

📅 40th Anniversary

You Must Remember This

SAM SWOPE

EVERY NOW AND THEN I GET AN E-MAIL FROM AN EX-STUDENT who has tracked me down. These always begin with “Dear Mr. Swope, You probably don’t remember me but...” Usually I do remember, though, because most often the e-mails come from students I taught creative writing to for three years, following their class through third, fourth, and fifth grades. During this time I was also their chronicler, paying close attention to their imaginations and their lives as research for a book I’d write.

Of course I remember those kids. How could I forget children I worked so hard to teach, or characters I’d labored so hard to render in a book?

When I began teaching, I emulated the teachers I remembered because of their passion and originality. They were artists, unafraid to look foolish, and they embraced teaching as the performance it is. I wanted my lessons to be as memorable. And so it was the classroom that became my creative outlet, my obsession, my art.

It wasn’t long, however, before I discovered the hard truth that no one can sustain a bravura performance over the long haul of an academic year, with its slogs, its doldrums, its drudgery. On days when my muse deserted me, I was as miserable as I am when I can’t write. But the teacher, unlike the scribbler, can’t put down his pencil and take a nap. Your students are there, waiting. You have to do something, anything, but what? What? *What?*

When inspiration failed me, I stole ideas from wherever I could find them, then gussied them up, hoping to make them mine. I remember one such theft: I’d have the class write a single story to which each student would contribute a single sentence. Except I upped the ante. Instead of writing one story, we’d write twenty-eight stories. Every kid would compose a first sentence and pass it along. After we were done, it would be interesting to study each student’s thread in these tales, observing the varying ways he or she had contributed and dealt with different evolving stories. Which kids were most interested in character? Which added humor? Which commandeered the plot?

What a disaster.

The project took hours. Not every child understood how to advance a narrative, and few gave a hoot for consistency. They just wrote whatever silly nonsense popped into their heads. And because several were weak readers, it took longer and

longer for them to decipher these increasingly lengthy stories full of illegible sentences and misspelled words. There was lots of giggling going on, but in the end, all the stories were absurd, unreadable, a giant mess. The project was a total waste of time—it would never make a memory, I had failed.

There were, however, stories from that year I was confident would be remembered. We'd published them in a professionally designed paperback book, the gift of a professional printer. Our anthology was called *George Pataki's Bad Day and Other Stories*, and each child got a copy. Chances were good that such handsome books would stay with the kids for a long time, and I imagined them picking up their copies in years to come. "Oh, yeah!" they'd say. "I remember that!"

But I had to take this on faith.

Then eleven years after the book's publication, I received an e-mail from Allegra: "Dear Mr. Swope, You probably don't remember me but..."

Oh, Allegra, who could forget you?

Little Allegra had been the only blond-haired, blue-eyed child in my class of twenty-eight children from twenty-one countries. She was adorable and good-hearted but had the attention span of a rabbit and was an incorrigible, maddening, silly girl. She wasn't a natural writer, and getting her to sit still long enough to finish even a paragraph was hell.

"Stop being a silly and sit down and write a story," I'd say.

"But I like being a silly, Mr. Swope!"

"Then sit down and write a silly story."

"Okay!"

"But you can't just be silly when you write. A writer has to be silly seriously."

Now nineteen years old, Allegra wrote in her email she'd been thinking about our time together, and after searching everywhere for her copy of "George Pataki's Bad Day," had concluded she'd lost it, probably when her family had moved. Did I know where she could get another? As it happened, I had an extra copy, so I sent it to her.

Dear Mr. Swope, . . . Thank you SO much for sending me the book. I received it yesterday. As soon as my little cousin arrived from school we began reading it. As I was reading I was remembering everything that we did in your class. It was like a memory flashed right before my eyes, and I was back in my third-grade class once again. It was a marvelous feeling.

It's good to hear from your students. We all want to be remembered. And of course I'm always interested to discover how my students' lives have turned out. The sad fact is, however, most of us *don't* stay in touch with our teachers, and most of my students didn't stay in touch with me. But after my teaching memoir was published, I sent kids copies, at which point I did hear from a number of them. I was pleased to learn they were in college studying medicine, law, business, and social work. Two told me they planned to be writers. Another two, I was heartsick to hear, planned to enlist.


What became of the ones I've lost track of I can only imagine, and those imaginings are especially poignant for students I knew well, like Su Jung, a brilliant, tragic

Now that I've been a teacher myself, things would be different. If I ran into her today I'd say, "Mrs. Swisher, you probably don't remember me but you taught me a very important lesson." . . . Perhaps Mrs. Swisher would have been horrified to hear she'd yelled at a student, or maybe she'd have been disappointed that her outburst was my most vivid memory of her. But there we are: Try as we might, teachers can't control what students remember.

years later, I couldn't approach her. She'd seen me vain and weak, and the shame of what I'd done came rushing back.

Now that I've been a teacher myself, things would be different. If I ran into her today I'd say, "Mrs. Swisher, you probably don't remember me but you taught me a very important lesson." But it's too late for that. Mrs. Swisher is gone, dead these many years.

Perhaps Mrs. Swisher would have been horrified to hear she'd yelled at a student, or maybe she'd have been disappointed that her outburst was my most vivid memory of her. But there we are: Try as we might, teachers can't control what students remember.

Take, for example, this reminiscence by Allegra. After she'd told me that reading "George Pataki's Bad Day" had unleashed so many memories, I asked her what she remembered specifically from her third-grade writing class. She mentioned one particularly happy memory of an assignment I'd given that turned out to be tailor-made for a girl who loved to be silly, one that suited her writing talents perfectly, a project in which "the entire class began writing a story together where each student added one sentence to every story from each student." 

Mrs. Swisher's body stiffened. She didn't even look at me, just hissed, "Sammy Swope, sit down and shut up!"

I was shocked, mortified, crushed. Mrs. Swisher had never lost her temper, certainly not with me. But obviously I'd done this sort of thing before and finally Mrs. Swisher had had it, she snapped. And who can blame her? There may have been gentler ways for her to make her point, but none of them would have been as effective. I needed that brutally honest, verbal slap. I needed to know my behavior was hateful.

I never tattled again.

But when I had my chance to thank Mrs. Swisher in the grocery store

Sam Swope writes for children and adults. I Am a Pencil, his memoir about teaching creative writing to immigrant kids in Queens, was born in a Teachers & Writers workshop. An excerpt won the Bechtel Prize. He most recently wrote the book and lyrics for a musical adaptation of his best known book for children, The Araboolies of Liberty Street, which premiered last year in Washington, D.C. Currently Sam is the dean of the summer seminar program for teachers at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at The New York Public Library.