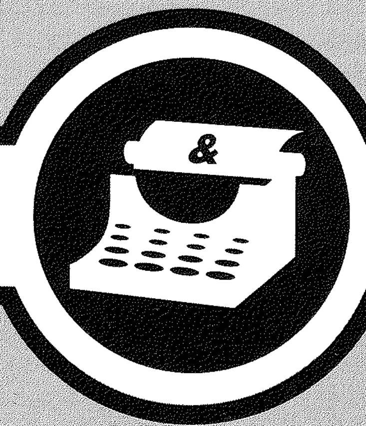
TEACHERS  WRITERS

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What Do You Know?

The Limitation of "Personal" Writing

by Liza Ketchum

THIS SPRING I VISITED A MIDDLE SCHOOL IN Washington, D.C., to speak with students about writing novels. After describing how incidents, memories, and scraps of overheard conversation can be transformed into fiction, I asked the students about their own stories. Did they like to write science fiction? Adventure? Mysteries? Romance? Ghost stories? Hands waved wildly as I mentioned each genre; all were popular. Then I asked, innocently, how much time they had for creative writing in school. An awkward silence fell over the room. The students glanced at each other, then at their teachers, who sat in the back. Finally one boy, who had been the most vocal all through the discussion, put up his hand.

"I write stories at home," he said. "In school, we can only write about real things."

"Yeah," said another. "We have to tell about stuff that's happened to us."

Hands shot up around the room. Clearly I had struck a nerve. "We can *never* make things up!" an angry student called from the back.

I glanced at one of the teachers. "Do you want to hear this?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I suppose it's healthy for them to get it out."

The students continued for a few more minutes, speaking passionately about their desire to write from their imaginations. As I listened, I imagined characters exploding from these eager students and diving onto paper, ready to enter a tangle of plots. I envisioned imaginary landscapes rising in front of us, strange sights and sounds jumping off the page. But the bell rang and the students filed out, their muttered complaints drifting down the hall.

This experience reminded me of a discussion I'd had a few weeks earlier with a ten-year-old named Anna. I was staying at her mother's house before giving a talk at the Vermont Council on Reading.

"A speech!" she gasped as we ate breakfast. "How boring."

I laughed, agreeing, and then she asked, "What are you going to talk about?"

I told her I was going to talk about the power of imaginative writing—and the importance of allowing kids to write what kids call "made-up stories" in addition to real-life ones.

To my surprise, she cried, "*Tell* me about it!"

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"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Every day, the teacher says, 'Write about something real. What happened over the weekend? Write about your families, your pets, or your best friends.'" She crossed her arms. "They never let us make up stories of our own."

•

There has been an explosion of writing in schools over the last twenty years. Many children start the day with an hour of writing, and their teachers are proud of their familiarity with "the writing process." Children publish their stories as books, which are available on library shelves; they share their finished work at "author's teas" to which parents are invited; they submit their work to magazines and state contests. In hundreds of classrooms, teachers recognize the power of imaginative writing and have given children the means to express themselves in a variety of forms.

But the focus on personal writing is in danger of creating a new kind of tyranny for students. "Just write what you know. Write from your own personal experience," some teachers say. When kids hear this refrain too often, they become angry. And they don't want to write.

When I was studying writing in college, my teacher, Harvey Swados, also told us to "write what you know." It's the oldest advice in the business, but I believe it's recently been misinterpreted. Swados didn't mean that our writing should be solely autobiographical. He wanted us to be open to experience, to involve ourselves in life, to describe the world through our own eyes, expanding the limits of what we *did* know, just as he did when he worked on the assembly line at a General Motors plant and then wrote a collection of stories about the workers there (*On the Line*). He sent us to night court, to the Fulton Fish Market at three in the morning, to cafés where we would hear people speaking with different accents and intonations. He taught us to open all our senses to the life going on around us, to absorb it and make it our own, using our imaginative powers. Some of us wrote stories or poems, some created pieces of reportage, others used what we witnessed as a way into memory.

What I have learned since those college days when I roamed around Manhattan is that a story might be conceived in something known—an event that is close to my heart or experience—but it usually moves quite quickly into the imaginative world of the *un*known, which is where I believe the true act of writing and creation takes place.

Eight years ago, when my son was fourteen, I watched the members of his junior varsity soccer team bait and harass a fellow classmate, whom they'd decided was gay. The coach ignored the teasing and eventually the young man quit the team. As a writer, I was interested in the incident, but if I had simply reported on what I'd seen, the story would have fizzled quickly. Instead, I tucked the incident away for about five years, and when it surfaced again, there were imaginary characters involved, including a sixteen-year-old soccer player named Todd O'Connor. Todd had to decide whether to go along with his peers in calling the new and talented soccer player a fag or whether to take a stand against prejudice. In the end, an isolated incident that was real—the event I "knew"—became a 200-page novel about peer pressure and homophobia.

Did I write "what I know"? Yes and no. Having two sons, I'm familiar with the habits and language of teenage boys. I've watched them play many hours of soccer. But I don't know what it feels like to inhabit the mind and body of a sixteen-year-old boy. I had to take a giant leap of the imagination, just as any author of fiction must do when creating a story about someone else. The experience is at once challenging and liberating. Why not allow children to explore the imagination in this same way?

Of course this does not mean I'm opposed to personal writing. Some of my students' finest work emerges in true-life stories, in poems expressing their feelings, or in portraits of people or animals who are important to them. It's wonderful for children to realize that their experience—limited as it may be—is valid, that their classmates and teachers respect what they think and feel, as expressed on paper. But I get upset when a teacher tells children that writing from their own experiences is the *only* option. This not only limits children's natural creativity and expressiveness, but carries the implicit message that their imaginations are somehow not a part of who they are and what they know—that their imaginations are not part of their experience.

When I ask students, "What is an author's most important tool?" they answer, without hesitation, "Imagination." For them, imaginative writing encompasses stories that come from real life as well as those that are invented.

