

Nature and the Personal Essay

Composing an Ecological Identity

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AS A CHILD, Jessica spent a week every summer sailing on the Chesapeake Bay with her father and younger sister. Jessica's mother, who forbade soda drinking at home, didn't come on these boating vacations. So Jessica and her sister drank all the soda they wanted. This was one of the things she loved about the sailing trips. She also loved what her father did with the empty soda cans:

My father would show us how to turn our cans into crab homes. As he ripped each can in two and tossed both halves overboard, my father explained that our cans provided much-needed shelter for the crabs of the bay. These crab homes filled my sister and me with delight. We would take turns throwing the torn cans into the water, taking pleasure in our benevolent donation to the marine life below our boat. (1)

Jessica learned the hard truth about crab homes only after several summers spent with her father and sister on the Chesapeake. An older cousin set her straight one day, revealing that "crab home" was just a fancy name for plain old litter. Outraged, Jessica confronted her father, who "chuckled in an ashamed way. 'Well, you all drank so much soda, there wasn't enough room for all the trash and us on the boat,' he said, not meeting my eyes"(5).

Jessica tells this story in the opening of "Homes for Crabs," the fine personal essay she wrote for Introduction to Conservation Studies, a course I teach in New Century College, the integrative studies program at George Mason University. In this course, we track the history of environmental conservation in the United States, with a particular focus on the evolution of conservation ethics over time. Like my teaching partner, human ecologist Dr. Joanna Cornell, I am committed to augmenting the more conventional academic learning we promote with experiences that individualize the course for each student. Thus we require students to combine classroom learning with

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Quixotic tickets tastes five progressive elephants, but the silly botulisms telephoned one dwarf, because Quark noisily tastes televisions. Umpteen irascible tickets.

real world experiences gained through internships with professionals in a variety of conservation-related fields. We also require them to talk with ghosts.

Since the nineteenth century, much of the most influential thinking about the relationship between people and the other-than-human world has been carried out by American writers of literary nonfiction. Our syllabus includes selections by giants of the American nature writing tradition, such as Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, and Carson; it also features works by living authors—Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, Richard Nelson, Janisse Ray, Wendell Berry, Bill McKibben, Michael Pollan—who seek quite consciously to continue the same conversations about people and nature that their literary forbears launched almost two hundred years ago. Joanna and I want our students to join these conversations as well. That’s why a nature-based personal essay is the main piece of formal writing students compose for the course. When we first decided to require this personal essay, we saw it primarily as an excellent learning opportunity for our students, few of whom bring to the course dreams of becoming serious creative writers. More than the finished product, we were interested in the learning that would happen through the writing process. We believed students would relate to the course authors’ words and ideas most energetically if they experienced the material not just as readers, but as writers also. We suspected that the work they did at various stages of this assignment could be transformative, clarifying core values and priorities at a critical touchpoint in their development as learners and citizens. We concentrated, that is, on creating a structure within which students would write to learn. We were delighted to find that they also learned to write.

We framed this writing project as “ecological identity work,” borrowing language and some teaching strategies from environmental educator Mitchell Thomashow. “Ecological identity,” Thomashow explains, “refers to all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self”(3). With our personal essay assignment, we hoped to encourage the kind of learning that Thomashow promotes in the ecological identity work he conducts with his students. The purpose of such work, says Thomashow, “is to provide the language and context that connect a person’s life choices with his or her ecological worldview”(6). The concept of ecological identity helped our students see how this particular writing enterprise supported the individualized learning fostered more generally in the course. As well, Thomashow’s deliberate strategy for conducting guided introspection in an educational setting gave Joanna and me some excellent ideas for pre-writing activities we could use with the essayists in our class.

Experience has taught Thomashow that people are most interested in exploring three types of environmental experiences: childhood memories of special places, perceptions of disturbed places, and contemplation of wild places (7). The first pre-writing exercise we did with students asked them to write down in their course journals places from their own experience that fit into Thomashow’s three categories. We also asked them to identify any people connected with these places. Finally, we asked them to write

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down three to five words they associate with each of the places on their list. Most of the special childhood places students named in these journal entries were creeks, fields, woods, and even individual trees, near the houses they lived in as children. These were places of adventure, imagination, and refuge.

