



The best teachers of writing are writers themselves, witness the writing of our Summer 2000 Fellows

Make it Matter

I spent the first day of summer in an in-service. While other teachers had "flexed out" of this day, I found myself feeling trapped inside our district's massive high school. Not enthralled by a workshop that sounded too much like all the others, I was fortunate to sit at a student desk that had been written on.

The handwriting was small and neat, just one sentence, overflowing with voice and oblivious to convention. I wondered if its writer had once been a student of mine. I may have once bored - or inspired - her to the point that she needed to write on the desk a message from the heart.

She sat near the back of the room and rarely smiled, and when she spoke it was quiet and faltering, as if she were more afraid of being right than being wrong.

When a poem was read aloud in class, she would start reading before she was told and finish long after the rest of the class, lingering over the words as though it might hurt to look away from the page.

Never daring to raise her hand, she seemed to ignore the ensuing conversation. Mostly she would stare intently at the text or absently out the window. Occasionally she would look

up, as if a question or comment caught her ear, as if she might be ready to finally be heard, to share a little portion of her soul. But when the teacher looked her way, she would instinctively avoid eye contact and return her gaze to the comforting page.

The teacher, not wanting to single her out, rarely called on her. He and other teachers considered her a bright enough girl, very shy, but never a problem in class. "We could sure use more like her," they said. So the teacher didn't notice as she wrote her best piece of the year on her desk:

"When have you ever not loved the pain of love?"

I don't know who wrote it on the desk. I certainly don't know if the author was a girl or if she was quiet. Maybe he or she was loud and disruptive and never even listened to the poems that were read aloud in class. What I do know is that this student wrote a powerful poem right there on a desk. A poem that was infinitely more interesting than the in-service workshop to which I was not paying attention.

Brought back to the reality of the in-service, I began my normal in-service self-reflection. Why do I often feel either painfully bored or completely incompetent when surrounded by other teachers?

Either I'm not doing enough of what others are doing, or I just don't care about some issues that cause other teachers to raise their voices and debate for hours. Am I in the wrong field? Why am I so interested in a single sentence written on this desk?

As I start to sort through these questions, I notice they keep coming back to the student. And so I realized that my focus is on the student. Right where it should be.

How often has this desk writer (and many other students) felt as I do at in-services? How often do our kids feel out of place, not good enough, and just plain bored? How can we reach these students? And how can we encourage students to express themselves in such simple, beautiful language?

In our better moments, we do try. We do try to teach content and use effective, "approved" methods while keeping students as our focus. Just as something inspired a student to write with such feeling on a desk, we can be inspired by finding models and mentors that we agree with.

Ralph Fletcher, for instance, inspires and instructs in his book *What a Writer Needs*. He uses a brilliant metaphor, "freezing to the

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face," to describe the fear students (and we) can feel when writing without confidence and support. He describes the need for mentors and a love of language. He gives practical examples and definitions of leads, endings, voices, setting, and other tools of writing. But throughout his book he keeps the focus on students. We can help them most, he says, by letting them decide what matters: "You learn to write by grappling with a real subject that matters to you" (p. 4).

Or read about writing workshops, developed by Nancie Atwell and others. The workshop approach requires student-centered environments where children feel free to take risks. The workshop gives students the freedom to choose topics and genres and methods of publication. The workshop works best when teachers write and work with their students. And the workshop understands that students need to have control over their learning to make it matter: "Learning is more likely to happen when students like what they are doing."

I like Fletcher and Atwell because they keep the focus on kids. One way they do this is by remembering that we're not so different from those we teach. We sat in their seats, sometimes scared, sometimes confused, sometimes inspired. I truly believe that as soon as we forget those feelings we stop helping kids learn.

In our faculty room (not usually the best place for inspiration) the following quote hung on the bulletin board for more than a year:

"They won't care what you know until they know that you care."

Like the writing on the desk, I don't know who said it. I just know that it defines what matters to me as a teacher. What matters is

making a difference to the kids I teach. What matters is creating an environment that values young people and their ideas.

So as my in-service day ends, I realize it was not a waste of time. If in every professional development setting I find one thing that inspires me the way the desk-poem did, I will keep improving as a teacher. If every year I inspire one student to turn desk-writing into a piece to be kept and shared, I will have made a difference, and that's what matters.

- by Joe O'Brien
'00 Bucks Writing Fellow



Legacies

I sit on the soft couch in the cramped living room, straining to keep up my end of the conversation on one of my infrequent visits to my Great Uncle Francis. A familiar, ancient smell permeates every object in the room: the old jigsaw puzzle on the card table, the baby grand piano stacked with Gilbert and Sullivan scores, the family photos covering all four walls and shelf tops. We have already discussed his favorite topic at some length: financial investment philosophy - not my topic of choice but one that taps into the extraordinary intellect of this retired banker. When I reach 100 years of age, I hope some great niece or nephew has the courtesy to listen to whatever I might have on my mind.

A Baby Ben clock ticks with agonizing slowness on the mantle-piece, reminding me that I need to get home, cook dinner, help the kids with homework, but Uncle Francis has, as usual, something important to say and I'll just have to stay until he works his idea through. We've moved on to the topic of our vast, close family:

cousins, deceased grandparents, his parents, and then he makes the point that he has been building to for the last five or ten minutes.

