



# Making the Impossible Possible

## Finding Inspiration in Imagination

CARON A. LEVIS

SO FAR, SO GOOD; only a handful of students in my seventh-grade writing class were whispering to their neighbors, just one was sighing wistfully out the window, and a few girls were even excitedly asking wasn't that quote I'd just read from *Alice in Wonderland*? I breathed in the smell of chalk and burgeoning body odors, cleared my throat to read again, and tried to believe that the lesson plan I had come up with at five o'clock this morning (refining it as I'd brushed my teeth) might accomplish the impossible and get all of the one hundred and twenty seventh-graders I would see that day writing—and enjoying it.

I'd actually had a different lesson already planned for this session, but when I'd woken up, after a bad night's sleep, the thought of teaching anything made me roll over and stick my pillow on my head—I *really* didn't want to go to school. It was a few weeks

before the winter holidays, my brain and my schedule were both overstuffed and full of conflicts; bills, dust, and to-do lists were piling up in my apartment, and my patience for waiting—for good news, for buses, for vacation to arrive—was waning. Mustering up the energy to commute the long way to school to teach four classes with the requisite pep and enthusiasm felt impossible.

It didn't help that the school I was heading to was undergoing the dreaded Quality Review, the two-to-three-day visit during which experienced educators evaluate each school in New York City. The pressure had spread from the administration to the faculty to the students as rapidly as this season's flu virus; teachers' backs were in knots and students' sighs sounded heavier than their backpacks. Creating an enjoyable learning experience of any kind seemed impossible.

I dragged myself out of bed and turned on the news: oil needed to come out of the water, the economy needed to be revived, a divided Congress needed to compromise—impossible. On my computer a list of e-mails from friends and co-workers showed that I was not alone in my Eeyore state of mind; an atmosphere of impossibility seemed to have descended, as invisibly and insidiously as allergies in spring, upon everyone I knew.

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I brushed my teeth and panicked. Teaching is about inspiring others to the possibilities within and without them. How could I possibly teach from this impossible place?

Start where you are, I reminded myself.

This was a lesson I'd learned in acting class that had never failed to help me in any endeavor; be completely present wherever you are, and see where that takes you. You almost always end up where you need to be, or somewhere better.

Where I was, was wanting the class to teach itself. Where I was, was lost in dreams of impossible things.

Impossible things.

I ransacked my desk and yanked out a small index card, upon which a friend had once written a quote by Lewis Carroll; I read it out loud. Suddenly I couldn't *wait* to get to school.

I taped the quote onto the board, cleared my throat, and put on my most Queenly accent,

'There is no use trying,' said Alice; 'one can't believe impossible things.'

'I dare say you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

All eyes were on me. I told them to get out a piece of paper, pick up a pen, and make a list of six impossible things. I read them my own example and instructed them, as usual, not to worry about spelling, or full sentences for now—we would deal with that in revisions. I told them that the most important thing was to get down their ideas; that however they interpreted “impossible” was right, and that the only

possible way to do this assignment wrong was not to do it. I walked around the room relieved to hear pencils scratching. Never underestimate the power of lists; they're familiar, short, and surmountable.

The residency was meant to aid the teachers' units on Personal Narrative and Descriptive Writing. My objective was to teach specific writing skills through focused exercises, and, more importantly, to instill an appreciation and excitement for writing—an activity which clearly felt scary, dry, and forced to many of my students. Each class had over thirty kids and included many ELL (English Language Learner) and special education students, as well as the usual mix ranging from the eager to learn to the completely withdrawn to the rebellious. While I had succeeded in hooking them into each session, I hadn't yet hooked them into writing itself. My desire was for the kids to see writing as something they could use to open doors, or as wings, as much a sign of independence as having their own room, allowance, or iPod; I wanted them to think writing was cool.

