of a new TA's packet in my master's program, turned my lesson plans upside down. I wanted to go where he was. I was a Hartwell groupie. A fan. Imagine my surprise then, as a beginning doctoral student arriving for the first day of orientation, when I noticed a shriveled raisin of a man (I say this with great affection), pants hanging from his hips in much the same manner that his cigarette dangled from his lips, pressed into the corner of the room warily eyeing the action. I now know that he must have been choosing his next duck-joke victim, but I didn't know it then. Nor did I know that he possessed a savant-like, comprehensive, bibliographic knowledge of the field. I learned both of those things, and more, very quickly.

Eight years later, in the early stages of the cancer that would kill him, he retired. I never heard him speak, in the three classes I took from him, as tenderly about teaching as he did on the day he retired. For that, I feel tremendous regret. But I have thumbed through the transcript of his retirement talk several times these last few years, in search of inspiration and support. Over and over again, I have found what I was seeking. He of all people might appreciate the irony that he spoke to me more through his writing than he ever did through his teaching, and that he did so at the beginning of my journey and again at the end of his.

In that final talk, Hartwell encourages those of us who teach to tell our stories of changing how we think about teaching and learning. He is careful to note that this is not the same as telling stories of how we have changed the things we do in the classroom (and, by extension, how our students have changed what they are learning). Hartwell's point is much more subtle than that. He calls on us, rather, as Blanchot does in my epigraph, to open our coats and show the marks of fire. And, through the drafting and re-drafting of the narratives that follow, I am beginning to see the first shapes of a vague language.

* * *

In my own scholarly work, I have made clear my commitment to a philosophy of teaching that engages writing center staff in increasingly participatory, higher-risk, less-scripted, more performative pedagogy. Much of that scholarship chronicles my dissatisfaction with what I have called low-risk approaches to tutoring (and to tutor education), programs that encourage mere competence (rather than excellence) on the parts of directors and tutors. I have argued that we should capitalize on institutional accidents (in the Foucauldian sense) so that we might re-configure our and our students' places in higher education. As a result of these moves, I have thought and talked and written a lot about risk in the last few years. I have cast performance largely in terms of risk-and-reward. I have demonstrated these moves primarily through the voices of others, first through the historical documents that have shaped the development of writing centers over the past seventy-five years or so and later through the voices of tutors and others working with me.

On my own teaching, however, I have been largely silent. I am now coming to understand what I only hint at in *Noise from the Writing Center*: my relationship to performance is an uneasy one. I sing with my eyes closed; and if I could teach that way, most days I would. My teaching self is carefully constructed, artfully posed, like the six-year-old me in the marsh; but that teaching self is also no longer blissfully unaware of the extent to which it is subject to dismemberment at every turn.

I was reminded of this paradox recently when I tore into the results of my teaching evaluations. One student's response stands out: "Get rid of this teacher." In the classroom, I am often scared, uncertain, scanning the rows for the one student among the sea of shining faces who is likely to be thinking, "Get rid of this teacher," wondering which of them I will never reach (or worse yet, lose), even as I meet new people whose company and intellects I enjoy. I don't want to fail them. And so, on the first day of class, like my colleagues all over this campus and elsewhere, I distribute the bullet-proof syllabus, stand at the front of the class, smile broadly and project my voice to the farthest reaches of the room.

That same early summer afternoon, as I set the evaluations aside, I skimmed through a stack of Interlibrary Loan books I had just collected, my eyes landing on this anecdote from Ronald Pelias' *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher's Body*: "A friend described a time when she asked her daughter to tell her about a party she had just attended. Her daughter replied, 'I can't. I haven't remembered it yet'" (4).

So as I write for you, I am in the process of remembering me. It is a version of a point made by Pat Hartwell during that retirement address, when early on he poses the following thought-problem. He asks the audience to "think of a teacher or teachers who affected your life in positive ways." He then follows up with a couple of questions like, "When you think of these teachers, are you thinking of what they taught you or what they did?" And then, "When you think of these teachers, are you thinking of them in neutral terms—as their career might appear in an encyclopedia entry—or are you thinking of these teachers in very personal terms, situated in your own experience with them?"

As you might expect, Hartwell concludes that, while we privilege education for content's sake—that is, we think of the importance of what gets taught in Western Civ or Intro to Marine Science—that content is in fact not what we remember years later when we think back on our experiences with schooling. He writes, "We *think* we learn from reading and lectures, from study and contemplation, from writing, feedback, and revision." But, he continues, "My argument here is that *that's not how we learn*, it's just how we *think* we learn. We really learn by telling little stories about ourselves as learners" [*emphasis added*].