Perhaps our current definition of "personal writing" is too literal or narrow. In my experience, students will expand the definition anyway, if the need is great. In a recent fiction workshop, for example, a fourth grader couldn't compose an invented story because her grandfather was dying. She spent the week of my residency describing her recent visit to his bedside and creating a touching portrait of their relationship. Meanwhile, the rest of her classmates were enjoying the chance to disguise their own lives through fiction.

When I was seven, I wrote and illustrated my first and only "picture book series." These small books, about four inches square, concerned a girl of seven who was angry at her parents because they wouldn't buy her a horse. However, she was clever, and she either outwitted her parents or met a genie who gave her a series of tasks to perform in order to get the horse she wanted: a white stallion that she rode bareback. From the safety of his high, rounded withers, she could look down on her enemies at school, the creeps who called her names and knocked her down on the playground. She could perform heroic deeds or simply gallop away from everyone she hated.

Obviously, I was this little girl. I'm not sure I wanted the horse as much as the feeling of power he would give me. Using paper, pencil, and a flashlight, I wrote these stories under the covers when I was supposed to be asleep, and I remember clearly the sense of mastery and control they gave me. In my ordinary, humdrum life, I was a skinny child with a squint (I needed glasses), buckteeth, and a perpetual case of school phobia. In my thinly disguised fiction, I was an athlete—clever, outgoing, even heroic.

Writing fiction empowers children. A few years ago, I worked with a student named Charles. He was eight years old, a troubled boy who was teased on the playground and felt friendless in the classroom. Because my residency began on Halloween, the children wanted to write monster portraits. Charles wrote:

The Friendly Monster

I have trouble at school. I usually come home bruised up. But one day something really made me jump. It was big, twice the school's size. It was friendly. It would not fit in the school because it was too big. After school when we all went out to play I went over to him. Everyone else does not know about him. He is magic and nobody else can see him except for me. He is invisible to the other kids. We became friends. He is furry and he feels as soft as a lion's mane. He has feet like a chicken. He has a head the shape of a unicorn. He looks scary but he is nice. He's like a guardian angel. He knows about the trouble that I have at school. We had the exact same favorite sport. We both like baseball. I became good at baseball because I played with my giant friend. Then all the people who would pick on me would like me. All the trouble that I had was gone.

If I had asked Charles to "write about the way you feel on the playground," I think he would have felt exposed and humiliated. But the creation of this friendly monster and guardian angel gave Charles a sense of control. It also changed the way some of his classmates behaved towards him. When Charles read his piece in front of the class, I noticed some students shifting with discomfort, and afterwards others told him, with heartfelt sympathy and new respect, "That was really, really good, Charles."

Imaginative writing gives children permission to tell the stories they most need to express. Like the shy child who becomes bold and expressive behind a mask or a puppet, fiction provides the storyteller with a safe way to reveal secrets.

During a residency in Vermont, I worked with a nervous eighth grader I'll call Sam. In Sam's classroom, the teacher wanted to focus on historical fiction. At first I was sceptical; I wondered if stories about ancient Rome (the period they were studying) would allow children to explore issues and topics important to them. But I shouldn't have worried. When we brainstormed possible conflicts that could form the heart of their stories, we came up with a familiar list: sibling rivalry, troubled families, conflicts with girlfriends and boyfriends, and peer pressure. The characters the students created, however, wore togas and sandals, drank from pottery cups, and rode around in chariots.

Sam wrote about a gladiator and his son. He'd done his research—the story contained accurate details about clothing, food, and customs—but the piece was also disturbing. The gladiator was an alcoholic who beat his son. Sam resolved the story by having the son stab the father before turning the knife on himself.

We went on to discuss the possibilities of different plots, including the resolution of conflict and how an author who kills everyone off in the end could be accused of choosing the easy way out. ("What about Shakespeare?" one student demanded, quickly poking a hole in that day's lesson!) As I read Sam's story and discussed possible revisions, I sensed he wasn't seeing the story with an editor's eye; his emotional involvement was too deep. I asked him if his character could find another solution to his problem. "No," Sam said, his voice shaking. He couldn't look me in the eye. "It's the *only* way."

During a meeting with the school counselor, I mentioned Sam's story. She told me Sam came from an alcoholic family, and that he had threatened suicide. She interpreted the story as a cry for help—which I believe it was—and found time to meet with him right away.

Sam's story gave us insights into the emotions that were battling inside him. If I had asked him to write a story about something he knew, he would have given me a rather flat account of a basketball game. Instead, fiction offered him a safe way to cry for help, without having to admit, to his peers or his teachers, that his life at home is a mess.

For me, and for some of my students as well, the most exciting aspect of imaginative writing is that it opens the door to self-discovery. When I start writing a book, I never know what I'm going to learn about myself, and I'm often astonished to get halfway through a piece and say to myself: "Oh! So *this* is where I'm going." Probably that's why I embark on the journey over and over again.

Just as reading opens our eyes to the lives of people different than ourselves, so imaginative writing offers us the opportunity to walk in another's shoes. The following student piece was written on the day of the so-called cease-fire, at the end of the Gulf War. I was teaching in Charlestown, N.H., creating characters with a group of sixth graders. I gave them a choice: they could either make a written portrait of someone they knew well or create an imaginary character. (In my experience, about 90 percent of the students choose to make someone up, or create a character who is a composite of people they know.) I didn't mention the war, but the school was plastered with Desert Storm posters and giant photos of President Bush. There were maps of the Middle East in the hall and yellow ribbons on the trees outside the school. In the center of town, the flag was at half mast, to honor a local man who had just been killed in the fighting.

The only other lead I gave them was that they could describe their character either from the outside (in the third person) or from the inside (in first). One student, Matt, decided to do both:

1. A soldier standing in a field, he is as big as a bear with his weapon at his side. His eyes are as brown as the fur of a brown bear. But he is very discouraged because his country is going down in flames and his people are being killed. His clothes are really raggy like greasy rags. He smells like gunpowder. His friends and family have been killed from this horrible war. He tried to fight for his country and his people. He waits to die because he has nothing to live for. His country's gone and his people are dead. He is thinking of death.