"When you get to be my age, it is satisfying to consider the wealth passed on from one generation to the next - not the material wealth, but the cultural capital: the educational and spiritual values that my parents and their parents passed on to their children, and to their children's children."

"Cultural capital." What a fascinating idea. I mull over this notion as I drive home, as always a bit more enlightened than I was before my visit. What has been my cultural inheritance, my birthright, just by virtue of having been born into the family I happened to land in?

The Economist

Grandmother Ardis sets the bowl of apple rice, a sweetened concoction with cinnamon and sugar, on the table. My sisters and I catch each others' eyes and suppress our giggles. We've had the same dish each night for the last three, served in progressively smaller bowls. We'll see it again tomorrow unless some brave soul polishes it off once and for all. Sticky, gummy, old rice - sweet and spiced, sickening. We hate it.

"Don't waste food! Be grateful for plenty," is the softly unspoken message. During the early years of her marriage, Ardis accounted for every penny she spent, at her husband's insistence. Three cents for stamps, 47 cents for milk and eggs, \$5.27 for the electric bill. Grandfather worked for Chase Manhattan Bank and eventually amassed a nest egg that yielded them a cozy retirement in Florida, where we boisterous grandchildren loved to visit. But the larger bank account

didn't matter. Grandmother still tracked every cent, still put out the apple rice in progressively smaller bowls. When some worthy cause came along, however, she'd spend.

"Here, Judy, take this \$1,000 towards your trip to France, with my blessings. Do some volunteer work there. Come back changed!" So I did.

The Artist

Grandmother Becky, with her snow-white hair and her small boxy feet that look as wide as they are long, throws back her head when she erupts in laughter, just the way I do now. Dressed in her favorite Hawaiian print dress, she dabbles in oil painting, favoring views from her cabin in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey next to the dark cedar water of the Rancocas. Rancocas and Rebecca sound almost the same in my mouth. One year, when she was sixteen, she memorized a poem a week. She kept a fat notebook full of her favorites, such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "The Explorer," and "Moon Madness." As a young mother, she continued to memorize poems while she washed the dishes and recited them to her four children, then later to her grandchildren.

"Hard as it may be to believe," my Aunt Carolyn has told me, "your father and I and John and Chris never squirmed on long car trips. We were entranced by her poetry." Obviously my father got his love of literature and reading aloud from his mother, who got it from her mother, who got it from

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The Thinker

"Here, let's try this one." We cluster around the worn out easy chair, jockeying for the best view over Dad's shoulder of the logic puzzle. "Mr. Jones, Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith are, not necessar-

ily respectively, a teacher, a doctor, and a baker. Mr. Jones never works on Tuesdays. The baker is not Mr. Brown. Mr. Smith and the doctor are neighbors..." and we're off. Dad makes the boxes and we fill in the clues until we have nailed the solution. We love these puzzles, and any other math game Dad can cook up - something fun to do after dinner.

He is that rare kind of intellect that knows as much about literature and music as he does about science and getting a spaceship to Jupiter, his professional line of work. His help on science projects guaranteed an "A," not because he did the work for us, but because we actually learned some real science under his tutelage.

As a child, I was convinced he was a genius.

The Lover

Jean can't keep herself from smooching her husband every time he says something smart or clever. She dotes on him, finds his socks when he can't find them, knows where his glasses are, his keys, the book he's reading. All day she is his helpmate. "It works out," she explains simply. "He gets what he needs and I get what I need."

When grandchildren come to visit for three days for "time alone with Gr and Gr," she keeps a detailed list of every activity they do together "Friday: caught crabs in the pot off the dock and let them go again, biked to the park and fed the swans stale bread, sailed across the bay and hiked to the public beach, rode the waves all afternoon, ate dinner at the Peking Buffet, told riddles on the car ride home." It's like summer camp for two. Her grandchildren adore her, her children adore her, and her husband adores her, because she really knows how to pay attention and to love.

When I was a kid growing up, my friends used to ask me in tones tinged with disbelief and obvious envy, "Is your mom *always* this nice?"

"Yeah," I'd have to say. "Always."

So who am I? I may not serve leftover rice four days in a row, but I do consider how I spend my money with great care and deliberation. Do we really need to eat dinner out? Do I have to have that new dress? I pride myself on my frugality and thrift, my skill at saving money for the important stuff. A legacy from Grandmother Ardis? Probably. But surely my artistic talents are my own, aren't they? My drawing ability, my love of poetry and language, my facility with words. They must be uniquely mine. But if no one had read to me when I was little, no one had recited poetry to me, no one had taken me to plays, would I still have those gifts? Can I take credit for my intellect, my strong performance in school and college, my success in my career choices, my ability to analyze and think? Or am I my father's daughter in these strengths as well? And in my ability to love - my passionate attachment to my husband, my tendency to demonstrate that affection with a peck on the cheek and a quick hug at the least provocation, my dotting attention to my children - am I not mirroring my mom's acute concern for her family? Am I the originator of my own talents and special qualities of character, or are they the "cultural capital" I have inherited from those who brought me here?