I left Pat Hartwell and graduate school behind for the job I currently hold, arriving at this new university expecting—seeking—chaos in the writing center and stability in my teaching. I was surprised to find neither—first, when I found myself directing a writing center in what I had imagined would be a contact zone, only to discover there was absolutely no contact in sight; later, when I plumbed the depths (often inadvertently) of the well-scrubbed, polite, earnest young faces who attended class regularly and did pretty much what I told them to (though rarely much more). I had not expected that it would be those same bright faces who would prepare me to teach in this new setting; nor could I have predicted that in doing so they would make me a writer, simply by offering me so much to think and write about.

* * *

Once I saw that gator lurking in those swamp waters near our family's camp, I immediately phoned my parents. After the initial reaction of shock and dismay, my mom offered this disclaimer: "I wasn't there that day. Your dad had taken you and your brother off in the boat. I'm not surprised he didn't see it, your damn father, always with his nose in that camera; he never knew what was going on around him."

My father's reaction was quite different. He died laughing. When I suggested perhaps he was failing to appreciate the gravity of the situation, he replied, "But I was right there with you. Don't you know I would have saved you?"

I can interpret my mother's comment as a traditionally maternal one; she would have her child facing no risk, experiencing only safety. In my father's opposing reaction, I hear that even in the face of extreme risk, there is always safety. Most days we wind up caught somewhere in-between.

* * *

In her essay entitled "How It Is That I Came to Create My Own 'Balloon Animal Zoo,'" Mary writes, "When I decided to learn how to make balloon animals I realized that one of the essential things that I would have to grapple with was my fear of the sometimes-abrupt demise of a balloon. It always seemed to me that this risk was particularly prominent in the art of balloon animals because by physically twisting a balloon, you were practically begging it to burst." This fear that it will all blow up in your face is familiar to anyone who has prepared a syllabus, stood before a class with a new idea or a different text, sat with a writer to work one-to-one on a piece of writing. When Mary admits her trepidation, she also acknowledges that the problem is intriguing. She wants to know how it is that someone can stretch and twist and knot an inflated piece of rubber and have it turn out—pretty—whether she too might be able to take such an ordinary object and craft it into something unusual. The key, she reveals later in the essay, lies in figuring out how much room to leave for E-X-P-A-N-S-I-O-N.

* * *

A full year before Mary stood in front of our class with her shopping bag full of balloons, another student, Angela, stood at my office door and, unbeknownst to either one of us, initiated the intellectual pulling and twisting and stretching that you are reading today. That day, Angela came to tell me that she couldn't write the final paper.

The assignment, a popular one in the staff education course for tutors, involved writing about something you've mastered (as a means of exploring the concept of mastery). For her part, Angela steadfastly maintained she had mastered nothing. A series of frustrating suggestions followed, each one more directive than the last. Finally: Swimming? I offered. Nope. Riding a bike? Brushing your teeth? Twirling a lifeguard whistle? No, no, and no again. Well . . . (sigh).

Shortly before finals, Angela announced that she had experienced a breakthrough with the paper but that she needed a bit of time to finish it. I gave her an incomplete for the semester, and the finished piece

appeared in my mailbox on May 31st. Her essay, entitled "Mastery Metamorphosis," opens in the bathroom:

I start out crouching by the toilet, stomach muscles taut, and reach one finger down my throat, massaging gently. As a large mass of cookie comes up, I quickly remove my hand before it gets soiled. I stand up now, leaning far over, and use two fingers, stroking until all of the cookies are gone. I sit down, exhausted and dizzy.

Her analysis follows:

Mastery requires practice, patience, determination, a certain amount of natural ability, and a desire to succeed that has the potential to reach obsessive proportions. No one masters anything without intensity. I never lacked intensity. I mastered the art of throwing up.

The rest of the essay continues to turn the trope of the mastery paper—the one for which I now had to admit I had held such low expectations—into a chronicle of Angela in the grip of her battle with bulimia. She writes that it is in fact not easy to vomit up all of your food. She recounts the jubilation she felt upon her first real success. She describes experimenting with different food combinations; with varying amounts of liquid; with one-finger, two-finger and no-finger methods.