2. I have failed to serve my country and let my country down. I'll wait for the bomb to drop and destroy me at least what's left of me. Lord, please forgive me. I have failed, failed! I wasn't able to save my country. My country is in shambles. Buildings falling behind me. I wish it would end, end it all now. I haven't seen food in days. I'm surprised that I haven't starved to death. I'm a failure. No one's around. I haven't seen anybody since three weeks ago. My platoon was blown up in a blast the size of five blocks. But I was scouting ahead about five miles. I wish I was with them. They never should have been killed. I had no right to live. No right. My family is gone, gone forever. I have nothing to live for.

When Matt read his piece aloud, the room fell silent. He was usually a reluctant writer and the power of the piece surprised him as much as his classmates. Students wearing Desert Storm T-shirts were visibly uncomfortable. Until this moment, no one had suggested they see the war from the point of view of an Iraqi. Like the best writers, Matt had taken us someplace unexpected. Clearly, he was not writing from personal experience, or writing "what he knew." His imagination—and his humanity—allowed him to make the leap from his limited experience in a small New Hampshire town to the battlefield of a foreign country.

When I come to schools as a visiting author, I tell students that the process I go through when creating a story is similar to their own. They give me skeptical looks, but when I describe how an idea, a dream, a fragment of memory, or a bit of conversation is slowly transformed into fiction, some nod their heads. Children have an easier time with this transformation than adults, because for them, the line between reality and fantasy is as thin as gauze. Here's a piece I wish I had been able to write when *I* was eleven:

Up and down I post in the English saddle. The black mane bounces against the horse's neck as she trots. Her shoed hoofs thump against the ground. With each step we come towards the edge of the world. Columbus was wrong—the world is flat. I pull back. She does not stop. She breaks into a canter, then a gallop. Her black hoofs fly as she jumps off the edge of the world. Her hoofs sail. One minute I am sitting in the saddle, the next minute I'm not. I grip her round middle with my legs. The bridle disappears and I grasp her mane tightly. Her beautiful bay coat slowly becomes white. She sprouts wings. Her eyes flash with red, her ears lay back. Her nostrils flare. She no longer wears shoes. We sail through the blue cloudless sky. The wings glitter in the sun's rays. My bad thoughts drift away. But then I fall. I fall long and far. I fall—plop—into my bed.

After a while I wake. I have forgotten about my ride. I go out to the barn. I sort through the bridles and pull out the one I need. I pull the saddle off the rack and toss it over the horse's back. I tighten the girth. I measure the stirrups. I feed her the bit. Up and down I post in the English saddle. The black mane bounces against the horse's neck as she trots. Her shoed hoofs thump against the ground. With each step we come closer to the edge of the world. . . .

—*Rebecca*

I love Rebecca's piece for many reasons: for its imagery, for the sound and rhythm of the language, and for the way she uses repetition to bring us to the surprise at the end. (Many young writers would have stopped at the point where the narrator wakes up.) Was Rebecca writing what she knew? Absolutely. Only an avid horsewoman could give us such accurate details about riding. But she also allows herself the freedom to "jump off the edge of the world"—and soar.

Children ought to have the same opportunities as writers that they have as readers. School classrooms and libraries offer a cornucopia of books, stories in every style and genre dealing with characters from every walk of life, written by authors with many points of view. In the same way, it's important to encourage our students to try all sorts of imaginative writing. Let them write fantasy, horror, science fiction, romance, adventure stories, ghost stories, historical fiction, mysteries, and poetry. Let them set their poems to music, write plays, and perform them. Show them how to play with words and stretch the language. And let them express their emotions, even if that means dealing with ugly, raw, or frightening feelings.

The world is a crazy, insecure, and dangerous place for some children. Imaginative writing can't cure their problems, but it can provide an escape—as Rebecca says, a way to make "bad thoughts drift away." At the same time it offers children a way to make sense of the world, or to understand their part in it. Let our children write what they know—but let them also explore the mysteries of the *un*known, the magical place where miracles happen, where honor, courage and love prevail, where ordinary children are transformed into the heroes and heroines they long to be.

PLUGS

Rising Voices: A Guide to Young Writers' Resources includes lists of reference materials; regional and national resource centers; summer residential writing programs, conferences, and camps; magazines that publish work by young authors; national contests and awards; and helpful books—all for students K–12. The 22-page booklet is available from Poets & Writers, Inc., 72 Spring St., Suite 301, New York, NY 10012 for $6 plus $3.90 shipping and handling. For information, call (212) 226-3586.

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Meredith Sue Willis, who has worked in the T&W program for many years and authored three books for T&W, now has two new books from other publishers. *The Secret Super Powers of Marco* (HarperCollins, $14 hardback, 112 pp.) is a novella for children ages 8–12. *In the Mountains of America* (Mercury House, $10.95 paperback, 192 pp.) is a collection of interlinked stories about Appalachian life.

Here and Now
Nine Meditative Writing Ideas

by Jeffrey Pflaum

CONTEMPLATION WRITING IS AN APPROACH I developed to teach upper-elementary schoolchildren to look at and write about their lives with the aid of music. My students used it to look inside themselves with the mind's eye and to discover various elements of inner experience—images, thoughts, fantasies, feelings, dreams, memories, and ideas. By contemplating to music, the students were able to observe these inner events in a peaceful state and, in turn, to write about what they saw. Reinforcing the writing lessons with discussion helped further the students' understanding of what was happening inside themselves and others.

Contemplation Writing led to what I call Reflection Writing. In this program, the children recalled a specific past experience, and then, using the inner eye, they contemplated the mind-pictures from this past experience. Next, they wrote (I gave them a 150-word minimum). The Reflection Writing period was followed up by a discussion period.

This led to what I call Present-Moment Contemplation Writing, another outgrowth of the original Contemplation Writing program. I developed this form of writing to see if 1) the mind's eye could be useful in dealing with present-moment experiences; 2) it could be used as a method for enhancing the children's ability to concentrate on any given classroom task; and 3) it could improve their self-expression, self-awareness, and self-esteem. In a series of assignments, I tried to stimulate my students' imaginations. During the lessons, the students "experienced" an event and contemplated what happened to them, externally and internally, during the event. Then I had them write (I always ask them to write at least 150 words) about their experiences. The length of the activity and writing period was 45–60 minutes; the follow-up discussion lasted about 30 minutes. I read aloud all the students' pieces anonymously.