The answers don't matter, really, but the mandate is clear: my job is to pass the gifts on, hand them down, keep the simplicity, the creativity, the literacy and the love flowing on for future generations.

**-by Judy Asselin
'00 West Chester Writing Fellow**

A Place for Talk in a Writers' Workshop

I find that my students are my best teachers. Over the last three years, they have taught me a great deal. However, one lesson has come through loud and clear: students need to talk before they write. Although I found this idea revolutionary, Lucy Calkins has been writing about talking and listening for years. In her book, *Living Between the Lines* (1991), she says that shared stories hold classrooms of writers together. Donald Graves, Ralph Fletcher and Barry Lane have all written about the importance of storytelling. I stumbled upon it last year when my fifth graders showed me how necessary it was for them to talk before attempting to write.

Time wasted: talking with my students

In the past, on Monday mornings, my classroom (usually a room full of energy) was sleepy. Our schedule demanded that writing be taught first thing, but my students were not ready to write and, truthfully, I was not yet ready to teach a mini-lesson. So I would close the door and we would talk. It became our classroom tradition. The first thirty minutes of the week were devoted to large group talking and listening. The topics usually were weekends, families, pets and friends. I enjoyed this time immensely because I got to know my students. I felt guilty, however, about stealing valuable writing time in order to have our chats.

As the months wore on, I felt as though I were falling behind in my curriculum. I decided to sacrifice the Monday morning gab sessions. One Monday morning, I simply began a mini-lesson. My students were not pleased. They begged to tell a weekend story. Just one, they pleaded, but I re-

fused. I conferenced that week as usual but it was not a good week for writing in our room. Tiffany summed up the situation nicely when she complained in a letter to me that she had writer's block, that everything seemed wrong because no one told stories on Monday. After talking with the class, we decided to reinstate Monday talks. I agreed but put some structure into the sessions. I did not view this time as writing time, but rather as time necessary to maintain a positive classroom community. Although we were building a safe, comfortable classroom environment, I never realized that this was, indeed, writing time.

A new model for morning chat: Headline News

The new structure took on a name, Headline News. As students entered the classroom on Monday mornings, they wrote personal headlines about their weekends. The rules were that the students had to have the headlines posted on sentence strips before the day started. The headlines had to not only be true but also creatively written. As attendance and lunch count drew to a close, the class began to buzz about what they knew was soon to come. Some students would read the headlines and guess the stories behind them, while others would rehearse what they wanted to share with the class.

I would often share. One week my headline was about a weekend trip. It read, "Doylestown Woman Lost in New Jersey, Sustains Self on Tootsie Pops." It was not a newsworthy story but my students hung on my every word as I told about the bag of Tootsie Pops and the adventure of being so lost that even a McDonald's could not be found for dinner. Most of the fifth graders were excited about hearing tales of my life

outside room N-3, but I noticed that a few students were writing down ideas and thoughts as I talked. Next another student shared and then another and another. We heard a story for each headline on the bulletin board and each time there were some questions and students were jotting down ideas.

Writers' workshop followed; the weeks ran smoothly. I praised my class for the strong voice I heard in their writers' workshop pieces. I bragged to fellow teachers about the ease with which my students found topics in their lives for writing, and I rewarded organized, focused papers with sixes on the old holistic rubric.

It was not until I began reading about teaching writing that I realized those morning gab sessions were responsible for this excellent writing. I thought we were "stealing" writing time to talk, but we were really practicing the art of storytelling. We were prewriting, planning and thinking. There was no drafting those Monday mornings but we did, most definitely, practice an integral part of the writing process. Because of those sessions, student writing was better organized, contained more distinct focus, had stronger voice and, best of all, my students were thinking like writers.

Thinking like a writer: Topic Selection

In *A Writer's Notebook* (1996), Ralph Fletcher addresses the problem that students face with topic selection. He says there is something to write about everywhere. Finding a topic is simply a matter of learning to live like a writer. "Writers are like other people except for at least one important difference. Other people have daily thoughts and feelings, notice this sky or that smell, but they don't do much about it. All those thoughts, feelings, sensa-

tions, and opinions pass through them like the air they breathe. Not writers. Writers record those things" (Fletcher, 1996). My students began to record thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions in their memories to share on Monday morning.

Initially, I heard a great deal about soccer championships and new pets but as the year progressed, other things, the things that make great writing, found their way into the headlines and then into our writing. I modeled looking for the small things in our lives, thinking like an author.

One Monday, I shared a headline about wearing a backpack. I told about using the backpack on a hike, but I spent the bulk of the time describing the feeling of the backpack and talking about my mind flashing back to college, camp counseling and then high school and elementary school; all times when I wore a backpack. I called wearing my backpack a personal joy. The following week Will shared a headline about a spaghetti dinner. He called spaghetti his personal joy. The precedent had been set: small headlines could make great stories. Soon we had headlines about the way cats look when they are scared and shiny wood floors in relatives' houses. I did not hear students complain, "I have nothing to write about." Instead, we learned that we can find things to write about in just about anything.