* * *

On page three of Mary's balloon-animal paper, she describes her first lesson, given to her by a friend and co-worker (and a suspected crush) Rick, a meeting which has Mary feeling pretty cocky about what she terms "the fundamental basics: how to blow up the balloon so that you actually have something with which to create a balloon object." Though Rick, a pack-a-day Marlboro man, warns her that blowing up these balloons is a Herculean task, Mary is certain that, with her Glee Club lungs and appreciation for "how important breath control truly is," she is up to the challenge. "I have the diaphragm of a champ!" she proudly declares. I turn the page to learn that Mary's "first lesson in balloon-animal making transformed into a lesson in humility." She admits, "No matter how hard I tried, I could not get the stubborn balloon to budge."

It is indeed a humbling experience to abandon all pretense of expertise and to lay oneself bare before another person, to open one's coat and show the marks of fire, as Blanchot observes. I am struck in Mary's description, not only by her own difficulties but also by Rick's willingness to put himself out there for her; for, before Mary is allowed to fail herself, she bears witness to Rick's labored attempt: "Rick struggled to inflate the first bright yellow balloon as his cheeks rivaled Dizzy Gillespie's and his face turned an alarming shade of magenta. I watched, with a mix of concern and wicked amusement, until at last he managed to blow up the stubborn balloon."

* * *

At the beginning of our semester together, Angela possessed what she believed to be the academic equivalent of Mary's champion diaphragm; and she found herself, in the face of this seemingly-mundane mastery assignment, deflated. She reclaimed herself in the act of writing; and through her own re/membering, she dismembered me. And now I—as I reshape the course, as I read my interlibrary loan books, as I draft this essay—am in the process of re/membering too.

So here's what I remember about that moment when I first read Angela's essay: I remember that her essay was compelling. It drew me in, seduced me, with its intimacy. She wrote about bulimia like a lover. Her essay is filled, in fact, with sexual, sensual imagery: the language of stroking, thrusting, euphoria, release. Even as I read it alone in my office, I felt my face grow hot with embarrassment, confronted with her unselfconscious juxtaposition of intimacy, pain, illness, and sex.

My immediate and looping thought was this one: I wanted to write about Angela's essay. That reaction made me ashamed—ashamed that she would become another character in my story, a story that I write for my own recognition, professional gain, and prestige. I worried that my response was somehow not professorial enough, and I struggled for several days to come up with a more "appropriate" response than that one—something about the power of language in conveying emotion and how she had used that very effectively in this essay, something about the style and presentation of this difficult material which she handled so deftly. But those responses, however true they might have been, sounded hollow in the face of what she had shared with me. And yet, I didn't want to be in the position of having to trade secrets. So I said to her anyway what I hadn't wanted to say from the beginning—the simplest possible response: your writing makes me want to write—because I could think of nothing else to say that felt real and true and more appropriate than that.

Sitting across the table from her, I nervously offered her my first and only response. When I did, relief washed over her face and then excitement as she replied, "That's so nice."

I didn't know then that what I was saying to Angela, in effect, was that her essay had cracked me up (in the sense that D. Diane Davis might invoke in her book *Breaking Up [at] Totality*) and that I needed to write in order to re/member myself. In a book devoted to championing the excess, the overflow that continually gets written out in the name of safety/comfort/community/boundaries, Davis urges readers to risk having their/our comfortable worldviews shattered again and again and again. Late in her argument, Davis quotes Cixous, who writes, "The only book worth writing is the one we don't have the courage or the

strength to write. The book that hurts us (we who are writing), that makes us tremble, redden, bleed." Davis goes on to say,

The only book worth writing is the one that refuses to stabilize identities and strives to *break them up*, the one that strains toward the Unhearable and tries to *crank it up*. Why write? To attend to the call of the exscribed. Same goes for reading: if it is to be worth it, we-readers will have to be willing to venture into a text unshielded, to dive in alone, to sever our links to the already-known, to the already-written. One has to risk one's Self, let everything go. Without this risk, one goes nowhere. One relearns over and over again what one already knows: one thinks the thinkable, hears the hearable, speaks the speakable. One risks nothing and gains nothing. (257)

Angela acknowledged with her act that the only essay she *could* write was the only one *worth* writing. The risks Angela assumed in composing and submitting that essay are obvious. My risks, in hearing it, responding to it, and writing about it are less obvious and, admittedly, less important. But I think we both, through our actions with each other, learned things we didn't already know, thought things we had not previously thought, heard things we weren't certain we could hear, and spoke things we were unsure we should speak.

