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# The Possum

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It started with a possum running right in front of the van. There are many things that I don't want to happen when I am driving a van full of my students (including, but not limited to, vomiting, flat tires, love triangles, and snowstorms), but I really don't want to run over a possum. My vanload of students had spent the afternoon wandering through and working in the galleries of the Kennedy Museum of Art at Ohio University in Athens. After an introduction to the permanent collection by Jolene Powell (chair of our art department), their assignment was to select a piece of art from the permanent collection and write a poem employing vivid imagery, representing the visual with language. Once they had claimed a particular piece, they each sat down on the floor in front of their paintings or their sculptures and started working in that absorbing intensity of learning that we hope for more often than we get. Then, after our dinner at an Indian restaurant, we were heading for a quick stop at Starbucks before driving home.

These Marietta College students were all enrolled in a learning community being team taught by Jolene and myself—taking both Introduction to Creative Writing and Introduction to Drawing together. We had combined our courses to teach creative process by having the students work in two mediums simultaneously. Having taken each other's classes in preparation for the learning community, Jolene and I focused on how creativity in our different fields (and by extension, the creative process) might inform imaginative development and combine for a more meaningful and organic artistic experience for our students—just as it did for us. We believed that the struggle to control a contour line was no different than trying to construct a metaphor, and that working to create both would be more fruitful than working on just one or the other. We agreed that creativity was the natural and inevitable response to being alive, an idea we wanted our students to both share and understand.

The possum had appeared suddenly, running into the glare of our headlights as if compelled to do so. It's common in this part of southeast Ohio to observe a variety of wildlife (dead or alive) in the road. But it was too late to do anything when I saw the possum; I had been focused on finding the Starbucks. Students in the first row of seats saw it dashing into the street. I hit the brakes, and there was bump, as if the front wheel had run into or over something. A few students moaned at the bump, and several turned backwards to see if the second van driven by Jolene Powell would

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hit the possum. Christina, who had called shotgun after dinner and was sitting in the front passenger seat gasped—"Eye contact!" she insisted. "I made eye contact with the possum!" The first line of Christina's poem about the possum encounter—assigned on the spot to encourage my students to connect art to reality (assigned on the spot to change the topic of discussion)—brought home the creative immediacy, and the anxiety, of her perspective.

> He looked me in the eye, the way you're supposed
> to in a job interview.

Creativity brings meaning to our experiences, and I strive to teach my students that the creative process is a way to negotiate our thoughts, feelings, and our lives. Writing a poem about a possum offers a means to focused consideration—helping students determine what exactly they might want to say about that shared moment in a dark van.

But can you really teach creativity? It is not an uncommon question for a teacher of creative writing to hear. At times it seems that the world is largely populated with folks utterly compelled to inform writing teachers that we are deluding ourselves, perhaps because when writing teachers consider creativity we are not thinking about the same thing. People who question the purpose of teaching creative writing at the college level, or the likelihood of successfully teaching creativity, are actually asking if we are going to produce best-selling authors. They mistake genius for creativity. This is no different than asking the chemistry department why they continue working if they can't transform a student into tomorrow's Nobel Prize winner, or demanding that the business department immediately produce the next Warren Buffet. Discussions like these reflect the profound disconnection between our society and our art—we often don't know how art or music or literature is created and so assume creativity at any level of competence is out of reach. Creativity and the creative process can be taught; indeed, they can be explored, enhanced, and informed.

It's important to connect the creative impulse to the tangible elements of students' own lives. While I urge these young writers not to base characters just upon themselves, I also encourage them to consider what ideas and experiences they might have had that would have meaning for their audience. Point of view determines perspective. Students who actually saw the possum tended to write poems that were more narrative—they had seen something happen and worked to create a story of what they had observed within their poems. Often they grounded their language in the terms of their majors, as Vince the biology major did in his first few lines:

> In the western hemisphere no one ever knows,
> it's actually called an opossum.

His poem went on to tell the story of the observers and the opossum getting the details wrong—like what to call the marsupial and why the road was not the shortest distance between two points. He was able to quantify the experience of bad science through creative process from his own considerations of the natural world.

Creativity is not a rare and fleeting exception—but all too often we consider creativity an abnormal state, and so we don't imagine it to be part of a typical educational experience. I spend a lot of time in class promoting the idea that my students are actually writers, that they can call themselves writers and that is enough to make it so. This is not always easy. My students always know who Emily Dickinson is—she is that crazy lady who wore white and never left the back yard. Emily—my students, convinced that they know all about her, call her by her first name—Emily wrote about nature and death. Emily probably spoke

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Greek to all the possums in her neighborhood. She capitalized words whenever the heck she wanted, ignored grammar, and chatted up the Grim Reaper because, as one of my students once wrote in an essay, "that's what you do when you're crazy and a poet—which is pretty much the same thing." Under those terms how might my students, who worked at McDonald's in the summer, find the time to wander among the flowers and write poetry? Ernest Hemingway was also easily explained away. Hemingway—my students refer to him almost exclusively by his last name as if his life was far too dangerous for a name like Ernest. Hemingway would have eaten the possum. Raw. And my students are fairly certain that Hemingway only wrote when drunk or watching a bullfight or perhaps immediately after shooting someone. So was it realistic for me to expect my students to write fiction when they had never been on safari? My students often insisted that they were too normal (too boring) to be creative.

Kay Redfield Jamison, professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, has spent much of her career investigating this perceived relationship between mental illness and mental achievement and can attest to our devotion to the idea that "a possible link between madness and genius is one of the oldest and most persistent cultural notions; it is also one of the most controversial" But creative process made exotic or pathological is also made unreachable for the average student. And it goes without saying that classroom application would be unworkable if the goal was to teach creativity by confusing it with insanity or alcoholism.

