

JAEPL, Vol. 21, Winter 2015–2016

OUT OF THE BOX

My Mom's Letter

Robert M. Randolph

I grew up in a poor family. We had an outhouse and a well with a hand pump. The house was heated with a kerosene stove. We did not own a car. My mom did not complete the first year of high school. My dad worked in a mill. It took me years of schooling not to use “ain’t,” or to say “them” for “dem.” We weren’t stupid in my family, just uneducated.

I liked to read and did well in high school, well enough to get a scholarship at a college with a work-study program, which allowed me to work in a factory to pay for most expenses. I read a lot and wrote well, well enough to get a teaching assistantship at a state university, from which I earned an MA and PhD. That was years ago.

At the point of writing this, I have been a Fulbright Scholar twice, been Honors Professor of The Year at a large state university, published individual poems, stories, essays, and a prize winning book of poems. I’ve been teaching at the college level since 1966. Even while working in the post office during the late 70s/early 80s, I taught part time. I’ve taught on campus, on military bases, at industrial sites, abroad, and in prisons, courses ranging from freshman composition to graduate technical and business writing. I am currently Writer-in-Residence and Chair of a Department of English at a college. Reading and writing have been good to me.

In addition to the BA, MA, and PhD in English, I also have an MA in Religious Thought, and an MA in Counseling. In all of that I have not forgotten how I started out. For years I carried around a letter from my mother, about four pages, handwritten, that contained only two complete sentences—the rest was sentence fragmentation. It was a beautiful letter, one of the last she wrote, a loving letter, full of detail about family and friends—written by one who as not stupid, just uneducated.

I believe we all carry the treasure of our individuality, which also involves our individual “voice,” our personal “metaphor bag,” as one of my teachers, the novelist John Gardner, used to say. When working with a student, Dr. Gardner would seem to be chatting aimlessly, until he understood the student’s “metaphor bag,” and then all of a sudden he and the student seemed to have grown up in the same neighborhood, now talking deeply about something.

These days the idea of the world as one neighborhood bears pondering. When I was in Finland as a Fulbright Scholar, one of my students asked me, “What do you Americans want from the rest of the world?” He also asked, “What is your soul in America?” I said I didn’t know, because we are a complex population; but sincere questions like that crop up, with good reason, and deserve answers. What is our idea of community? What are our values?

In teaching I try to create colleagues, others who can engage with informed articulateness in the conversation we all need to hold, in this world neighborhood, to work on pressing issues of the human community. In working with a student, I start with the individual treasure, listen for and appreciate the learned metaphor bag, and then approach traditional (and genuinely profound, at the deepest level) composition ideas like grammar, syntax, organization, writing from both the heart and the head, and following the dogs off into the woods—as Donald Murray says.

I lost my mom's letter, probably in some move from one state to another. I'm glad she wrote it, and I read it, and it mattered in my thinking. Whenever I read it, I felt closer to her, felt her there. That's the idea of writing, making things matter in words, bringing a presence into them.



Final Journals

Robert M. Randolph

Their journals stun me
with honesty. I watch the sun go down.

A dog barks.
Night wind opens a book.
I sit by a simple window, one pane of glass.

The air inside my Aalto vase
forgets its last secret.
I read the journals again.

I am filled with silent tunnels
and always want to be.

In the face of this writing
let trombones play for swans,

let Kansas fall in love with the Verrazano Narrows Bridge,
let all things interconnect with love.

Thank you all, all who do,
for writing from your hearts.