What I did at that particular moment, when I sat with Angela in my office on one very late morning of one early summer day, was tell a little story about myself as a learner, as Hartwell explains it. I had spent the previous days obsessing, trying to come up with a response that would have, in effect, demonstrated to Angela that I had learned nothing from her effort at all, when I had in fact learned a lot, only some of which I was able to articulate that day. More that I began to understand only as I talked with her, as I went back to the drawing board for that assignment, for that class, for my teaching and writing life.

* * *

In odd and unexpected ways, my first encounter with Pat Hartwell, watching him crouch behind the curtains in the Graduate English library, marked the beginning of an education for me. I went to IUP determined to be taught how to teach. There I learned to stop looking to my professors for that information, to look to my students instead. Even today, I can't be sure that I am fully aware of the implications of that lesson.

As I worked to sort out my encounters with Angela, I was forced to look hard again at my own teaching. In doing so, I realized that, though I was writing a great deal about the need for tutors to take risks, to operate on the edge of their pedagogical expertise, I really was taking very few risks of my own, at least in the classroom. My teaching was, in fact, a place where I was beginning to feel safe. Seven years in to my

career at Fairfield, I was confident that I knew my students, that I had accurately characterized what *kind* of students I had, and I had begun to teach to that expectation. Angela rocked me out of my complacency; and though I had sensed for some time that I needed to be broken up, I don't know when (if ever) I would have been ready to do anything about it on my own.

As director of our university's writing center at Fairfield, I often talk to others about changing how we teach and learn: revamping syllabi, modifying assignments, reconsidering assessment techniques. The more difficult conversations to have, however, are the very ones Hartwell calls for: the examinations of what compels us to throw out a perfectly good plan, to pitch a seemingly adequate assignment. As I worked with colleagues across campus to help them change how they taught (and by extension, what their students learned), I resisted changing fundamentally the way I myself thought about teaching and learning. I had instead expected that I was there to change the way *my students* thought about teaching and learning. It took some time before I figured out I couldn't do the latter without doing the former. Tilly Warnock, paraphrasing Kenneth Burke, puts it this way: "When we shift from being people who learn in order to teach to people who have already learned, we no longer model learning and adapting what works in one context to new situations" (51).

* * *

Cheryl taught me, that year after I first met Angela. A 60-year old mother of two / grandmother of four, back in school part-time, despite speech aphasia which is the result of a brain tumor, Cheryl wrote an essay about *ikebana* (the art of Japanese flower arranging), and she asked whether she could do an *ikebana* demonstration in class. Never one to do anything halfway, she showed up one day with *ikebana* for everyone—armloads of flowers, rocks, dishes, and an instant camera to capture it all.

On Wednesday evenings that same semester, down at the local high school, Terry, my knitting instructor, forbade me from starting my scarf over. During our first class, Terry showed me how to knit and purl, and I dutifully knit and purled through the entire class. At home, I knitted and purled some more, but it was terribly ugly, so I ripped all the stitches out just before the next class, certain that a fresh start would make all the difference. Terry showed me again, and I knitted again, and I purled again, and I ripped the stitches out again the following weeks, until finally she said to me, "I can't help you if you keep showing up here with nothing." I registered my despair with her: "But it looks so ugly." She popped out laughing and said, "Well, of course it does. It's supposed to look ugly. You're *learning*."

The desire for a fresh start is understandable, as I sympathized with the international students in my first-year writing course, who kept wanting to start their papers over every time they saw any writing that they thought was better than their own. I tried different techniques to encourage them to push through their blocks; I worked individually with each writer. But it wasn't until I stopped, after discouraging the fifth student from starting over again with a new topic, turned to the class and said, "OK, let me tell you a little story about this knitting class I'm taking" that they really got it.

Considering Hartwell's thought-problem, when I look back on my experiences with my teacher-students, I must acknowledge that he is right: it is easy to remember what they did. I think of Renee's freckled face and red hair when I make her killer BBQ chicken recipe that everybody loves; of Jeaneen, when I attempt to ride the New York City subway, which I navigated for the first time under her guidance; of Alec, now on tour with his band *Acquiesce*, when I hear a driving bass beat; of Pam, when I see a beautifully-rendered sketch, similar to the ones she sends each year for the holidays; of Gary, on a brilliant fall day, hoisting a kick-drum above his head and lugging it across campus to my car, when I sit behind my drum kit, which is really more than half his. I will always smile when I think of Mary arriving at our cramped, hospital-scrubs blue classroom on the third floor of Donnarumma Hall with an Old Navy bag overflowing with balloons. Of course, I remember Angela, for the essay that prompted this article obviously, but also for being the only eyebrow-ring-wearing, women's-studies-minoring, staunch Republican that I know.