From spoken story to
written tale: Voice

Pieces conceived during Headline News almost always were written with a strong voice. This is not surprising given that students were allowed to actually speak the story before they wrote about it. What I did find surprising is that each student found his or her own unique voice. Ralph Fletcher in *What a Writer Needs*

(1993), Donald Graves in *Discover Your Own Literacy* (1991), Barry Lane in *After the End* (1993) all address finding student voice. Keeping writers' notebooks and listening to storytelling are suggested and both are worthy practices, but the most effective method for capturing the elusive student voice is to let them use their voices, literally, to tell stories before they write them. When students talk, they must find their voices in order to tell the story and that voice finds its way into writing, as well.

Sustaining the audience's
attention: Focus and Organization

Because each student could only share for about three minutes, students were forced to evaluate their stories and decide what was important and what was not important. Out of necessity, the pieces became focused. I developed mini-lessons about focus specifically, but most students had already thought about the concept before we ever called it "focus." They were interested in listening to stories that had a point and stuck to the topic in the headline. It came naturally out of talking.

Organization also became important as listeners became more demanding. When the stories were initially told, the storyteller would be interrupted to clarify or reminded to include important facts. Suspense and purposeful ambiguity were born when storytellers tried to make their stories a little different from the others. The order in which the story was told was critical. To further assist in organizing writing, students had the benefit of thinking about the story for an entire day before they had to write it down. During this time, students slowly organized the pieces.

Those thirty minutes every Monday morning became the

most valuable minutes of writing all week. As I read articles and books about writing, I see talking addressed repeatedly. It is akin to reading, writing and listening. I will no longer feel guilty about using writing time for storytelling. Lucy Calkins explains why storytelling is valuable: "Writers need this sense of fullness, of readiness to write, of responsiveness. It can come from storytelling, it can come from shared responses to literature... However it comes, it's terribly important" (*Living Between the Lines*, 1991).

- by Erin Pirnot

'00 Bucks Writing Fellow



What poetry is.

Beyond the confines of a paragraph
Yet confining
In the confines
Of the mind
Where mind
Meets the meter
Of words and becomes
A dance
Hanging in midair and
Confined within
Walls
Of Museums of Never-
Mind.

Author

If my book
Can burn sounds
Like a bomb
Man
You run.
I run it.

- Terry Lynch

'00 West Chester Writing Fellow

"To Read or not to Read"

To read or not to read? For many years I chose not to read for enjoyment. I read because I had to. I went through my childhood wondering, "What is so fascinating about reading? It is difficult, it is boring, it is not fun, and someone is telling me to do it."

Someone was "telling me to do it," but no one showed me how to enjoy it. After reading The Lost Lady, I realize I do enjoy reading beyond the literal level, and it brings a sense of fulfillment to my life. Fulfillment is not something that reading has brought to my life in the past. I have lived a very rich and gratifying life through many things including sports, family, friends, nature, love, animals and my career. Reading a novel just did not seem to have a place in my life. I would read a good book here and there, but nothing seemed to really make a connection for me. My experience with my literature response group and novel The Lost Lady have made that connection.

My group and I were assigned the novel The Lost Lady. I was initially a bit apprehensive because I knew what I read and interpreted from the text would be discussed in a small intimate group setting the following day. Before we read we made some predictions based on the book title and cover and learned a little about the author. "No problem," I thought. I ask my own students to do the same exercise before they read a book. After I had read the first 50 pages, we met in our groups and shared our journal entries, thoughts, questions and insights. As we discussed the book I realized "Hey, I can do this!" I had some of the same questions and comments that my peers did. It certainly

was comforting to know I could understand an adult novel and have a meaningful discussion about what I read. This was all I needed to start my quest as an engaged reader.

I had this epiphany because of the activities and interaction I had with my peers. Reading and having meaningful discussions about the book helped me to make text-to-text, text-to-life and text-to-world connections. As I read The Lost Lady, I used different strategies to help me comprehend the text. I began to take notes in the margins, notes that helped me to remember characters and important events. I used question marks and exclamation points to express my feelings. All the members of our group kept journals that we used to guide our discussions. These strategies helped me engage in what I read. I slowed down and really thought about what I was reading.

During our discussions, I learned so much about the book from different perspectives and understood what I read on a completely different level. Part of my new found love for reading is having these group discussions after reading a book. Thoughts and comments in group setting like "What did you think...", "I like it when...", "The author seems to...", "I did not understand it when...", "Could you believe...", "Why did...", Oh, I get it now..." have made the reading experience much more enjoyable for me. It is ironic that throughout the school year I base my reading program around promoting self-esteem and teaching children to believe that they are readers. In my teaching I use many of the same strategies that we used in reading The Lost Lady. The irony is that I have not taken the time to practice what I preach.

To read or not to read? I now

choose to read. I cannot wait to read my next novel. My next adventure is to read the Harry Potter series with my husband. I have asked him to read it along with me, so I can have someone to ask questions and share my favorite parts. I am excited about finding a certain genre, style and author I can connect with. I am also hoping to become part of a book club, so that I can continue to reflect after I read and also learn from others. A neighborhood book club or a book club with my colleagues would be great. Reading is not difficult, it is not boring, it is fun, and someone has now shown me how to enjoy it. Thanks!

- by Melina S. Henry
'00 Literature Fellow



Projects

Fifty degree weather in February reminds me of house projects and a past love.