CONTEMPLATING YOUR NAME
Present-Moment Contemplation #1

One day a friend called me on the phone. After I said hello, he started repeating my name, "Jeffrey Pflaum," over and over again. Things started happening inside me: associations, images, ideas, thoughts, and feelings floated through my mind. That phone call inspired this lesson.

A few days later, in class, I decided to ask the children to repeat their full names to themselves, silently, for two minutes. After they had done that, I said, "I now want you to recall—and then contemplate—what you just experienced inside yourself. Take five minutes to think about your experience and what you're going to write about. Your composition could include anything—mind-pictures, thoughts, feelings, memories, daydreams, or fantasies. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers. Write about what really happened while you were repeating your name. Try to be honest and to recall as much as you can." When the children finished contemplating, I had them write about the experience.

A few days after I read through their responses and made up discussion questions for each work, I began class by asking some general questions: "What was it like to repeat your name over and over again? Can you describe your experience for us? What happened inside?" This started a dialogue, and then we went on to read and discuss what they'd written. (I always read the pieces anonymously.) Here are the beginnings of some of the children's pieces, followed by my questions:

> I saw in my mind that I was alone in school and there was fog in the hallway. I heard my name called and I was scared. I saw a stranger coming towards me and he said my name. . . .
>
> —*Omayra*

What kind of experience does the writer go through? What mind-picture pops out from the contemplation? What feelings are expressed?

> While I was saying my name, I recognized myself more than before and I felt happy. . . .
>
> —*Sandra*

What does the writer mean by the sentence: "I recognized myself more than before?" Why does she feel happy? What mind-pictures might she be observing?

> I couldn't take it. I got confused, mixed-up like. I don't know what happened.
>
> —*Arthur*

How many people had a hard time doing this exercise? Why did you have trouble? Give me an example of what happened. Why do you think the writer got confused?

JEFFREY PFLAUM is a teacher at P.S. 16 in Brooklyn, N.Y. His article is an excerpt from his book-length manuscript, *Experiences, Reflections, and Insights*. A previous article, "Contemplation Writing," appeared in *Teachers & Writers*, Vol. 23, No. 5.

> I thought about what Manny said about being brave. I saw myself on South First Street. There was a boy who said to me that I was dumb. . . .
>
> —*Alex*

There are two experiences presented here. What are they? Why do the words brave *and* dumb *come up in the contemplation? What do you think happens after the boy says the writer is "dumb"?*

As before, mind-pictures and their descriptions became the sources for the students' creative writing, which often included surrealistic imagery. "Contemplating Your Name" caught the children so off guard that it led them directly "inside" their experience, enabling some "things" to come to the surface spontaneously. In their writings, the children expressed their feelings more openly than usual and, during our discussion periods, talked about them in greater depth. We carefully analyzed specific lines, words, phrases, and ideas to expand our understanding of the writers' experiences. The students felt closer to each other because they experienced the same present-moment event, and their intrapersonal experiences were validated by those of others.

As with all my writing programs, I tried to "light up" each child's head in order that he or she might observe the "show" inside. Present-moment contemplation writing shows students how the present—the *now*—can be fascinating, if they choose to get into it. My aim is to lead the students into a "luminous" present time necessary for learning.

SITTING ALONE IN A ROOM
Present-Moment Contemplation #2

Nowadays, much of our time is occupied by some activity. We are rarely alone with ourselves. But even when we are alone, we watch television, play video games, listen to the stereo, talk to our friends on the phone, play games, or read—involved with things outside of ourselves. Rarely do we sit and "do nothing" for an extended period of time. My next lesson came from this observation.

I asked the children to do the following homework assignment: 1) Sit in a room, alone, for 30 minutes. Don't talk to anybody, watch television, listen to music, play games, make telephone calls, etc. Just sit in a chair or lay in a bed—without falling asleep. 2) Then, for at least five minutes, think about your experience of sitting alone and doing nothing. 3) Keeping these questions in mind, examine the experience: What happened inside you? Did you have thoughts? Feelings? Mind-pictures? What happened outside yourself? What did you experience at the end of your sitting? Would you ever do this again? Why or why not? "Don't write immediately after the sitting," I told them. "Figure out what happened and then decide where to begin your composition. Take about 30 minutes to write." Here are some excerpts from samples by my sixth graders, followed by my discussion questions:

> While I was in my room lying down in bed, I was looking at the wall. As I watched the wall, I saw it moving, and I thought a person was in the wall. . . .
>
> —*Lynette*

What happened to the writer as she stared at the wall? What kind of experience would you call this? Did anyone else imagine things while sitting alone? Describe what you saw. Why do people imagine things if they sit quietly for a long period of time?

> I felt that I was the last boy on earth and there was no one around. I thought I had a new kind of life and started to walk all over the place. I saw a lot of the sun's rays shining at me and believed that God had left me all alone to experience the world by myself. . . .
>
> —*Marc*

What feelings are experienced by the writer? How does he feel about being left alone to experience the world by himself? What do you think his "new kind of life" will be? Why is it both scary and exciting to experience the world by oneself? Did anyone else feel like they were the last person on earth while sitting alone? Explain why you felt this way.

> I was thinking and remembered when I was five years old. I experienced many good things in my life. I thought that I was dreaming. I felt good feelings because when I was a little boy, it was a lot of fun. . . .
>
> —*Jorge*

What happens to this writer? Why does he go back to a past event? Why does he feel like he's dreaming? Did anyone else think of a past event? Describe what you saw. Did anyone feel like they were dreaming?

> Staying in your room for one hour is not the same as going downstairs. There you can play with your friends, walk around, and do anything you want. But being stuck in your room for so long is not fun because you can't do what you want to do. . . .
>
> —*Orlando*

What feelings are expressed by this writer? What is his conflict? How many people felt angry or bored while sitting? Why do you get into these feelings? How can you change them? Could you learn to relax even though you're doing nothing but sitting alone in a room? How can you relax?