My first stop in the room was always with one particular student, Kim, who didn't speak. Selectively mute, she spoke only to some of her peers, and to her main teacher when absolutely necessary. She had been in the country only a year and had looked terrified when I'd first come to their room. I'd assured her I would never ask her to talk to me or share her work, only to do it to the best of her ability. I always went over to make sure she understood the assignment and to coax her to try it—which she did only some of the time. I knelt down next to her. Her notebook was closed as she stared blankly past my shoulder. I had gained her trust over the past weeks, but she continued to test me each time. She was clearly not planning to write at all today. She looked upset. I began asking yes or no questions she could just nod or shake her head at.

“Do you want to do this exercise?” I asked her.

She shook her head.

“Do you want to be in school, today?” She shook her head.

“That’s perfect.” I said.

Surprised, she looked briefly into my eyes. I told her that not wanting to be here was a perfect impossible thing; all she had to do for the list was write down places she’d rather be, and things she’d rather be doing. She gave me a questioning look, and I assured her, as per our usual deal, I wouldn’t even read or collect her list if she didn’t want me to, all she had to do was write it. She turned away, opened her notebook, and let her hair fall like a curtain. I let out a breath.

After the students were done, more hands than usual shot up to read their lists, which included impossible things such as being able to fly, for it to always be summer, for homework not to exist, to have a pet dragon, to go deep under water without holding your breath, to be able to talk to animals and trees as if they were people, to be in the NBA at age twelve, to get an MFA, for there to be a cure for cancer, for there to be no war in the world and for Justin Bieber to stop singing.

### Six Impossible Things

BY SEBASTIEN

To be able to fly without wings.

For there to be no war, only peace.

For love to be in the air.

To think of six impossible things.

For it to snow every Friday in December.

To get my masters when I am thirteen years old.

To be President without having any death threats.

To meet Victoria Justice.

For Pangaea to exist again.

To live to be a million years old.

To think of—only—six impossible things.

“So, why on earth did I read you this quote?” I asked them. “What does believing in impossible things have to do with writing?”

“Okay, we have about a half hour left,” I told them. “We’re going to spend it believing in impossible things. After all, you are all creative writers, and creative writers get to make the impossible, possible.”

“Writers have to imagine they’re animals sometimes,” one voice called out, “but that’s impossible, because they’re not animals.”

More voices chimed in that yeah, writers have to be other people too, and that’s impossible, or know about places they’ve never been, or places that don’t even exist, or imagine living in the past or the future.

“Writers have to believe they can finish a book,” one girl said.

“They have to believe they can fill up a blank page,” mumbled a student who was always asking to use the bathroom as soon as we began the exercises.

I asked them what about for life in general? Why is it important for people to practice believing in impossible things?

Immediately they were calling out about the moon, computers, and Obama.

“Okay, we have about a half hour left,” I told them. “We’re going to spend it believing in impossible things. After all, you are all creative writers, and creative writers get to make the impossible, possible.”

I thought I heard somebody call out, “Cool.” Was that possible?

I told them to choose one thing from their list, and use their imaginations to describe the moment the impossible happened. Again, I read them my own example, told them not to worry about spelling and to use their highly trained writerly senses, which they’d worked on in our previous lessons.

I walked around the room with crossed fingers. I needed this assignment to be successful, not only for them, but for myself; I needed inspiration and secretly hoped they might remind me how to believe in impossible things again.

I stopped by Kim and ducked down to go through the coaxing routine again, but before I could say a word, in a hoarse whisper she asked, could she write

about going back to her old home? I told her that was a great thing to write about. She nodded and picked up her pencil as I walked away, pleasantly shocked at the impossible thing that had just occurred.

My next stop was John, another consistently resistant writer. I noticed he'd only gotten two things down on his list: "teleporting" and "no school." I asked him what was up. He shrugged, and hid his face in his elbow.

"I don't know what to write," he mumbled, which was his favorite road block to set. I was ready for it this time, though, because after all, I'd started my day with a similar problem; I hadn't known what to teach. Start where he is, I reminded myself.

I asked John to tell me honestly what he was feeling about this writing assignment at this moment. By now, he knew me well enough to know that when I said honest, I meant it.