Trying to fix water pipes, laying tile in the dilapidated bathroom of his mother's house, our chalky hands, our clothes covered in clay, the family cat, Snowflake, watching us sort through broken tiles.

Several years later, I'm building again. It's a different love and our own living space.

The work is never done. First, it's hanging drywall and doors, then taping all the cracks and seams. This time, I am careful with fragile corners, I take all measurements twice. The result: it's taking a lot less spackle.

Sometimes, I worry that the foundation will shift, that after all the hard work, flaws will show in the kitchen on sunny afternoons. Mark assures me the house settled years ago- I believe him. It's time to paint.

- by Karen Slowik
'00 West Chester Writing Fellow

Being Average

You never thought
Whitehaven, Pennsylvania
could teach you anything, until
you walked into Thriftway saw
the checkout girls standing by
the magazine rack
Their hairsprayed bangs,
chipped pink nail polish,
paging through *Star*, *YM* and
Cosmopolitan.

You breathed a sad sigh of
relief and vowed to thank your
parents for not raising you in a
small town.

You imagine how horrible it
would be to listen to country
music
Or worse yet, to know how to
line dance-

"Could ya, would ya, ain't ya
gonna, if I asked ya would ya
wanna be my baby tonight."
Hee Haw.

Of the girls, you think, "They'll
never go anywhere in life."
The truth is you do have more
options.

The suburban girl with a
dozen radio stations to
choose from, and clothes and
friends and fear. Your parents
paid for college, where's the
job to show for it?

When they were your age
they were going to school and
raising a family, living in a one
bedroom apartment in a part
of Chester you can't remem-
ber.

Before that, your father's
parents struggled to feed eight
mouths, while St. Robert's
nuns volunteered their time to
change and feed and pray.
Your mother's mother worked
in the coat department at
Wanamaker's, speaking Polish

to fellow immigrants, trying to
earn commissions.
The truth is you're only two
generations away from liking
Polka music,
and dancing nights at the
American Legion.

So you decide the checkout

girls are who they are.
Maybe lack of awareness is a
good thing,
and Whitehaven is a safe place
where people who pass through
pass judgement
to justify being average.

-by Karen Slowik
'00 West Chester Writing Fellow

Janie and Charlotte - Gathering Strength

A poem for two voices

Based on Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

It ain't always easy

No, it isn't.

Ain't easy to hush.

To hold my tongue.

It ain't easy to speak up, neither.

Nope.

But Ah know Ah can.

But I know I can.

There's been troubles,

There have been doubts.

lotsa troubles.

Indecision.

There's been pain, too.
But t'ain't no burden.

There's been pain, too.

No burden.

Ah can carry it all,

Carry on

'cause

Ah know

Ah love

I know

my God

mah God,
an' a man

a husband

who truly love me,

Me!

truly love me.

No matter what.

Dat's right.

- by Charlotte B. Dean '00
Literature Fellow

WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING

Arriving at my father's room in the convalescent home, I find him in his usual condition. He is sound asleep. His head and neck are arching backward awkwardly, his mouth gaping open like that of a hungry sea bass poised to swallow the bait. Fortunately for my dad, he is *very* hard of hearing, so his rest goes undisturbed by his own painfully loud snoring. An avid outdoorsman, he proudly proclaims that he is as musical as the drilling of a downy woodpecker on a hollow tree stump. Few would argue *that* point.

Not surprisingly, his roommate does not seem to share my father's appreciation for the "sounds of nature." When his daughter asks him if he would like her to bring a new battery for his hearing aid, he promptly replies with a resounding, "No!...Please, don't!", and he buries his head ever deeper into a pillow.

To *me*, my father's sonic booming is actually a *welcome* sound, even comforting. It has a mesmerizing effect like that of an air conditioner humming in the bedroom window on a muggy August evening. It relaxes the tensed muscles and quiets the frayed nerves like the calming shhhh...shhhh...shhhh...of the gently breaking surf on a secluded Outer Banks shoreline.

The sight and sound of my dozing daddy revive numerous humorous memories. My father was always there for me, willingly entertaining me, **even when he was asleep...**

IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE

While shopping with my mother at Sears and Roebuck, when I was about five years old, I beheld a true miracle. How else could anyone explain the sight of a beach ball hovering above the stream of air

rushing upward from a Hoover canister vacuum cleaner? So impressed was I by this wonder of science that I was compelled to apply what I had witnessed later that same day when I happened to spy my dad sleeping on his back with his mouth wide open. If this nifty trick worked with a beach ball, then *surely* I could duplicate the feel with my aqua cat's eye marble.

Hmm...Maybe my father had inhaled when he should have exhaled. Whatever, I was certain that this could not possibly have been *my* fault as we sped off in an ambulance toward Einstein Hospital where my father had to have the contents of his stomach pumped out. It was a mystery to me why my father was so upset. After all, didn't he *instantly* lose some of the weight he had been trying to work off for weeks? *And* didn't he notice that my aqua cat's eye marble was now even bluer and shinier than ever before? Kindergartners are certainly unappreciated.