> I experienced that I was in Puerto Rico and I was on the beach in the sun. I had been staying at my aunt's house for the summer vacation. . . .
>
> —*Jackie*

What experience does the writer go through? Did anyone else imagine being in another pleasant environment? Describe where you were. Did anyone imagine a beautiful mind-picture? Describe the image. Why is it hard to stay in present time? Does your mind keep going backwards (past) and forwards (future)? Does your mind seem to be all over the place? Do you feel this way at other times?

The purpose of "Sitting Alone in a Room" is to have the students be alone with their thoughts and feelings without any other activity. I feel this helps students to sit down with

their work, to focus their attention, and to complete assignments by themselves. Some people are not good students—they get overwhelmed by their thoughts and feelings. Eventually they stop or avoid work. It's so much easier for them to run to the television or see friends than to be alone and study.

For Marc, the experience of sitting by himself revealed "a new kind of life." With the sun's rays shining at him, he felt eager to experience the world. On the other hand, Orlando showed us the basic conflict of many students—the longing to be with your friends and to have the freedom to do what you want rather than be trapped indoors. By putting Marc's and Orlando's pieces side by side in the discussion period, I gave my class a strong dose of reality that came from their own writings.

Other children responded differently. Some flashed back to and reflected on the past. Jorge recalled a happy time in his life (five years old), as opposed to the much more threatening present. In my discussion I talked about how the mind, when facing an intolerable situation, will go anywhere to avoid it. I ended with these questions: "Why is it so hard to stay in the present? If your mind is not there, why is it hard to learn?" The children's responses to these questions made them aware of some barriers to staying in present time, concentrating, and learning.

CONTEMPLATING HAIKU
Present-Moment Contemplation #3

Oral reading of stories and poems helps children appreciate literature, partly because as the teacher reads aloud, the students picture the story or poem in their minds.

I spent fifteen minutes reading haiku to the class. Before reading, I instructed them to get into the poems by picturing them in their minds, to "let their thoughts go" as they listened. Also, I told them to keep the following questions in mind: 1) What are you thinking about and imagining while listening to the haiku? 2) What feelings are you having? 3) What experiences come to mind after the reading?

Afterwards, the children recalled and contemplated their listening experience. Again, I asked them to focus on the main question: "What happened inside you as the haikus were read aloud?" They had five to ten minutes to examine the inner experience and organize their thoughts in preparation for writing. Next, they were given 25 minutes to write. The total time for the lesson was 45–60 minutes. A few days later I began the discussion period with some brief remarks about the students' haiku journeys. Then I read the contemplations aloud.

> I was looking at the snow and thought that I was a snowflake falling on the ground. . . .
>
> —*Vicky*

Imagine what it would be like if you were a snowflake. Describe the experience. Did anyone else become something in nature, such as a cloud? Tell us about the experience. Do you think the writer was listening carefully while the poetry was read aloud? How does listening carefully help you to enjoy poetry? How does listening carefully help you communicate to others, and to yourself?

> I was thinking about a lake and roses surrounding the water. Children were playing and fireflies glided over the lake as little birds sang. . . .
>
> —*Angelina*

Do you think the writer got into the poetry? Did anyone else create or see a beautiful mind-picture after listening to the poetry? Can you describe it for the rest of us?

> When I heard the poems I went into a world of yellow. There were yellow houses, yellow trees, yellow horses, yellow sky, and yellow clouds. . . .
>
> —*Manny*

What unusual mind-picture does the writer communicate? What feelings are expressed through this image? What does the image make you think about? Imagine that you went into a world of only one color such as red, blue, orange, or green. Describe the mind-pictures, feelings, and thoughts from these experiences.

> The poems were beautiful. Picturing them made me feel happy. All the poems were short and simple, but they had lots of things to say about how beautiful nature is and how beautiful the world is. They made me feel magnificent that I'm alive. . . .
>
> —*Robert*

Why does the writer enjoy the poems so much? Why is listening to and reading poetry so important?

In "Contemplating Haiku," I wanted to find out what was going on inside my students' heads during the "literature appreciation" period: Are they with me? Are they getting into the writings via their imaginations and feelings? Are they in the present moment? Are their minds stimulated by the literature? This exercise gave me a chance to evaluate the children's experiences, and to reinforce—by discussion—what actually happened inside their heads. I was able to see, firsthand, if pleasure and comprehension came from an oral reading of haiku. With haiku, the poet takes you halfway, and you (the reader) must complete the other half of the experience—via contemplation.

The sample writings gave the class some ideas for future writing assignments. Vicky became the snowflake she visualized. Angelina described a beautiful mind-picture she imagined from the poems read. Manny's idea of a "yellow world" could be expanded into a "red world," a "blue world," etc., and these in turn could lead to further ideas for stories or poems. The last contemplation by Robert summed up the ultimate purpose of reading and listening to literature: "It makes me feel magnificent that I'm alive."

STARING AT A FRIEND
Present-Moment Contemplation #4

A game that I used to play as a child was the "staring contest": Who can stare longer at the other person without cracking up? The rules were simple: 1) no making of faces or gestures of any kind, and 2) keep staring, eyeball to eyeball, until someone laughs and is out. In the classroom, I paired off

the children at random. My instructions were: "Stare at your partners for five minutes. Don't talk. If you start to laugh, calm down, and continue staring. During the contest, keep track of what is happening inside and outside yourselves."

When the activity ended, the students took five to ten minutes to recall and contemplate the whole experience (both externally and internally) and to figure out what they would include in their compositions. For the contemplation period, I told the students to ask themselves the following questions: What are you experiencing? What are you seeing on the outside? What are you thinking about? What are you feeling? What pictures come into your mind? How are you feeling at the end of the activity? Why? (The children do not have to answer all the questions, which are there to help them organize their writings.) Then they wrote for 30 minutes.

The following writing samples are given in their entirety.

