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More than a Clean, Well-Lighted Place

BY SCOTT PETERSON

I am sitting in a downtown coffee shop in a small city in southwest Michigan. The building sits on a triangular piece of land between two busy streets, and the traffic moves around it as if it were a round stone in a smoothly flowing stream. Late afternoon sun pours through the long windows in front of me, bounces off the walls, and fills the room with a bright, clean light. A pen lies on top of a yellow legal pad filled with scratched out words. Books and white pages of typed prose litter the table in front of me. It is a perfect place to write, and when I look up for an instant from my work, a surprising thought flashes through my mind: I am, at this very second, fulfilling a fantasy that I have carried in the back of my head since I was a freshman in college over two decades ago.

Ever since I read *A Movable Feast* and *The Sun also Rises*, I've always wanted to be a café writer. Nothing, and I mean nothing, seemed finer than to sit in a clean, well-lighted place drinking cup after cup of French roast coffee (penrods in the evenings) served by waiters in white aprons while I scratched out in my notebook short stories, an occasional novel, and insightful essays much like this one.

And that is exactly what I am doing at this very moment. I am sitting in this hard chair, hunched over a table, pen in hand, putting something together that, if I am lucky and if I work really, really hard, may climb out of the darkness of my notebook and see the light of day in a real, live magazine. I am not scratching around in my journal pretending to be Hemingway or correcting papers from one of my college classes or writing a report for a school committee. I am actually deeply involved in the writing process, the same process used by real writers since the beginning of time.

I have learned an important lesson from all this: Fulfilling my long-held fantasy of being a café writer is not all that it's cracked up to be. My head throbs from a headache the size of a watermelon, my eyes

ache from the intense pressure of reading of one draft after another, and my blood pressure is up 10 points because of the frustration that comes from tearing words from my mind and wrestling them into the right order on the page. Despite the ideal working conditions, the good coffee, the bright, clean light, writing is just plain hard work. Hemingway never gave me a clue about how difficult this job really is.

But I can't say I regret even one second of the whole process. Despite the stress and frustration that comes with the territory, I can't imagine any other activity being as worthwhile as what I am doing at this instant. Writing, like any other skill worth acquiring, is not a spectator sport. Just as the best way to learn how to ride a bike is not to study the manual but to jump on the seat and start pedaling, the best way to learn to write is not to read books about the writing process but instead to pick up a pencil and write in a serious way. There is just no other way to experience the joys of writing. Teachers need to get down and dirty, to pick up a pen and go through the process of getting their ideas to come out clearly on paper right along with our students.

Scott Peterson has been a teacher and educator in the Mattawan Consolidated Schools for more than 20 years. He is also a teacher-consultant for the Third Coast Writing Project and teaches writing classes for teachers at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. Mr. Peterson is co-author with Connie Weaver of the book Theme Explorations: A Voyage of Discovery and has published essays in various educational journals.

Being an active participant in the writing process on a personal level adds a whole different dimension to our teaching and pays big dividends in the classroom as well. Writing alongside our students gives us an authenticity we can achieve no other way. No longer are we sitting on the sidelines playing the passive role of armchair quarterback. Instead, we are down in the trenches alongside our students, modeling and sharing strategies, and figuring out together this complex and mystifying act of writing. Writing along with our students, in other words, is not a luxury but a teaching strategy that has a huge impact on our students' performance. It demonstrates beyond words that writing is not just a subject taught in school, but something practical used by someone they admire. In a nutshell, it elevates the teacher to the status of practicing writer.

Writing with students also gives us an understanding of the process that could never be achieved if we merely stood on the sidelines and watched while our students slogged their way through the process. To start at one end of the writing process with a vague, unshaped idea and to come out the other end with a fully formed piece that is of interest to others provides insight and knowledge about the process that can

be achieved only by doing, not talking about doing. Before we can truly be effective teachers of writing, not only do we have to talk the talk, but we must walk the walk alongside our students.

It is late now, and the sun has long ago disappeared behind the downtown buildings. I have drained the last of my coffee and put my pens, papers, and notebooks back into my bag. My head still aches, and I am not at all convinced of the quality of the writing I produced this evening. I am sure of one thing, though: It is not the place, clean and well lighted or not, that matters. The place, the quality of light, the favorite pens and special notebooks are merely tools that ease the pain or add some small pleasure to the act of writing. The key is the process itself, of writing as writers write. We can't teach writing without being an active participant in the writing process ourselves anymore than a driver's ed teacher can teach driving without being an active driver himself. To teach writing without ever having felt like a writer simply can't be done. To be actively involved with the process on a personal level enlarges our understanding of writing and makes us all better teachers of writing. There is just no other way we can fully understand the writing process.