COT IN THE ACT

In my early teens, my favorite interests were baseball, Beatles, Beach Boys, and Boy Scouts. Having grown up in a row house section of Philadelphia, monthly Boy Scout camping trips were a welcome change of pace. Better still were the week-long encampments, every summer, at Treasure Island Boy Scout Camp in the Delaware River. My dad was the proud leader of our troop, Troop 104.

One steamy day our troop suffered through a twenty-mile forced march. It was not only a tiring experience, but a monotonous one as well, especially when you consider the fact that the island is only two miles long. That called for a lot of left turns to prevent potential drownings.

At the close of this very active day, my father was eager to "hit

the sack," as he often phrased it. By dusk my father had "sacked out" and was in a deep sleep in a matter of seconds, as usual. While at camp, he fell asleep so quickly every night that he was convinced that Taps contained only 3 notes.

Around midnight, a group of us pulled what we thought, at the time, was a very original practical joke on my father. We were surprised just how stealthily the six of us could transport my father, still asleep in his cot, to an adjacent campsite which was occupied by a *Girl* Scout troop. Even more surprising was the fact that we were able to deposit him in the middle of the female leader's cabin without awakening *her* either. Just imagine how surprised the lady leader was when she awoke and discovered my dad snoring away in her canvas cottage sporting his flashy "I GOPHER YOU!" boxer shorts. I guess she didn't consider it a *pleasant* surprise because a few days later, most surprised of all was our minister when he received a letter from the Boy Scouts of America explaining in detail why our church's troop was forever banned from camping at Treasure Island Boy Scout Camp.

POTTED PLANTS

My father was a Mechanical Engineer. He was an accomplished mason, roofer, plumber, carpenter, and electrician, as well. His favorite source of relaxation was gardening. Miraculously, he was somehow able to produce impressive yields from the sorry soil in our tired back yard.

While home on spring break, my friend Dave and I tilled the soil in preparation for my father to sow his seeds. He then proceeded to plant his standard fare: peas, beans, carrots, cabbage, peppers, and tomatoes. This year's experimental veggie would be asparagus. But first, my dad felt inclined

to recline in his new lawn chair.

Dave, who was fascinated by things "organic," slyly substituted marijuana seeds for the asparagus seeds while my father slept.

When my father awoke, he struck up a conversation with our new next door neighbors, Jim and Mary Jane. Jim was a Philadelphia police officer. Mary Jane was his six-year-old daughter. As they got acquainted, the three completed the planting. They were the model of an efficient Columbian assembly line. My dad poked holes in the soil with his finger. Mary Jane dropped a marijuana seed or two into each crater. Jim, the cop, covered the evidence with some loose soil. Dave and I looked on from the kitchen window with pride and amusement.

A month or so later, my dad leaned on his rake, examining his garden quizzically. "This asparagus grows like a weed, but there are still no spears on it," pondered my dad aloud.

Jim approached my father in an agitated state. "Did you know you have cannabis in your garden?"

My dad, wanting to beat Jim to the punch line, replied with a hint of a grin, "I hope you apprehend them before they start eating the kids in the neighborhood."

"No! Cannabis! Marijuana! Look!", bellowed my dad's new friend as he pointed accusingly at the row of waving weed.

My father's grin dissolved. He immediately began to uproot his hallucinogenic harvest with Jim's help. Jim never did report the incident to his superiors, perhaps because he and his daughter were accomplices. In fact, they actually remained friends. My father invited Jim and his family to dinner that night. Nothing fancy...just *potluck*.

Now, sitting at the foot of my father's bed, I reflect with fondness on the nearly fifty years that he has been my dad, my best friend, and

my favorite entertainer. He awakens and quietly contemplates his situation. Seeing me, he smiles and poses the question that he has often reluctantly asked for many years: "I must have dozed off. What happened while I was sleeping?"

- by Edward A. Renn
'00 Bucks Writing Fellow

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

Up 7th Street

Once again
After a night's rain
Toilets upspewed on the hallways

So I had enough.
Left a note in chalk
An optional assignment
Asked kids to join me
Exchanged angry words
Left on a 1-man strike

And ignored the cell phone
Anger
Emotional blackmail
And dime-store psychology.

School administrators sped up
7th Street

At day's end,
Three porta potties
A contingency plan. Long phone calls
With the director

And a plumber who was there
the next day.

Student Conundrum

What if
Your teacher liked all your writing
But you

Didn't?

And you wonder
If you should love her or fear her
And
If judges dispense justice

Or put people in jail.

-by Terry Lynch
'00 West Chester Writing Fellow

Strange Wisdom

A strange thing is happening to me. I feel, apprehensive, anxious, excited, and I am growing another sense it seems. I am seeing something different in people, specifically men, that is not spoken but exists in the glint of an eye or the turn of the lips in a smile. I don't sense this in all men just a select few, a brotherhood. This extra sense does not grow from potions or pills. It grows from parenthood. I am going to be a father and the world, honestly, is beginning to look very different.

I have yet to see a man not gleam when it comes to talking about his children. It isn't always spoken yet it exists all the while. And I am beginning to feel the sense of pride and disappointment which this journey is bringing for me. Because even I know that it will not all be easy, that there are pitfalls and struggles in all relationships, but everyone tells me, "You will never love anything as much as you love your children." This is what spawns the unspoken glow, the glint in the eye, the turn of the lips. This is what grows a strange wisdom.