> I felt as if I was going to burst out laughing. I tried to hold it in, but I couldn't stop laughing. I also felt like sleeping because I looked deeply into his eyes and became hypnotized. His eyes would turn different colors, and every time I looked, I would get dizzy. It got funnier and funnier. His eyes would go up and down, and also sideways, just so he wouldn't start laughing. After that I got a stomachache. I held my breath in order not to laugh. I let go because I couldn't hold it anymore. Mr. Pflaum still did not say, "Stop looking at your partner." Then, finally, he said, "Stop." I took a deep breath and let go. Boy, was I relieved. Soon as he said to start writing, I wrote a lot. Every time I wrote, I would think of another idea. I noticed that I had many things to say.
>
> *—Venus, age 10*

Why do you think the writer feels like laughing as she looks into her partner's eyes? How does she try to stop herself from laughing? How does her partner try to stop himself from laughing? What feelings does the writer experience in the staring contest? Why do you think she is relieved at the end? Why does she have a lot to say in her contemplation? Did anyone else feel hypnotized during their experience? Describe what happened to you.

> I felt weird and funny. I was laughing and couldn't stop because being around girls, that is, very pretty girls, gets me nervous. They make me shake inside, but outside I act cool like nothing is wrong. A little later I felt pretty good for a person who is scared to be with girls. I wish I wasn't afraid. When cute girls are near, my mind goes blank and my heart starts beating faster. I feel like a wolf howling at the moon. The only way this can stop is to realize that it's natural and normal to be scared of pretty girls.
>
> *—Jason, age 9*

Why is this writer laughing? How is his inside experience different from his outside experience? What mind-pictures does the writer convey to us in this situation? What insight does he make at the end of his contemplation? How many people felt nervous as they stared at their partner? Why? Why do people feel one way on the inside, and act differently on the outside? Give an example.

The children had a lot of fun doing this present-moment contemplation. If you want to enhance the activity, and there's time, have the children draw pictures—in an impressionistic or cubist style—of their partners.

DRAWING DESIGNS

Present-Moment Contemplation #5

"Drawing designs" is something most of us have done since early childhood. It can be a relaxing and rewarding experience to let your hand run free over a piece of paper. To this I added the contemplation of the experience, followed by a written description of what happened.

I asked the children to draw designs either small (9" x 12") or large (12" x 18") and then to color them in. I gave them fifteen minutes to do this. There was no talking throughout the assignment. They had to keep track of what was going on inside and outside themselves while drawing. Next, they had five–ten minutes to remember and contemplate drawing the design, and to think about what they would write. As in the previous exercise, I gave them some basic guidelines: Describe your experience. What do you see on the outside? What are you thinking about? What are you feeling? What pictures do you imagine? How do you feel at the end?

> I walked down the street today and felt something was wrong because the ground felt funny. I was going up and when I looked down, the ground became coiled, wiggly, and was in circles. The lines in the sidewalk got all tangled and everything went backwards and forwards. It was as if the sidewalk were alive. I started to run but my foot got caught in one of the coils. I tried and tried to get out. My foot almost got loose, and then finally it slipped free. The streets began to get softer and softer and I couldn't run. I was sinking. I yelled, "Mommy, help me," but the bubbles just came up and I was dead.
>
> *—Ammonis, age 9*

What kind of experience is described here? How does the writer use his design to get into the fantasy? What feelings is the person trying to express? What makes the fantasy interesting? How does the fantasy end? Do you like the ending? How would you end the fantasy? Describe a fantasy you got into while drawing designs. Why did you get into the fantasy? Use your design to illustrate your answer.

> The drawing I made was messy, as if I got it from the garbage or found it somewhere. But that's how designs are—messy. I wonder if people will like my picture. It looks disgusting to me, but to others, I don't know. It might not look awful to them. Oh, I don't care what they say! I get so mad that sometimes I feel like pulling people's hair out. But I would never really do it. If my mother caught me, she would smack me. I would cry only if I got very angry. Then I would break everything and my mother would hit me harder than before. I would really, really hate that. And next, I would run to my

father crying hard. He would feel so sorry for me. I would lay down on his lap, fall asleep, and not feel the pain anymore.

—*Jenice, age 10*

There are two conflicts in the first half of the contemplation. One is about the drawing, and the second is about other people's opinions about the drawing. In your own words, define the two conflicts. What feelings are expressed in this piece? What three ways would the writer use to deal with her painful feelings? Are these positive solutions to the problem? How would you change the angry and hurt feelings around? If you created something, be it a design, a drawing, or a story, would you care more about your opinion of the work or other people's opinions?

I liked both pieces because the students really "lost" themselves in the present-moment activity and their subsequent contemplations. They got into the *now*, and as a result, the voice in each work is spontaneous and genuine. Also, in both cases there was a connection between the illustration and the text. Ammonis took circular lines, coils, and curves to create a funny fantasy with a tragic ending. Jenice's frantic design used many different colors. She finished it with thick black curvy lines that might have led directly to her feelings of frustration, anger, disgust, and hate.

LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW
Present-Moment Contemplation #6

In the city, you often see people sitting by their windows looking outside. They seem to be watching something happening, but they are separated from it by a transparent glass wall. They become not only observers of the outside world, but also participants in the events of their own inner worlds: the window can become a place to create fantasies, stories, and daydreams, and a place to think about past or present events. In Present-Moment Contemplation #6, I wanted my students to use the window to view their inside worlds just as much as the outside world.

The students stood by the (closed) windows in the classroom and looked outside for ten minutes. (If the classroom is not convenient for this, the children can do it at home.) I asked them to stay "under control" and to remain silent for the duration of the activity. I instructed them to keep the following question in mind while looking out the window: "What is happening inside yourself as you look outside?" When the exercise was completed, I gave them five minutes to review and contemplate the "looking" experience, and to think about what they were going to say in their compositions, with a typical set of guide questions. Here are two of their pieces.

