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Tolstoy, the Writing Teacher

by Bob Blaisdell

Every artistic word, whether it belongs to Goethe or to Fedka, differs from the inartistic in that it evokes an endless mass of thoughts, images, and explanations.

—Tolstoy, "Are We to Teach the Peasant Children, or Are They to Teach Us?"

WHEN I WAS EIGHTEEN I READ *ANNA KARENINA* and my life changed. For one thing, it seemed as if *the* novel—that is, the novel I wanted to write—had been written. I reread *Anna* four or five times before I got around to reading *War and Peace*, but during the interim I read most of Tolstoy's shorter fiction, essays, and even the religious works. When I started teaching as a graduate assistant at age twenty-two, I picked up *Tolstoy on Education*, a collection of pedagogical articles in a 1904 translation reissued in 1967 by the University of Chicago Press. Until about fifteen years ago this was the only edition in English of his teaching articles; unfortunately, it is now out of print again.

Maybe I'm out of the loop, but I never seem to hear Tolstoy mentioned by teachers or educational theorists. Tolstoy is such an enormous historical figure that I'm always surprised and amazed when I learn that my fellow teachers and writers don't know about his brilliant and, though intermittent, nearly lifelong career as a teacher. Many people don't know that Tolstoy ran a free and noncompulsory school for peasant children on his estate, Yasnaya Polyana. His first, short-lived experiment with teaching came at the age of twenty-one, in 1849–50. In 1859, now a famous author and a war veteran, he began another school. The school's motto, written over the door, was "Come when you like, leave when you like." Tolstoy trained three teachers to conduct classes with him for forty students in a two-story building; the subjects ranged from literature to music to biology, with the students' interests directing the daily course of study.

As with every project Tolstoy pursued, he did enormous and exhaustive research; in 1860–61, his last venture out of Russia, he went to France, Germany, and England to find solutions and alternatives to his own teaching experiments.

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Tolstoy

Then, having studied the methods and theories of Europe's leading schools and educators, in 1862–1863 Tolstoy formulated his own dynamic, clearly drawn ideas, rejecting most of the pedagogies he had read and observed as twaddle or harmful:

> The best teacher will be he who has at his tongue's end the explanation of what it is that is bothering the pupil. These explanations give the teacher the knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods, the ability of inventing new methods, and, above all, not a blind adherence to one method, but the conviction that all methods are one-sided, and that the best method would be the one which would answer best to all the possible difficulties incurred by a pupil, that is, not a method, but an art and talent.[1]

So teaching is an "art," and like any of the arts, it works only when it works. Tolstoy knew from experience that what was successful in the classroom one day did not necessarily succeed the next. Theories aren't to be bowed to—they are for a teacher to use (or not use), a part of his or her technical and creative skills. At the same time, there *were* rules-of-thumb Tolstoy and his teachers observed. The chaos and clamor of everyday classroom activity was not to be squashed by teacherly authority; the "chaos" was natural, even necessary, and Tolstoy discovered that the children themselves justly regulated its duration and limits.[2]

Even more exciting and important than Tolstoy's "theories" or anti-theories are the accounts of his interactions with the peasant children. ("More important" because the dramatizations show more about successful teaching than any of Tolstoy's formulations can.) In two essays in particular, "Are We to Teach the Peasant Children, or Are They to Teach Us?" and "The School at Yasnaya Polyana for the Months of November and December 1862," Tolstoy's accounts are so beautiful and evocative that they're as moving as his fiction:

> Fedka kept looking up from his copy-book to me, and, upon meeting my eyes, smiled, winked, and repeated: "Write, write, or I'll give it to you!" He was evidently amused to see a grown person write a theme.
>
> Having finished his theme worse and faster than usual, he climbed on the back of my chair and began to read over my shoulders. I could not proceed; others came up to us, and I read to them what I had written. They did not like it, and nobody praised it. I felt ashamed, and, to soothe my literary ambition, I began to tell them the plan of what was to follow. In the proportion as I advanced in my story, I became enthusiastic, corrected myself, and they kept helping me out. One would say that the old man should be a magician; another would remark: "No, that won't do,—he will be just a soldier; the best thing will be if he steals from him; no, that won't go with the proverb," and so forth.
>
> All were exceedingly interested. It was evidently a new and exciting sensation for them to be present at the process of creation, and to take part in it. Their judgments were all, for the most part, of the same kind, and they were just, both as to the very structure of the story and as to the details and characterizations of the persons. Nearly all of them took part in the composition; but, from the start, there distinguished themselves positive Semka, by his clearly defined artistic quality of description, and Fedka, by the correctness of his poetical conceptions, and especially by the glow and rapidity of his imagination.[3]

From the beginning of "Are We to Teach the Peasant Children...?" Tolstoy makes plain and simple what, in the classroom, I sometimes understand and what I sometimes forget:

> The chief art of the teacher, in the study of language, and the chief exercise with the aim in view of guiding children to write compositions consist in giving them themes, and not so much in furnishing them as in presenting a large choice, in pointing out the extent of the composition, and in indicating the initial steps.[4]

Tolstoy is not referring here to "adult learners," whom I teach. There are useful distinctions between children and adult students, but as far as this statement goes, there is no difference. When Tolstoy describes his wonder at witnessing a student's first experience with artistic creation ("I felt that with that day a new world of enjoyment and suffering was opened up to him,—the world of art...—the germination of the mysterious flower of poetry"[5]), I think of nearly every meeting of the writing workshops I have taught at the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in Manhattan, started three winters ago by the author Ian Frazier.

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1. Leo Tolstoy, "On Methods of Teaching the Rudiments," in *On Education*, translated by Leo Wiener (University of Chicago, 1972), p. 58.

2. "We think that the disorder is growing greater and greater, and that there are no limits to it,—we think that there is no other means of stopping it but by the use of force,—whereas we only need to wait a little, and the disorder (or animation) calms down naturally by itself, growing into a much better and more permanent order than what we have created." Ibid., p. 234.

3. Ibid., pp. 193–194.

4. Ibid., pp. 191–192.

5. Ibid., p. 197.

Most of the thousand men and women who patronize the church for lunch every weekday are homeless, and the eight to twelve individuals who regularly participate in our early-afternoon workshop do so voluntarily. My work at the soup kitchen is my only experience teaching in a wholly noncompulsory program, and because this is so, it's different from every other class I've ever taught. I'm a college professor and I know it's not the same as teaching an elective; college students usually have to take *some* elective—yours or someone else's. Working at the soup kitchen humbles my view of myself as a teacher. Without doing what I do in classrooms—that is, "teaching" (coercing, encouraging, threatening, grading, correcting)—the results are *better.*

A prospective participant asked me, "What's in it for you?"

I shrugged. "That I enjoy it?"

"You getting paid?"

"Yeah."

"There you go. Now what's in it for me?"

I stumbled around for an answer to that the first two years of the workshop, but now I know that the best one, the most succinct anyway, is "fun."

Writing is not always fun, of course; it is, as Tolstoy says, "a new world of enjoyment and suffering." My co-leaders (Ian Frazier and Susan Shapiro) and I have a preference for uncomplicated topics: for instance, "How I Came to New York"; "Easy Come, Easy Go"; "One Song I Can't Forget"; "A Letter to a Person from My Past"; "If I Had Not Seen It, I Would Not Have Believed It"; "A Turning Point." The most surprising reaction to one of our topics was when we suggested "First Love." We had thought it was a light theme. But here we saw "a new world of suffering," wherein two participants were wiping tears from their eyes as they wrote or read aloud their compositions. "First Love" was evocative not only of partners they had loved and lost, but of the drug use that helped precipitate the loss.

When we come up with topics, worrying whether they're relevant or off the mark, we are usually worrying over nothing. The writers at Holy Apostles turn and shape the topics to their own likings—unlike nervous college students, they know that they really can write about whatever they want. Who's to stop them, and why would we stop them?