Naturally, we look toward our fathers as our role models, but we must also look elsewhere and one of those places may be the literature we are exposed to in our lives. After all, these works are where we look as teachers to instill values in our students. Chinua Achebe has written a novel entitled *Things Fall Apart*. The novel, a powerful tale of native Africans struggling to maintain their culture against the onslaught of 19th century Colonialist forces, is also, more simply, a tragic tale about a father. Recently, I reread this novel and was fascinated by the strength

...continued on p. 10, column 1

with which I identified with the main character, Okonkwo. With some thought, it occurred to me that it was my own impending fatherhood that made Okonkwo's story so intriguing and so different from the first time I read the novel.

Okonkwo is a physically strong, commanding man who is ruled by his pride. He is a classic tragic figure who struggles with his past and lets it determine his future. He is very different from my own father, yet his wisdom carries nearly as much weight as my father's, and it leads me to ask myself: what prompts our decisions as fathers? Despite cultural differences and time, fiction and reality, our reasons remain similar. As fathers, we are concerned with the well being and safety of our children, with a wish to see our children succeed and become strong, independent-minded people. What becomes evident, however, is how we go about teaching the lessons.

My father demanded respect through his silence and perseverance. A determined man, he understood that the survival of his family depended on him. He complained little and relied on his strong faith to carry him and us through the hard times. Okonkwo also exhibits great perseverance, but demands respect with a heavy hand and a hot temper. Achebe writes that "Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye,...was causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness," and so Okonkwo "sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating" (13-14). He also understands the survival of his family depends on him but seems obsessed with molding his sons into a version of himself. And finally, Okonkwo understands that his religion is paramount in the survival of his people and himself, but his decisions with regard to

his personal gods are clouded by his stubborn pride.

Surprisingly, I found myself relating to Okonkwo's character. Despite my father's strong model, I, too, can be quick to anger and have found myself making knee-jerk reactions then staring at my own stubborn pride. Perhaps we can chalk some of it up to youth, but in retrospect I understand that I am struggling to find identity apart from my father. Perhaps what is most frustrating for me is that I don't feel I possess his qualities of calm logic and sound decision making. I am also at odds with my personal God, and like Okonkwo, it seems to be my pride and anger that keep me from a fulfilling relationship with my faith.

While I know the facts, it is the fiction that has brought about this conversation with myself. It is the richness of literature that has sparked this self-examination at a time when I need it most. I look at Okonkwo, and his story only emphasizes how our past comes to bear on our children.

Okonkwo's father, Unoka, was a failure. He was a bad farmer and a debtor. Achebe says that Unoka "was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow." If he came into money, he "immediately bought gourds of palm wine...and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime" (4). Okonkwo was ashamed of his father and at an early age set out to prove himself better than his father. And he did but at a cost. Okonkwo resented his father's failure and weakness and "was ruled by one passion - to hate everything his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and the other was idleness" (13).

I don't want to make the same

mistakes as Okonkwo, and though my father is a solid role model, I have my own past with which to contend. It has done much to shape who I am and I am reminded, thanks to Okonkwo's tale, to check my stubborn pride and revisit my faith. I am also reminded to put away the darker moments of my past and the anxieties that have haunted me not only for myself but for my children. For if I am to teach my children to be strong and independent and loving, they deserve to have the best parts of me every day.

This, I think, is the beginning of the wisdom which will place me solidly on the path to fatherhood. Like my father, I might also become a respected role model, and when other men without children look at me, they may notice a glint in my eye and a specialness in my smile. Okonkwo showed me how things can fall apart. He sparked the self-examination that may help me hold things together.

-by Christopher Carbo
'00 Literature Fellow

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

Utopia

*I could live like that...
walking by the murmuring stream,
crackling leaves as I go,
feeling Autumn's coolness,
settling a harried heart.*

*I could envelop myself in calmness,
and dine on warm cider and fresh
baked bread,
and snuggle under a cozy afghan,
and gaze at the embers of a
glowing fire.*

*I could love the simple life,
and the giggles of innocence,
and unabashed creativity,
and the lessons of a life spent
living.*

- by Rita B. DiCarne
'00 Bucks Writing Fellow

Oprah Winfrey suggests that we write down our thoughts in the form of a gratitude journal. I think that is appropriate for the way I feel about my experiences in the summer Writing Institute 2000.

I AM GRATEFUL FOR:

Having class for only four weeks instead of five.
Having good food in the mornings to get our brains thinking and focused.
Having our day begin at 8:30 instead of the usual arrival at 7:30.
Having an hour for lunch instead of the typical 20 minutes.
Having breaks to go to the bathroom instead of stealing a minute between classes.
Having "socials" so that we could get to know each other...other than as teachers.

I am grateful for:

Learning writer's craft from Ralph Fletcher.
Learning new and clever techniques that are hands-on, practical and fun.
Learning different ways of teaching specific skills including music and gym.
Learning how to use a storyboard to write a story from Peter Catalanotto.
Learning how to make poetry fun using techniques from Julia Blumenreich.
Learning how to give a workshop presentation.