I saw a white bird flying across a dark cloud. The bird flew higher and higher. I heard a sound as if the clouds were mad. The noise was like a tiger's growl. A skyscraper with a point looked like it was guarding the world for us because we didn't realize how important our love and freedom were. They would end if we didn't stop thinking only about ourselves. The cloud was getting darker and sadder because the people weren't listening. They worried about money and power—not about things like communication. I felt as if the clouds and birds cried out for love. They were unhappy because they needed a better life, too. I thought that we could help ourselves if we helped others—including the birds and animals. If you think they are unimportant, you are wrong. Even though they are animals, that doesn't change things. They have the same needs that we do—like water, food, love, and shelter. We're all the same beings living in the same world.

—*Elsa, age 12*

What insight does the writer make while looking outside? According to the writer, what are the problems with people today, and what should we concern ourselves with? What is missing from today's world? How are birds and animals affected by human behavior? How does the inside world affect the outside world?

When I looked out the window, I thought that I was flying on a cloud. It was a sunny day, when suddenly gray clouds came, and lightning struck me. I fell on a roof and stayed there for half an hour. I woke up and didn't realize that I was dead.

I walked home and kissed my mother. She didn't even know I kissed her. I got real scared and looked at my back. Wings began to grow. I walked outside and the sun shone on me. And I went to heaven and saw lots of angels.

One angel was very special to me. It was my mother. When I saw her, we hugged each other tightly and kissed. Then God said, "You could go back to earth," and I said, "I want to stay here with my mother." I had made friends with the angels, and then, in a flash, I shook my head and stopped thinking. It was a dream. But I wish the part about my mother was true.

—*Nigza, age 11*

What feelings are expressed in the fantasy? What images stand out in your mind? What does the story make you think about? Why does the writer have herself struck by lightning and killed in the story? Why can't the writer stay in heaven with her mother and angel friends?

CREATING MIND-PICTURES
Present-Moment Contemplation #7

Mind-pictures had become such an integral part of my programs that I wanted to see if the children could conjure up images for contemplation—from external reality, the imagination, or both—at will. We drew the shades and turned off the lights. The students put their heads down on their desks and used the inner eye to find and observe the pictures traveling across the mind's "imaginary movie screen." No talking or distractions of any kind were allowed. The children had five–ten minutes to find images inside their heads. I did not tell them anything else. They could go in any direction they desired. After they finished, I asked them to recall and contemplate the experience of "inner visualization" for another five minutes, and to think about what they

were going to say in their compositions. If they asked questions like "Can we make up a story or fantasy?," I told them, "It's your choice. Just describe the pictures you saw in your mind. Put them in whatever form you want."

> When my head was down, I went back to the past. And I was in church because my mother died. My whole family was there. When we got out of church, my father didn't want me to see my mother get buried. I cried so he would let me go. And he did. When I saw my mother, she was pale blue and purple. I cried when they buried her.
>
> That night I was in my cousin's house and I heard someone call my name. Then I saw something white like a ghost. I rubbed my eyes and it was gone. The next morning my brother, sister, and I went to our house. I looked out my mother's bedroom window. I heard someone call me again. My heart pounded hard and fast. I told my cousin what happened. She told me that she felt like someone was in the room, too. Weeks after my mother's death I kept seeing and hearing things.
>
> *—Nigza, age 11*

What kind of experiences are described by the writer? What is the main mind-picture that starts this reflection? Describe two other mind-pictures that you see in this experience. What feelings go with each picture? How many of you have had strange or unusual experiences after the loss of a loved one? Can you describe the mind-pictures from these events? How many of you saw other images from the past?

Nigza's mother died when she was seven years old. She was still depressed over the death and had unresolved feelings that overwhelmed her. If you compare Nigza's fantasy about heaven (in Present-Moment Contemplation #6) with this one, you can see that she was trying to deal with her feelings through fantasy and reflection. In my opinion, both writings helped Nigza through her ordeal by giving her insights into her present mental state and thus a heightened level of awareness and understanding of herself. I should point out that all Nigza's classmates were aware of her situation, and that despite the personal nature of her piece (which, like the others, I read anonymously), I felt it worth the risk of making it public.

If children got into fantasies or "movie" experiences—in which they describe one mind-picture after another—that was fine, too. (In fact, this was what I had anticipated.) My main intention was to see if they could come up with the raw materials for creative writing.

CONTEMPLATING A WORD
Present-Moment Contemplation #8

The purpose of this assignment was to get the students to realize how words could trigger associations, ideas, images, and feelings. I had the children take five–ten minutes to draw up a list of approximately ten words that made them feel good or happy: "When you hear, see, or read this word, something goes off inside you and makes you feel good all over." After completing the list, they selected one word for their contemplation. (I gave them two minutes for this.) Next I said: "Contemplate the word, that is, 'say' the word silently, over and over again, for two minutes." I asked them to be aware, while they repeated the word, of what was going on inside them. Next the students spent five minutes contemplating the experience of repeating the word. The guide questions I gave them were the basic ones: Pictures? Thoughts? Ideas? Feelings? Afterwards they wrote a composition describing the experience of contemplating a word that made them happy.

In the following piece, the student chose two words instead of one: *love* and *smile.*

> I pictured two little friends talking about love. "Love is a beautiful word," one of them said. And the other said, "Love is love. I hope we never change the word." The first friend said to the second friend: "Is a smile a little love?" The friend answered, "Yes, a smile is a little love." "Goodbye . . . with love," said the first friend. And the second friend said goodbye with a smile. What is love? And what is a smile? I am going to explain it to you: Love is all love. And a smile is a little love. This is all you need to learn about love. I love you, mother. . . .
>
> *—Sandra, age 10*

How does the writer get into her contemplation of the words love *and* smile*? What does she mean in the following lines: 1) "A smile is a little love." 2) "Love is all love." 3) "I love you, mother. . . ."? What do you think is our most important experience with love? Explain by giving examples. Picture or visualize the words* love *and* smile *in your mind. Describe the images you see. What feelings go along with the pictures? Describe what happened inside your mind as you repeated your particular word over and over again.*

The student combined *love* and *smile* to create a simple yet moving contemplation. The story of "two little friends" discussing "two big words" comes across to us, and then ends with a striking last line. I should point out, however, that both this contemplation and the previous one (creating mind-pictures) were two of the more difficult lessons in the unit. You may need more than one lesson for each to get great results.