I consistently draw parallels between the choices that published authors make and those made by my students—where to break a line, how to create an extended metaphor. Robert Frost faced the same issues that they do in the creation of a poem; it's only in the skill level that we see a difference. I remind my students that they are creative in many ways—not just in our learning community of language and charcoal, but in their majors and larger lives.

Most of my students saw neither hide nor hair of the possum, and their poems tended to be much more lyrical—expressing intense emotion instead of telling a story. They were forced to imagine what the possum had looked like, what it had done, and how it felt. Craig, my varsity basketball star whose dramatic tension had, in his previous work, almost always involved a shot clock, was able to imagine the scene from the possum's point of view:

> I thought I could beat the van,
> Death wasn't part of my plan.

While Craig never got over his affection for somewhat obvious rhyme (died/cried, rushed/crushed, etc.), I later learned from Jolene that Craig had expanded his possum-based point of view into an assignment for her class. When asked to represent value in a realistic sketch—producing every shade of gray between and including total white and complete black—he drew the undercarriage of his car in remarkably accurate detail.

No real conversation on creativity can be limited to just this department or only that field of study; its relevance is manifested across the curriculum. In his book *On Creativity,* theoretical physicist David Bohm imagines the scientist's desire for answers, the quest for creative insight, in the form of a discovery of something that had been previously unknown. He

argues that the desires to discover and create are present across society and typical for all walks of life, not limited to those who create and those who research for a living. And discovery does not require genius.

There is always an unpredictable variable of originality at work, Bohm notes. "There must have been a considerable body of scientists who were better at mathematics and knew more physics than Einstein did," he writes. "The difference was that Einstein had a certain quality of *originality*." Originality, in the context of Bohm's consideration, relies upon the ability to keep an open mind and avoid preconceived notions. That's almost starting to sound like something teachable.

Bohm's most convincing example of originality is a familiar one: Anne Sullivan teaching Helen Keller to communicate, by spelling out "water" in her palm while exposing her to water in various contexts. Blind and deaf from infancy, Helen Keller was a nearly feral child lacking the means to communicate. After Anne Sullivan was able to reach her and teach her by introducing conceptual abstraction, Keller's world was forever transformed. Culturally, we have already assigned Sullivan's innovation to a heady position in history—we called the stage play and the movie about these two remarkable women *The Miracle Worker*. But it wasn't a miracle, according to Bohm; it was an example of creativity and originality—both the creativity Anne Sullivan used to reach her wild pupil and the unique abilities she could see in Helen Keller, even before she could communicate.

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A few of my students already know they are creative people and believe that they are writers. Marianne, the only English major in the class, evoked Walt Whitman and his famous elegy for President Lincoln in her poem. Having seen drafts of Vince's poetic efforts towards scientific accuracy, she was able to pun Whitman's famous title and acknowledge animal taxonomy in her first line:

Opossum, My Possum

It wasn't just clever; it established context and expressed a light-hearted irony. The van became a ship of state and death was, well, death. But Marianne was the student who had fun with the assignment and felt the freedom of confidence in her work. She didn't want to get bogged down in sadness, so she didn't; she didn't want to get stuck in definitions, so she wasn't.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, tends to open up the playing field beyond the individual as he argues that "an idea or product that deserves the label 'creative' arises from the synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person." As something that can only happen within a community or cultural context, "Creativity," he clarifies, "does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context." The result of nearly a hundred interviews with creative people, Csikszentmihalyi's work supports the idea that creativity is not only something that most people aspire to but also something that can be supported and encouraged. So when my students can experience something together, write poems related to that event, and then share them with each other, the whole of the process becomes more than just the sum of its parts.

Creativity is always an opportunity for truth and thus it's crucial we nurture the creative process in our classrooms. Each of my students was able to take the utterly random occurrence of a possum running out into the road and create a unique poem that spoke to the specific experience, visible or not, from the front seat or the back. They could follow their own creative process to a meaningful end, to the creation

> Each of my students was able to take the utterly random occurrence of a possum running out into the road and create a unique poem that spoke to the specific experience. . . . They could follow their own creative process to a meaningful end, to the creation of a small piece of art that stood apart from something we had experienced together.

of a small piece of art that stood apart from something we had experienced together. There is one last excerpt from a student poem I should share, this one from Sean who had, until they all read their poems in class, been known primarily for his universal rejection of shoes in the middle of an Ohio winter. Sean's poem was called "Athens, OH" and his first lines contained a key point that no one else's eye or poem managed to capture—that we hadn't actually run over the possum:

> I saw his tail shoot through the bushes.
> On the other, other side,
> Probably a pothole instead
> You people need to start paying attention.

Sean's poem gave me reason to believe that this assignment worked for all of my students—not in the same way but for the same reasons. Each of them, with his or her own talents and perspectives, created something out of this event… and even when no actual possums were harmed in the making of this poetry, we still have the words we write and the pictures we draw to assert our meaning and being in this world. The possum scooted under the van or between the wheels, with luck or skill, and made it to the other side of the road almost completely unobserved. We're not aware of how it worked or why, only that it did in a lovely way—poetic justice at its best. The importance of creativity, in our classrooms and in our lives (and in response to the possums that run out into the road before us), is that there are many things that become real and true through the creative process without our thinking too hard about it. It's possible to bring far more creativity into our lives, and our students' lives. It's not hard; we just need to start paying attention.

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