

KNOW RED INK

Some

STORIES FROM WRITING TOGETHER - WRITING WELL
issue 01, volume 01

march 2011

Introduction

For ten weeks, students in the Writing Together-Writing Well class at the De Paul University School for New Learning participated in a personal narrative writing workshop during class. The aims of this pedagogical experiment – from the point of view of the instructors at least – were many. We hoped to encourage students to embrace academic writing via personal narrative, and to explore the similarities between those two genres. We also hoped to use this direct experience of a community writing method to expose the students to popular education and provoke consideration of the politics of literacy and what it means to be a literate person. Finally, direct experience of the writing workshop was meant to prepare students to engage in their own community writing experience – either as observers, participants, writing teachers, or workshop designers.

In their writings, students examined their prior learning experiences, home lives, writing triumphs and challenges, career struggles and joys – all through the lens of narrative. They shared stories together in the writing workshop and developed their narratives with constructive peer feedback, producing a diverse and inspirational array of stories, samples of which appear in this booklet. For ten weeks, these students have been writing together, and, dare we say, writing well.

– *Steffanie and Janise*



The Kitchen

Rosalba Delgado



The kitchen has always been a kind place to me. It's where I prepare my family dinners; where I listen to my kids tell me stories of how their day went or what happened on the school bus; or where I listen to my boyfriend as he talks to our baby daughter. It's where I begin to clean up and wash dishes, and where my mind wanders. The kitchen is my setting. It's where I let go of my daily worries and focus on me, if even for half an hour or so.

As I add soap to the sponge and let the water run, I begin my therapy, my letting go of my day. With each dish that I wash a worry is erased; with each spoon that I rinse a new thought comes into mind. As I wait for the dishes to dry and wipe the counters, plans are made. All this on my mind, in my head, then I make my way to my desk and write away.



Speechifying

The first time I stood up in front of a group of people to give a speech was in my 10th grade speech class. I was an extremely shy child and the idea of standing up in front of the class and delivering a speech was absolutely terrifying to me. The assignment was to do a five-minute speech without notes. My best friend had taken the class the previous semester and had used the opportunity to do an improvised discussion about how pencils were manufactured. He did his speech while holding a pencil in his hand, giving himself an object to focus on and relieve some of the nervousness. I decided to take up this approach and give a speech on how tennis balls were constructed and the properties associated with tennis balls.

I did a bit of research on tennis balls in preparation so that I could discuss tennis balls for the full five minutes. I also came up with a “hook” that would add some flare to my presentation and maybe help me get over some of my fear. I started the speech with a dissertation on the materials used and the manufacturing process involved in the construction of tennis balls. It was pretty dry material and I presented it as such. When I had calculated that I was past halfway through the presentation, I started discussing the properties of tennis balls and how rubber and compressed air at sufficient psi could come together to make the ball bouncy. I was struggling through with a great deal of stammering, but as I neared the end, anticipating my “hook,” I finally started to loosen up a bit. To wrap up the speech with a demonstrative finale, I tossed the tennis ball and bounced it off of the back wall of the classroom. The plan was for it to bounce straight back to me. I should have rehearsed this part of my presentation. The ball must have hit a crack in the back wall. It careened off on an unplanned flight path and struck a rather unimpressed male student in the back of the head.

I have had to deliver a lot of presentations in my career and I’ve never really gotten over the terror of standing up in front of a crowd of people and delivering a speech. But I did learn not to end my presentations by throwing things at the audience.

Holiday Blitzed?



New Year's Day belongs to my sister Cynthia. My sister Lisa has ownership of Easter. Dad's responsible for Mother's Day. Kim rules Christmas. Oh yeah, and Thanksgiving is my appointed holiday. This lineup is the holiday holy grail for our family. Everyone is assigned the responsibility of hosting the celebration for that day and there are *no* deviations!

We all take pride in our appointments and go all out to make it a special time. In my home, my daughter and I prepare our home and the meals for a week. We plan the menu. We shop for groceries and decor and I always plan to begin my cooking at least three days in advance. Somehow, though, my Martha Stewart gene doesn't kick in until two days before the holiday. We'll call it Frantic Tuesday and I am scrambling to make my grand plan a reality.

Sometimes this scrambling has comical results. Like the time when I doubled the proper amount of rum in the rumballs because I wasn't sure if I had added it. It didn't take long to figure out what I had done. Everyone exclaimed as they entered, "Wow, your house smells like alcohol!" or "What is that smell?" I didn't notice, of course, because I had grown accustomed to the liquor cloud that had been wafting through the house since I made the rumballs three hours prior.