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS
Present-Moment Contemplation #9

In the previous two exercises, I tried to get children to create mind-pictures on the spot, and to take a significant word from their vocabulary and to find its various associations. This next present-moment contemplation focuses on the students' thought processes. I wanted to demonstrate to the class that there was an unlimited storehouse of thoughts in their minds that they could tap—at will—and use for creative writing. In fact, if you combine all the ingredients from Present-Moment Contemplations #7, #8, and now #9—images, words, and thoughts—you come up with some key elements for writing.

The procedure for "A Penny for Your Thoughts" was different than that of previous exercises. First I explained what that expression means: "If you should see a person who seems to be deep in thought, you might say, 'A penny for your thoughts,' which translates into 'Would you like to tell

me what you're thinking about?' It's a friendly gesture that will let the person express what's on his or her mind." Next, I told them that I was curious about the thoughts they had inside their heads. Specifically my directions were: "When you hear me say 'A penny for your thoughts,' think carefully for a little while and come up with a thought and write it on your paper. If you have more than one thought or idea, write all of them down. I'll give you a few minutes to write down your answers. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers in the lesson. When I say, 'A penny for your thoughts' again, come up with another thought and write it down. Write whatever comes into your head. Pretend that you're fishing, but the thing you're trying to catch is a thought. Cast the line in the waters of your mind and catch an idea. I will repeat the saying about ten times. Number each thought as you write it."

The following is a sample from a fourth grade student:

> 1) I thought about what my mother could buy with a penny. 2) I feel like I want to beat somebody up. 3) I want to go home and watch the movie *Breakdance*. 4) I hardly know what to write. 5) I wish I can go on a vacation. This schoolwork drives me crazy. 6) There's an ice-cream man outside the door. 7) I wish I could fly a rocket. 8) I forgot what I was supposed to write. 9) I don't know why I wear glasses. 10) This is fun. 11) I have to study for the talent show. 12) Boy, am I hungry. 13) I am so tired of school I have a stomachache. 14) We did a lot of contemplations. 15) I thought about my friends. 16) A lot of kids can dress. 17) Everybody is pretty. 18) Brandy is always going to the library. 19) Mathew and Islam are good artists. 20) I don't know why I write so much. 21) Some people are funny. 22) I remember when I hit my brother and he said, "Ouch, ouch!" 23) Anna always wears glasses. 24) I wish I was rich. 25) I want to own TOYS "R" US. 26) Gabriel's mind is always wandering. 27) Mr. Pflaum is very funny. 28) I remember screaming at my mom. 29) I am going fast. 30) I hardly know what it means. 31) Some people are nice. 32) I can't go to the center today. 33) I was right, the answer is 1,000. 34) I thought about the astronauts who died. 35) We do lots of things in school. 36) Mr. Pflaum said we lost our gym period. 37) I have many answers. 38) My pencil is getting wasted from writing. 39) I am finished. 40) I did pretty good.
>
> —*Venus, age 10*

What feelings does the writer express? List some of them, and give the related number of the thought. Is there any confusion on the writer's part? Give an example by using one of the writer's thoughts. Give me a mind-picture from the thought that really stands out in your head and explain why. Which thought is funny? How does the writer feel at the end of the contemplation, and at the beginning? Why do you think her feelings changed? After listening to this person's thoughts, did you get new thoughts of your own? Can you give some examples? What feelings did you have as you wrote your thoughts on paper? How did you feel at the beginning of the lesson? At the end? Why?

For the discussion period, I had the children read their thoughts aloud. It became like an extremely energetic and powerful brainstorming session. Venus's answers showed one student's journey in this present-moment activity. She starts off with some hostility, talking about how schoolwork drives her crazy. There is also confusion about what to write. But by the end—her 40th thought—she looks back at all her work and says, "I did pretty good." She really got into the exercise and didn't censor herself. She wrote down whatever came to her mind, moving along with the assignment's rapid pace. She wrote a lot—and made a lot of sense, too.

•

In the last few years, I've also used traditional meditation techniques in my present-moment activities. I've found that children enjoy meditating and writing afterwards. Various meditations—breath meditation, body-scan meditation, and walking meditation—are described in two particularly helpful books: *Journey of Awakening* by Ram Dass (New York: Bantam Books, 1978) and *How to Meditate* by Lawrence LeShan (New York: Bantam Books, 1978). I've also used Daniel Goleman's excellent audiotape, *The Art of Meditation* (Los Angeles: Audio Renaissance Tapes, 1989). My students have been enthusiastic about engaging in these activities that are outside their usual experience.

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Here are some other ideas for present-moment contemplations:

1) Use other expressions (like "A penny. . . .")

2) Try different types of meditations.

3) Use a physical activity such as catching a tennis ball in a tennis ball can.

4) Have the children stare at a burning candle in a dark classroom.

5) Blow soap bubbles for ten minutes.

6) Do a food contemplation with bubble gum or peppermints.

7) Create an absurd word, sentence, or paragraph and use it as a catalyst.

8) Use an entire paragraph as a trigger.

9) Let the class listen to the same song over and over again.

10) Observe a work of art.

11) Present a series of slides on whatever subject you think will be fascinating.

12) Play classical music.

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In the Present-Moment Contemplation writing program, I was concerned not only with getting results from a specific lesson, but also with finding out how that lesson might influence future learning. I found that the contemplations got the students more and more into the present moment, which in turn improved their concentration and listening skills, making them more receptive to learning. I made inroads with each assignment, and realized that their cumulative effect enhanced the children's ability to learn.

I got the students to "be there with me" in present time, to involve themselves in what I was teaching. With more active and focused minds in the class, my lessons were much

more effective. I always told the children, "If more of you are with me, if more of you are present and concentrating, then the lesson's going to be better, and we're all going to learn more." This newly created field of cool blue focus and awareness, mixed with the fuel of motivation, enthusiasm, and excitement, helped to lead the students into a "luminous" present time necessary for learning. The more we were there, the more we discovered about ourselves, others, and the world. Together we made things happen. Together we created a dynamic energy that took us into the extraordinary.

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