

## How to Turn an Ordinary Floor into an Oceanside Beach with One Hand

### *Field Notes Concerning the Precise Location of the Imagination*

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*All third graders are surrealists, saboteurs, reckless, ready to plunge into the  
deepest abyss, laughing.*

Dean Young, *The Art of Recklessness*

Let's start with an annoying conversation.

AWP 2012: The hotel bar is crowded, because the hotel bar is always crowded. At one table, writers are drinking and swearing and laughing and arguing. The argument is about “pedagogy” and the value of creative writing programs, but really it's an intense display of intellectual one-upmanship. One writer says one thing, and the other—as if on cue—immediately disagrees. They dance back and forth like this until the person arguing “against” the value of writing programs blurts out, “Yeah? Well, you can't teach imagination, can you?”

The conversation fizzles out after this, the air is released as if from some grand balloon. People pay their tabs. It's late. This is boring.

Here's a conversation that haunts me. In the winter in 2007, I was a visiting artist for a middle school in Southwest Detroit. This wasn't for InsideOut (though I had been working there as well and had been for several years). This was during a time when I was always working two or three part-time jobs while finishing up college and beginning grad school, and I was grateful for this extra opportunity. I was to meet with a class of eighth graders once a week for eight weeks.

One week, a kid says to me, “I don't know if I can write poems.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I don’t have an imagination.”

“Sure you do. Everyone does.”

“Not me.”

“Yes. Even you. I’m sure. Look at all the drawings you make.” His drawings were impressive. He had entire notebooks filled.

But he didn’t seem convinced. He said, “Can you teach me how to have an imagination?”

“I don’t have to teach you; you already have one.”

“Well, if I have an imagination, how do I find it?”

Then the bell rang. “We’ll work on this,” I told him as the class gathered their gear and began filing out. I left the school feeling a sense of resolve. Next week: we’re talking about the imagination.

I had a mission.

But there wouldn’t be a next week for him. His teacher called me, just days later, and said he’d been shot. He opened the door to his house to let in a friend who was running from trouble. Someone opened fire. And that’s how abruptly this part of the story ends.

About four years before that, I worked my first residency for Inside-Out. A high school. First day: nothing but awesomeness. Students were enthusiastic, even if only because writing poems meant they didn’t have to be writing essays. They had escaped from the jaws of “real” schoolwork.

Here’s a conversation that baffled me. I had just given the “assignment” and students were digging in to write their poems. Then, a tentative hand raised near the back of the room.

“Yes?” I said.

“Does this poem need a thesis?” she asked.

Then another student raised her hand: “And how many paragraphs does this need to be?”

I guess they hadn’t escaped the essay after all.

The first time I worked with students who weren’t teenagers was at Lessenger K–8. By this time, I’d been with InsideOut for maybe eight years. For this residency, I’d have a seventh grade class, an eighth grade class, and a third grade class. *Third grade*? What was I supposed to do with that? I was dreading walking into that classroom,

but when I got there something amazing happened. They were discussing what they wanted to be when they grew up. It went like this:

“I want to be doctor.”

“I want to be president.”

“I want to be a dolphin.”

There was a smattering of giggles, and I thought that last comment would dislodge the room’s tenuous attention. Instead, it crystallized it. The room was now energized, orbiting that impossible aspiration like some bright, new star.

“No! I want to be a dolphin!”

“I want to be a dolphin, too!”

“Well, I want to be a dragon!”

“Well, I want live on the moon!”

Whatever happened was instantaneous. One after another, whatever possessed the first student to declare her desire to be a dolphin rippled through the room. It was contagious. And soon, this room—that only seconds ago wanted to be doctors and politicians—was filled with future dolphins and space monsters.

These conversations are all out of order. The four scenes I just presented occurred independently of each other over the span of about a decade. It’s like one of those pictures where you can’t see anything when you’re standing up close, but take a few steps back and an image blooms into view.

Only now, looking back from a distance, can I see that these four moments are absolutely connected. One leads to the next leads to the next. Consider the lifespan of the human imagination.

- 3rd grade. It’s alive and thriving. *I want to be a dolphin.*
- 8th grade. It’s doubting itself. *If I have an imagination, how do I find it?*
- 12th grade. It arrives in critical condition. Sirens are going off now. It needs immediate medical attention, or it risks fading completely from view. *Does this poem need a thesis? How many paragraphs does this need to be?*
- Then the MFA graduates and professors at a bar at AWP. *You can’t teach imagination, can you?* Now, the imagination is be-

ing revised out of having ever existed in the first place. It's declared to be domain of the privileged. It's some rare blood type that only the lucky or gifted are born with. Everyone else never had it, and it can't be taught to them. They are doomed to boring lives of infomercials and Reality TV.

You can see the decline, and it's frightening to think what comes next.

*A kid says to me, "I don't know if I can write poems."*

*"What makes you say that?"*

*"Because I don't have an imagination."*

*"Sure you do. Everyone does."*

Did I say this conversation haunts me? Because it does. I wrestled with it for years afterward. Maybe, it's simply the spotlight of tragedy where everything is illuminated, magnified, and eternal. When I said, "Everyone has an imagination," I believed that, and still do. Every kid who once played cops and robbers, who had a conversation with a stuffed animal, or threw a basketball toward a hoop pretending it was Game Seven of the NBA Finals has an imagination.

That's not opinion. That's fact. It's something anyone can prove by falling asleep and dreaming.

It's the next part of the conversation that gives me trouble.

*"Well, if I have an imagination, how do I find it?"*

That's the real question. How do you access the imagination once it's been buried by peer pressure and the desire to grow up and be taken seriously? How do you reclaim it once it's been drained by scantrons or schools that lay off their art teachers or cities that consider selling the contents of their museums?

What could I have told him?

Where could he have begun to look?

Here's a final scene. My last year with InsideOut—before a job in another state took me out of town—I did a residency at Cooke Elementary. There I worked with another third grade class. There's a writing exercise I got from Pete Markus (InsideOut's Senior Writer and Language-Magician-in-Residence). It involves looking at your

hand and saying all the things it can do. *My hand can play piano. My hand can turn on the TV.* Now, let's think of all the things you *wish* your hand could do. Touch the stars. Turn rocks into puppies. Let's call this your "dream hand." Write about it.

Here's an example from Kalila Mason-Smith:

### **What My Dream Hand Can Do**

My dream hand can  
make me fly. When I  
make a fist, I can  
become the best skater.  
When I wave my hand,  
I become famous. When I make  
my hand bang on the table,  
ice and snowballs come out.  
When I open and close my  
hand, I can get a hovercraft  
or flying machine.

Have you ever seen thirty kids all holding their hands in front of their faces and staring as if their hands were foreign objects? As if their fingers had arrived from another planet? Remember how I was saying imagination at this age is contagious? How if one kid wants to be a dolphin, then the next wants to be a dragon?

That's how the dream hand works.

Suddenly, you have hands that are made of fire, hands that travel through time, hands that turn math books into Xboxes, hands that lift mountains, and hands that speak to the dead.

*"If I have an imagination, how do I find it?"*

Before a kid reaches the age where he has to ask that question, the imagination is everywhere. Could I have told him that? Look everywhere? It's all places? It is literally in your own two hands? It seems far-fetched, but when I think of those kids at Cooke Elementary, it also seems very possible.

Look at them. They lift their palms up to the light. They wave and shake their hands with fury. They tap their fingers on their desks and consider the sounds that the desks make in response. They hold

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their hands way out, stretch their arms as far as they can reach, then they bring them in real close to examine their palms, their fists, their knuckles, their fingernails as if the heart of the Earth is there—alive, new, and suddenly visible.