Healthy Lifestyle Choices

During the last 10-15 years I have decided to take control of my health. I have learned to make healthy food choices, as well as how to eat with moderation in order to maintain a healthy weight. I also try to incorporate exercise into my busy schedule at least two to three days a week. I have made these changes because I grew up with several of my family members suffering from health conditions that could have been avoided had they learned that nutrition and exercise would have made a difference to their health. Several of my family members are obese and have developed diabetes II. I knew that I did not want to become another statistic like them. I want to enjoy my life without having to worry that I may have a heart attack because I am overweight or that I have to be on medication. Obesity and diabetes II are diseases that are a result of poor eating habits and the lack of physical activity. It's your body. Make healthy food choices and incorporate some form of physical activity in your life. You will see the difference it will make.

Here are a couple of things I do to stay healthy. When I get to work in the morning, I try to make sure that I fill up my large mug with water. My goal is to drink at least 36 ounces of water a day. When I get home, I try to drink more before the day is over. I make sure that I have three to five servings of fruits and vegetables a day. I prefer to eat whole grains, whenever possible, and I have at least two servings of dairy a day. When it comes to protein, I choose to eat lean or low-fat meat or poultry. I try to exercise at least two to three days a week, if possible. I know what you're thinking. This is not a diet; it's a life time commitment to live a healthy life style. Try it and you will see and feel the difference in your body.

Special Presence

Mary Grisby

It's the summer of 1972 and I just turned six. All I can think about is opening up my birthday presents. My grandfather, "Pop Pop," says he has a very special present for me. He secretly tells me that we will sneak away from my birthday party to open it. My grandfather was always spoiling me and my birthday was the perfect excuse to do it again without fear of my mother scolding him for it.

We snuck outside and to my surprise there was a beautiful red bike sitting on the front porch steps. "Pop Pop, this is the best present I ever had. Can we ride it now?" The bike had red and white tassels in the hand grips, a white basket on the handle bars, and the best banana seat around.



How could I not ride it at that very moment? So we took off the bow and made our way to the sidewalk. I was nervous and excited. This bike didn't have training wheels. I was afraid of falling but my grandfather made sure to hold the seat and steady me. We tried again and again to keep my balance. Pop Pop was so patient. I was losing confidence but my grandfather kept telling me, "Straighten out the handle bars." "Look straight ahead." And I found his instructions helped me to find balance and keep going. We kept this up for about 15 minutes.

A few moments later the most amazing thing happened. I turned around to find my grandfather was not holding me up and I was doing it all on my own. This is when I first learned to ride a bike.

The Blind Leading the Blind

Credell Walls

This is a great story of “the blind leading the blind.” The first time I left the country was in 2004. I took six teenagers and two co-workers on a ten-day excursion to a Peruvian rainforest with the help of an international outfitter. It was the last day for our two-year Green Teen program where the youth learned the basics of entrepreneurship and about tropical plants. One of the youth expressed an interest in what was going to happen with them now that the two years were up. Another said, “Maybe we should see the plants in their natural habitat.” After pondering this idea for a minute I said, “Why not? Although, this has never been done here at the Garfield Park Conservatory before does not mean that it can’t happen.” After the decision was made that we were going to plan this trip, we went on to get OUR first passports. I took them to get their immunizations and spent a lot of money out of my pocket to buy things because money to support the trip came in late.

We did OUR first fundraiser as a group to raise \$30,000. Schools and small foundations donated money. People from the East Garfield Park-Westside community contributed close to \$20,000 over six months to make this trip happen. This experience was very emotional for me because I’ve never had this high level of responsibility and the families trusted me with their kids. The kids trusted me with their lives. I felt very blessed to have found support from different people to aid with this experience.

Four days before we left for Peru the group and I had a farewell celebration. Right before I took the stage to address the audience, a woman walked up to me and gave me \$500 in cash and said, “Keep this anonymous. Please keep this as pocket change and get them whatever they need.” I split the money up between all of us and told them they had more spending cash. As I took the stage, I started to cry when I began my speech because I felt like we had just done the impossible . . . for the first time.

Wanjiro

Jimmy Amutavi

The first time I saw her was at a restaurant in Nairobi, Kenya. I was having a drink with one of my friends who happened to know her.

She walked over to our table to say hi to my friend and then went on to introduce herself to me. “Hi, my name is Wanjiro.” Clearly she was not “Wanjiro” since she was from America and Caucasian for that matter. “Wanjiro” is a name that is derived from one of the communities that belong to the Bantu speaking group in Kenya. “Hi, I’m Brad Pitt,” I said.

Both of us started laughing and right there and then we struck a connection. I could go on and on to talk about her and never come to an end. She is the love of my life now. She is my wife.