As readily as I recall what they did, it is that much harder to articulate what they taught me, which is certainly why Hartwell calls on us to try to tell these stories. Still now again, long after I first held Angela's paper, two full years after I participated in Mary's balloon animal lesson, I am remembering—not only in the sense of recalling those moments but also in the sense of putting them together again and for the first time—and, through remembering, I am continuing to learn.

* * *

My admission to Angela—that I wanted to write about what she shared with me—I now see as the culmination of a much longer process of coming to accept writing as meaningful to me, of seeing myself almost as much as a *writer* as a writing teacher.

Hartwell's suggestion that we learn by telling stories about ourselves as learners is not, of course, new in our field. We can trace it back at least as far as Flower and Hayes and others who championed meta-cognitive strategies of learning. We can trace it all the way up through

Elbow and the expressivists, through Fulwiler and the journalers, to the current interest in narrative inquiry and methodologies. And yet, it feels as though we haven't fully explored its potential for ourselves. Specifically, while we might all agree that telling stories about themselves as learners is a good way for students to learn, it is not as clear that we believe our own writing is truly the way that we still learn. It might be the way we purport to teach others in our field something we have *already* learned; it is certainly how we compete for jobs, tenure, promotion, prestige. But can we really claim, those of us who demand it of our students every day, that writing is how we too make sense of our relationship to what matters?

I was taught well—by Pat Hartwell and others—that we are *all* writers. If anything encapsulates the expressivist legacy, the firm conviction that everyone is a writer certainly fits the bill. From the beginning, I embraced these expressivist principles wholeheartedly when it came to my students, adopting the textbook approaches in my classes: Brief freewriting to start discussion. Provocative writing prompts to promote invention. Writing logs and journals to synthesize and integrate class material. And I always (because we know this is part of the deal) wrote with my students. But in all that time, it never occurred to me that I too was becoming a writer, that my students were teaching me to write, that they would lead me to ask myself why *I* write, what moves *me* to work out ideas on paper.

* * *

Early each semester, I ask my students to finish this thought: "When writing is hard for me, it feels like. . ." . . . shelling pecans on the front porch of my grandparents' house. Sunday afternoons from late summer to early fall (to the extent that there is such a thing in South Louisiana—more like from blistering heat to merely sweltering), Willie, John Robert, and I would be handed paper bags and sent out to the front yard to gather pecans. Now I'm sure I would think of it as backbreaking work, but then it seemed more like an Easter egg hunt. The smooth brown nuggets littered the walkway, secreted themselves in the nooks and crannies of oak tree roots, and hid out beneath the ligustrum bushes. I never did figure out whether there was a way to tell, simply by looking at its shell, whether a particular pecan would prove to be a tough nut to crack. As I dropped them by ones and twos into the bottom of the sack, each seemed as good as the next.

I was usually the last one to find a spot on the porch because Willie and John Robert were both older than I was by a few years, so their hands were bigger, which meant fewer ground-to-sack transfers, and because they were boys, which in retrospect may have made no

difference at all but at that time and in that place it was presumed to explain a lot. When she heard us clambering up on the porch, Maw-Maw would come to the screen door with two more sacks for us—one for halves and one for pieces—and three pairs of nutcrackers so that we could get to work.

In the beginning, it was easy: Pick a pecan, any pecan, position the nutcracker just above the nut's black collar and squeeze, applying even yet decisive pressure. Too far up and you'll have to dig the meat out, which renders pieces worthy of a sweet potato casserole but not halves good enough for show. Too hard or too soft and you'll crush it, which meant that you either sacrificed the whole nut or you spent a tedious couple of minutes trying to separate shell from meat—and that never really worked out anyway. Most of the time, you wound up just throwing that one to the squirrels.

Early on, you had your pick of pecans. If one shell was wet or otherwise old and generally ornery, it just got thrown back into the bag in exchange for a drier, fresher, more cooperative one. This system worked out pretty well, and tended to yield nice, symmetrical pecan halves, until about halfway down the bag. Then the ratio of stubborn-to-generous pecans suddenly shifted and more often than not, you found yourself cajoling, squeezing, and prying the meat from the shells (when you could crack them open at all).