In my own case, the special place of childhood, a brushy hillside next to my family's property, became the disturbed place when bulldozers arrived to prepare the site for a new supermarket that announced the arrival of suburban sprawl. The same was true for some of our students, many of whom have grown up in northern Virginia or one of the state's other rapidly developing regions, where the woods and fields of childhood became the housing tracts and malls of adolescence. The wild places students wrote about tended to be farther from home. These were wilderness areas they had traversed with backpacks, rivers they had run, ocean waters where they had surfed or sailed. The people they associated with these wild places were often the adults—parents, teachers, camp counselors—who guided them there.

In class, we built lists of words on the board for each of the three types of environmental experiences, working to recognize and articulate the kinds of patterns that underlie the various sub-genres of the nature-based personal essay. Special childhood places evoked words such as secret, hidden, private, natural, special, free. Bulldozers, chainsaws, and other machines appeared frequently in their entries on disturbed places, which seethed with words such as ruined, stolen, raped, destroyed. Wild places triggered a complicated mix of associations. Our collective list reflected the serenity and purity people find in wilderness with words such as pristine, virgin, untouched, and sacred, while the danger and majesty of wild landscapes came through in words such as rugged, violent, and awesome. This session made a nice prelude to our discussion of the model personal essays students had read before coming to class. In "A Windstorm in the Forest," John Muir rhapsodizes about climbing to the top of a 100-foot Douglas Spruce tree during a major windstorm in the Sierras, risking personal safety so that he might better perceive the winds' effects on the surrounding environs. Students identified strongly with the impassioned prose Muir deploys to evoke his deep engagement with a wild place. Likewise, they recognized some of the anger in their own language for disturbed places in Terry Tempest Williams' essay "The Clan of One Breast Women," which challenges the U.S. government to come clean about the connection between atomic weapons testing and rising rates of cancer in the Salt Lake region where the author's roots reach back seven generations.

Also on the reading list for this day was my personal essay "Fire and Water," which parallels the fate of the disturbed landscape I grew up in with the fate of my parents' failed marriage. I had never assigned my own work to students before, and I had deep misgivings about doing it in this situation. However, I thought that sharing this piece, in which I disclose painful family memories, would help justify a class assignment which asks students to make themselves much more vulnerable than they are in most other academic writing situations. While examining my parents' history together, my

Paul tastes five schizophrenic
Jabberwockies. Minnesota abused
umpteens bourgeois elephants.
Botulisms bought the putrid
Jabberwocky. Five fountains ran
away

essay also considers how my naturalist father helped to focus my attention on the often-overlooked details of the natural world, while my artistic mother, who excelled at arranging flowers, encouraged my aesthetic engagement with nature. I

hoped reading “Fire and Water” might help students think further about any elders who had mediated their early experiences with the natural world and influenced the development of their ecological identities.

After discussing model personal essays, we asked students to go home and write in their journals, in as much detail as possible, about a couple of events, figures, or places that had helped shape their ecological identities and inform their personal conservation ethics. Those journal entries laid the groundwork for first drafts of essays, which students edited in workshops with peers and submitted for faculty feedback. In most cases, peer and faculty feedback sparked major revisions, which yielded the final drafts students submitted at semester’s end.

“Homes for Crabs,” Jessica’s essay, resembles a number of the finished pieces in its telling of a story where recognition of a parent’s fallibility led to a moment of environmental awakening. In the body of her essay, Jessica tells how she moved past her disillusioned anger with her father and got serious about atoning for years of ignorance and littering. She implemented a new regime on the family sailboat, with sharply curtailed soda consumption, separation of trash and recyclables, and collective family responsibility for making sure recyclables were dealt with properly at trip’s end. Her piece draws a parallel between the kind of short-term thinking that inspired her father to make up the crab homes lie to the dominant mindset that underpins all of our society’s unsustainable practices, which now threaten the ecological integrity of the entire planet. This insight informs the forceful statement of intention that concludes her essay: “I want to help this current generation, which is on the cusp of change, discard the destructive behaviors chosen by past generations and realize that their individual actions and choices do impact the environment”(7). Not just forceful, but clever too: note how the word “discard” gestures back to the tossed cans in her essay’s opening.