I am grateful for:

Participating in book groups to study different authors and their philosophies.
Participating in study groups to discuss issues, problems, techniques, and getting help with the revision and editing of our work.
Participating in scoring PSSA writing tests to better understand the domain scoring rubric.
Participating in the workshop that taught us about the different magazines and journals that publish teachers' work.

I am grateful:

To: Hilde and Shari for being supportive, knowledgeable, compassionate, caring, sharing, encouraging, thought provoking, good listeners, responsive, fun, and funny.
To: Laura and Melissa for entertaining us with their funny personal stories.
To: Mark, Rick, Matt, Ed, and Joe for providing us with just the right amount of testosterone to keep us from *taking ourselves too seriously*.
To: Laurie, Vicki, Carrie, Jill, and Erin for making us "old veterans" feel young again, and for making us feel like valued members of the teaching profession.
To: Molly and Sheryl for teaching us that their Big Kids are just like our Little Kids. For teaching us that they are grateful for what we do in the lower grades to prepare the students for high school.
To: Andrea, Beverly, Ann, Rita, and Gloria for teaching us that we are never too experienced to learn new tricks. That teaching writing can be taught in the early elementary class, in small remedial groups, or in the music classroom.

But I am most grateful for:

All my new friends here at the Institute who shared their life's work and expertise, their personal lives, their strengths and their weaknesses, their compassion, their support and encouragement, their passion for writing and their love of teaching.
All my comrades, *mi compadres*, who have made this Writing Institute a significant memory to be placed on my time line. They have made these past grueling weeks of papers and research bearable. They made me laugh a lot, think a lot, and learn a lot.

I am grateful to all of my fellow "Fellows."

Thanks again for the Kodak moments, the smiles and the laughter. I will remember this incredibly busy and stressful time in my life as being one of the smartest things I have ever done.

As Always,
Diana

-by Diana Garza Sullivan
'00 Bucks Writing Fellow

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West Chester University
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Making Connections: Educators as Readers & Writers

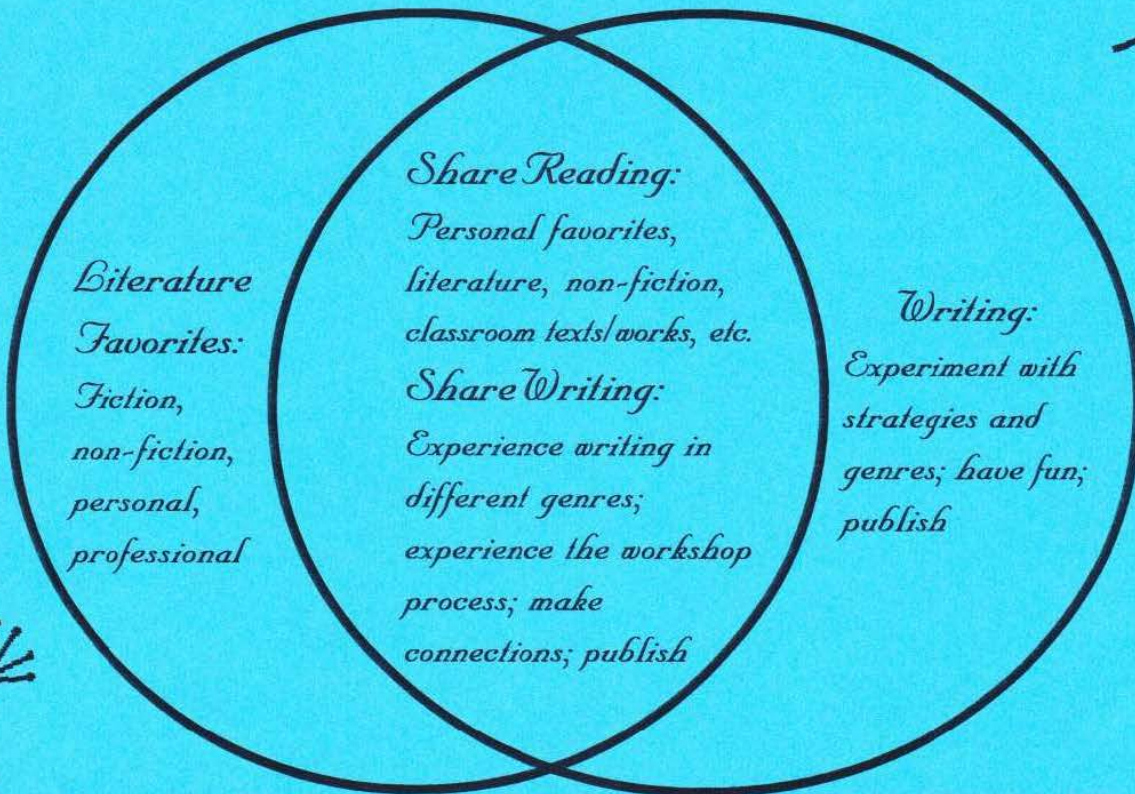
*New Three-Credit Graduate Course: PWP 599-75
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For more information contact Mary Buckelew, Associate Director
Pennsylvania Writing & Literature Project
West Chester University, West Chester, PA 19383
610-436-2998