Making your way through the last third of the bag was the least pleasant part of the afternoon. Each leftover was tougher than the last, and every nut required careful scrutiny for stray shells. At about this point, my dad would often sit down beside me, pick up one of the nutcrackers that Willie or John Robert had left dragging on the porch (since they were either finished or had long ago lost interest), and set to work on the worst offenders. Some of the time he managed to extract a perfect half, but a lot of the time he too wound up with the shattered remains of a recalcitrant pecan. As we shook pecan remnants from our hands into the bag marked for pieces, we would play a game of where-will-this-pecan-end-up. With the halves, that game was easy, because they were always for company—battered, toasted handfuls set out in crystal dishes or a batch of Maw-Maw's silken pralines carefully packed into a Christmas tin. But the pieces were the workhorses. They formed the bulk of the filling for the pecan pies or the salty bite for the rice dressing at Thanksgiving. My dad would say, still, that the pecans in their respective bags served different purposes, but that they were equally useful. There's no denying, though, that some were more beautiful than others.

* * *

Working this year with an independent study student named Gary (he of the kick-drum image), I see that my students and I are engaged in parallel struggles. Gary is a musician and a reluctant language-user; I am a storyteller and a frustrated musician. After one particular discussion about the relationship between language and music, I logged on to my email account to find this message from him waiting for me:

Many times I find myself struggling to express myself with words. I am almost never happy with the words that I choose in a conversation or on a page.... I have walked away from many conversations with people frustrated at my inability to make someone really understand what I am feeling or thinking. I do believe (maybe because I am forced to) that there are emotions/thoughts that could never be fairly portrayed with words.... [S]omething is always lost in the translation from person to words. I think that is why the most profound experiences in our lives are often silent.

Sometimes I wonder if I've ever really said anything. I mean this in the most profound sense, if I've ever really expressed a piece of myself with words. I feel like I am comfortable doing that with music, much more so than with words.

I just wanted to write this to you.

When words fail me, I usually find myself back in a moment. Upon reading Gary's message, I wound up again at our family's camp. Here's what I wrote to Gary:

My brother brought his new girlfriend, whom I adored, to the camp to spend the weekend with us. As soon as we arrived, the three of us headed to the grocery store. While we shopped, she let me wear all of her rings, about 6 or 7 of them, on the condition that I remember to give them back to her before we went swimming. (You can see where this is heading.)

Once we got back to the camp, I sprinted for the bayou and dove in. Of course, the second I hit the water, I felt the rings sliding off into the muck. I popped up, panicked and unable to breathe. I was mortified.

When my brother realized what had happened, he dove in after me, and he spent at least the next hour plunging ten feet down and coming up with handful after handful of crud. By this time, I had climbed out of the water and was shivering on the dock, with no expectation that the rings would re-appear but with every hope that I might disappear.

Years later, I said to him, "What in the world made you keep going back under, when it was clear those rings were gone for good?" I heard a sad smile in his voice, from across an entire continent, and he said one thing: "Your poor face."

So, while I understand your point about the inadequacies of language, for me, trying to express a piece of myself (as you put it) through language is such a supreme gesture of hope, even if much of the time I come up with a handful of sludge.

Writing allows me to re-enter the same conversation again and again, each time from a slightly different angle, with the hope that I'll get it a little closer to right. That sense that you wrote about, where you leave a conversation feeling like there was something more or different you wanted to say—that is *precisely* what drives me to write.

But I'll admit it's an imperfect system.

* * *

Growing. Pain. I had not appropriately calculated—when I began teaching, when I began writing—how much pain would surface through them both.

In her book *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, Mary Rose O'Reilley writes of the folk art she began collecting when she worked as an arts-and-crafts instructor at a psychiatric hospital: "The artwork people made and gave me was strange and beautiful. It *had* to be made. I like art that has a feeling of 'I had to make this or die. I had to make this so badly that it didn't bother me that I don't know color theory'" (40).

As Angela used that essay to reclaim and re/member her own trauma, so too I take the opportunity now, as I draft this article, to reclaim and re/member my own. There is little space to admit that teaching, while often beautiful, while certainly a privilege, causes such pain, that the measure of responsibility catches in my chest like the thick bayou air, uncomfortably familiar. And that we, as practitioners, might need to write so that we too can compose a narrative that sends us back to the classroom each semester with some shred of hope left intact.