Perhaps unconsciously, Jessica structured her essay very much like another piece of personal writing on the course syllabus. Aldo Leopold’s “Thinking Like a Mountain,” a canonical work of environmental literature, recounts the author’s killing of a wolf, an act motivated by his misguided belief that fewer wolves would mean more deer for him and others to hunt. Looking back on the event, a contrite and more mature Leopold contrasts the misguided and selfish short-term thinking symbolized by his killing of the wolf with the long-term “thinking” of a mountain—the kind of thinking that both Leopold and Jessica espouse. A number of other students found direct and indirect ways of engaging with course texts as they constructed their personal essays. Nikki’s piece recalls a day when dire suburban boredom was transformed by a violent thunderstorm that sent her and a friend into the nearby woods and up to the top of their favorite tree to better experience the drama of wind and rain. “We wanted a taste of that “wild ecstasy” that John Muir saw in the tree tops,” she writes in her essay (2). In a final

reflection on the assignment, she acknowledged that “Muir was my favorite. I am absolutely taken by the way he expresses himself, and it was very influential in trying to be more descriptive in my essay.”

Nikki’s words express a commitment to writing well that proved nearly universal among students in this class. Although I always offer extensive feedback on preliminary drafts, one of my abiding frustrations as a teacher is that students often submit final drafts that reflect minimal revision. This class was different. Students worked diligently to craft the very best pieces of writing they could produce. Comments they made on revision memos and final reflections corroborated the ample evidence of hard work I saw in the final drafts. “Thanks for giving me good feedback on my first draft,” Megan wrote. “I did a lot of restructuring, scrapped the bulk of my original essay, and basically came up with a whole new concept.” Jenna confessed to not being entirely satisfied, even with her final draft: “I still might expand upon it, add to it, or change it a bit. I would really like to perfect it.”


I want it to be something that I will be able to look at and remember forever.”

Common sense, and my own writing experiences, tell me that writers who care deeply about their work can’t help but advance in that work more quickly than indifferent scribes. As a teacher, I want to figure out how we helped these students to care so much. I know we supported the writing process effectively, as I am always careful to do in my classes. And comments such as this one, from Megan, assure me that students were aided by reading the model personal essays on the syllabus: “These readings definitely helped to give me a better idea about the value and intention of a personal essay.” But a well structured assignment and good models don’t account entirely for the high level of engagement we saw.

Ben, a staunch environmentalist who is deeply committed to hunting in an ethical manner, wrote about stalking and killing his first deer on the farm where he and his father had hunted since his early childhood. He offered me the kind of clue I was after when he reflected that “this was a paper that I *wanted* to write. It was a great departure from the research papers that I have written [in other classes]. I was so glad to have the chance to write about my relationship to the environment, to a farm, to my father. This assignment has taught me a lot about myself.” Ben’s enthusiasm arose in part from the intimacy and subjectivity the personal essay makes possible. Of course, the danger of this genre is that, when poorly done, a personal essay can become so intimate and so subjective that it loses all relevance to anyone but the person who wrote it. Ben went on to say that his work on this assignment allowed him to “look deep inside myself and analyze my values and how they have changed with experiences.” This comment, and others like it, suggest that the writers in our class were very well served by our decision to frame the personal essay assignment as ecological identity work, and to adapt some of Thomashow’s activities to help us conduct this work in a structured and conscious way.

The day we discussed my personal essay, “Fire and Water,” I told the students

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that my motivation to write such pieces comes from my need to explore, in my own way, the same core question that occupied Thoreau and Muir, Leopold and Carson: How should we humans relate to the other life-forms with whom we share the planet? A note Ben sent me at the end of the semester spoke directly to my hope that sharing my own work with students might help confirm for them my personal belief in the importance of the work I was asking them to do. “Your personal essay was really moving,” Ben wrote, “and I applaud you for letting yourself be vulnerable with the class. By vulnerable, I mean courageously sharing yourself with all of us.” Literary art enables writers to unlock the meanings inside their own stories. Students engaged so seriously with their personal essays, I think, because they understood that their stories, if told well and interpreted thoughtfully, could illuminate their most deeply held values regarding their personal relationships with the earth. For these students, this was not just another class paper; nor was it a license for extended navel-gazing. Instead, each student challenged herself to engage, as only she could, one of the core questions facing human beings in every age. Writers who commit to entertaining such a question rigorously, honestly, and artfully undertake a solemn task. 

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