"I wish I was already done with it," he said.

"Oh, but that's... impossible, huh?" I said.

His eyes lit up. "You mean, I can write about that?"

I nodded. With a mischievous grin, he began writing.

I was sitting in Ms. Caron's class wishing I could teleport into the future and get the paper I needed to write for her class. If I went into the future, it would already be done, so I thought I could just go get it and not have to write it now. I was thinking hard about this, when, BAM! A finished paper was on my desk. I was the first one done, so I handed it in and wondered what else I could test my power on. Then I wondered, what had I written in that paper?...

It was the most I'd seen him write so far. I continued walking around the rest of the room. Kids were busy making the impossible possible; they were teleporting, living in constant summer, eating pillows made of cotton candy, talking to their dogs, graduating college at age fifteen, reuniting divorced parents, becoming the first female President, and riding on the Orient Express. I looked up at the clock to see how

### World Peace (The Moment)

JASMIN, Grade 7

"Residents from all over the world gathered at the White House," a news reporter said. "They are thinking of doing the impossible, world peace. As you can see, people and citizens are gathering around the White House supporting this idea and asking for it to happen."

The camera zoomed in on the people around the White House, and you could see boards with sayings like "World Peace Will Happen!" and "We are the citizens, you are our leader!" were being waved forcefully in the air. People were shouting and screaming...

"Hear our voices! Hear us out!"

"We want world peace. Make it happen for your people!"

Meanwhile, inside the White House... I stood next to the President of South Korea as an interpreter and translator. Obama asked for the doors to be shut.

"We need to have peace. This world cannot be called home to the people with all these conflicts happening. They're our people. We are their leaders, their guides, and their commanders. We need to have them trust and believe that we can make things happen for them. Their voices will be heard, not ignored... What do you think?"

I translated everything into Korean for the South Korean President and into French for the French President.

Silence hung in the air like thick honey. I shuddered from the tension.

Then the French President started to speak and I translated.

"I agree. We need to trust our citizens. The way we act is child's play. I say we need to become more mature and act like real leaders. I say we sign a treaty with each other and strengthen our alliance."

The South Korean President told me, "I agree. We need to make our people happy again."

I translated.

Obama called for a typewriter. A man quickly walked in with a typing machine in his hands. Obama

told him, "Type everything we say and don't stop. We'll fix the mistakes later." The man nodded and sat down.

"We the presidents hereby sign a treaty to strengthen our alliance. We will treat each other as equal in power, furthermore we will trust our citizens. All of us will bring peace and harmony with all human beings, black or white, and treat animals with the same respect."

The typer was typing furiously on the typing machine.

"Our confederation will assist and help each other no matter the consequence. There will be no crime, treachery, wrongdoing, or vandalism. Let everyone get the same needs and supplies as others. When the world is in danger, or our home is in great trouble, we the presidents will do everything we can to make it right. We will fix our mistakes. We will become a bond, stronger than iron or metal."

All of the presidents nodded in approval and stood up. They all walked outside.

"We presidents signed a treaty and our leaders agreed to make world peace."

Everyone cheered.

I grinned. "**World Peace! Finally it had happened.**"

much time we had, but it took me a minute to locate it...

...the clock, you see, had sprouted thickly feathered wings; time was flying around the room, passing over the heads of students whisking pencils across pages, huge smiles overtaking their faces, as they laughed, burst into bouts of spontaneous applause, and shouts of "I LOVE WRITING!" They looked up at the flapping clock, begged, please could they keep writing? I nodded and heard the trees outside the window chuckle. Kids began flying around the room and it started raining cupcakes and jelly beans. The NBA called to tell us that Wesley had just been drafted and a dog wandered into the room, asking for directions to the park—

— Now, if you don't believe this story... well, the kids may not have actually flown around the room, but there were real hands clamoring to read aloud, and students were asking if they could finish and revise their stories for homework. The power of writing pulsed though the room, kids were hooked, and a teaching artist's hope was revived; at least for a time, impossible things were indeed becoming possible. 🐾