I have struggled with this essay for two years now. Some days I am not certain I want to write it at all. I would prefer not to say out loud some of the things I have admitted in the course of it. Maybe Gary is right, that I should let the profound experiences simply be. Why try?

Because the risks of not-saying, at this moment, as O'Reilley suggests, seem more frightening. I have to make this or die. Maybe not die today, tomorrow, next semester or the year after that. Maybe not in any recognizable way. But slowly. One student at a time, One class at a time. A thousand little deaths.

* * *

One afternoon, as I urged Gary to write, he asked why I had ever assumed writing would matter to him. When Gary is wrapping his mind around a thought, he takes a deep breath, closes his eyes and reads each syllable, it seems to me, slowly and deliberately, from the insides of his eyelids. Finishing, he looks up for confirmation. "I do that," he explained once, "to help me focus, because I can't concentrate with all the visual stimuli around me."

That's why I thought writing would matter to him. Moments in a day move past so quickly. Writing slows them down. It freezes the frame. While we may not always expect to find what lurks in the background, our view of the world changes once we see what is actually there.

Ultimately, I read Angela's response ("that's so nice") and Gary's frustration ("sometimes I wonder...if I've ever really expressed a piece of myself with words") as a call to be heard. Through writing, I can express to my students, in ways that I can't always articulate in the moment, "I heard what you said, and it changed me." Considering what I have learned from Angela, from Mary, Gary, and others, I realize what a shame it is that we have such limited opportunities to tell stories about ourselves as learners. If Hartwell is right, if that truly is how we learn, then there are precious few occasions in the course of a school day when anyone really gets a chance to do that. Teachers, positioned as subjects-supposed-to-know, pressed by the ever-increasing crush of content mastery, are certainly not supposed to be telling *stories* about *learning*. Students, whom we might think have more opportunities to tell such stories, are too often in the position of having to demonstrate mastery, expertise, certainty, whether or not they feel master, expert, or certain. There is really very little space to re/member, to crack things up, break them apart, put them together for the first time or put them back together again. To actually learn, that is.

* * *

When I told my mother about the alligator, her response—that she "wasn't there that day"—encapsulates her entire parenting philosophy, which was one of anticipation, a strategy of pre-figuring needs before they were even uttered. There was no call to be heard; in fact, there was barely occasion to speak. My father, on the other hand, operated on a paternalistic intuition, secure in the notion that, when danger truly loomed, he would know it, we would be ok, and we would learn from it. Each night when he tucked me in, with a pat on my belly, he would say, "Call if you need." As he went to flip off the light, he would turn back and, with a twinkle in his eye, he would caution, "But not too loud." I have plumbed many murky depths with my father, and each time he has shepherded me home, not by turning me away from the dangers, but by talking me through them, quietly and calmly.

At a recent conference, during the question-and-answer segment following a presentation on my and Angela's re/membering, an audience member posed one simple, straightforward question. He asked, "Beth, what happened to Angela?"

I had trouble answering this question, even though I am still in fairly regular contact with her—maybe because the short answer seemed

too simple; the long answer, too complicated. In hindsight, I interpret the question to be one, ultimately, about Angela's safety, about her well-being. That picture of me in the marsh grass would be part of a very different narrative if my leg had been chomped off in the midst of the photo shoot. So too, the audience needed to know, Is Angela OK?

Periodically, as I have revised this draft for publication, I have sent it to Angela for her general comments. Shortly after the presentation, I wrote to Angela, asking her to think about what she would have said. In her response, she captures the tension between risk and safety in a way that reconciles, in my own mind, my parents' opposing reactions to the peril I faced unknowingly so many years ago and that teaches me once again how to be in the world with others:

As for what happened to Angela, well, she set some very high standards and fixed an impossible ideal in her mind that she has taken much time and energy to deconstruct. Writing my mastery essay was the first real step that I took in order to heal. It's an essay that I send to other people to read as they attempt to reach inside themselves and feel what is deep down, but an essay that I, myself, cannot read straight through.... I've taken some huge risks in breaking down walls I don't remember building, but they have been guided risks. So when people ask you what happened to me, you can tell them that I'm remembering how to take risks on my own, and relearning how to live.



Elizabeth Boquet teaches at Fairfield University in Connecticut.

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