Like Tolstoy, we offer students a couple of themes for writing each week. We always tell them, "If those don't do much for you, write about anything." The participants listen to the suggested topics thoughtfully. One or two sometimes raise an eyebrow or ask, "Where do you get these topics from?"

"I don't know, Arthur. They just come to us."

"From some place far, far away, I think—but I'll give 'My Face' a try," Arthur said.

Actually, I'd got the idea for "My Face" from an essay by Robert Benchley in Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*, but it didn't seem to matter where it came from. As soon as I announced the topic, I began to wonder at my tactlessness. T. C., one of the regular participants, had massive scarring on his face. I hastily reminded the men and women that they could write about "whatever."

But T. C. paid it no mind and went on to write and read aloud:

My Face

In December of 1980 I received second and third degree burns to my face, hands, and left leg. To reduce keloids (a type of scar tissue) from forming, burn patients are required to wear a skin tight garment called a Jobst garment which resembles a silk stocking. The pressure exerted on the skin grafts and second degree burn areas from the Jobst garment prevents or deters keloid formations.

I started wearing Jobst gloves and face mask about six weeks after I was burned. I was told to wear the garments at all times except when I bathed. When I wore the face mask I looked as though I had pulled a tan silk stocking over my head which had cutouts for eyes, nose, and mouth. I used to get many double-takes from people while I was driving or out walking, but my biggest concern was being taken for a bank robber at the branch where I banked. I made it a point to let the bank guard, who was armed with a holstered pistol, know that I'd be wearing a mask when I came into the bank. I didn't want him panicking and shooting me.

We were all pleasantly surprised—a fine, somewhat comic piece! Arthur nodded at T. C. and said, "That's very good. Yeah. Thank you."

"I thought, 'What the hell, let me clear the air so nobody has to wonder any more,'" said T. C.

Arthur then read the piece he'd written:

My face is not the same face I was born with. You may laugh at that statement, but it's true. My face has changed over the years. My face even changes from moment to moment and day to day or week and month to month. I have pictures in my wallet of the different faces that have been at the top of this body, and some of them are so radically different that you would have trouble recognizing them (these different faces) as belonging to the same person. Example, I have a picture from when I was a derelict and panhandling in the street for money to supply my daily needs. That picture, that face, is so different from what I look like now, as almost to belong to separate people. The face I had then was the face of a person who was always ready with a word, or song, or even a smile if it would get the desired results. This face had lots of hair on the head, because I never got a haircut. There is a beard that shows lots of white hair at the chin. There are no glasses on this face, and the picture of me looks as if it is about to speak. There is a slight glimmer of teeth almost like the person has just finished talking, or is about to say something. It is not a serious face in that it appears to have come to terms with its environment and the ability to cope with its surroundings. This is the face of a man who has held a cup in his hands and begged for change on the street and in subway cars. This is the face of a man who does not fear being arrested for fare beating on the subway, this is the face of a person who lives on

the street and knows how to make the streets pay and support his survival. The face is always ready to tell a joke, a story, or sing a song to get you or anyone else to part with a dollar or spare change. This face has challenged cops to fight in police stations, only to have them laugh because they knew that it was a drunken challenge made by someone so under the influence of alcohol the body that supported the face couldn't stand up. This same face made these same cops ask to hear him sing "Danny Boy," which the face did on a moment's notice. This drunken face has panhandled money from the likes of Brooke Shields, Danny Glover, Tony Bennett, and B. J. Crosby, the singer in *Smokey Joe's Cafe*. This is one of the faces I possessed at one time but not any longer. The face you would see today is a little more, or much more serious. There is no beard, this face is clean shaven, the hair is cut and trimmed, this face I have today wears glasses and looks a bit scholarly. This is a face that has not smoked a cigarette or drank alcohol for almost a year. It is a clean face. A face that is so different from the face that was drinking as seemingly to belong to two different people. But they both belong to me.

To me, Arthur's essay leaves Benchley's terrific essay in the dust. How intelligent and self-scrutinizing and sympathetic it is. Hearing Arthur read the piece made me wonder how it could be that his latent writing skill could remain untapped for so long. Now, at age fifty, it revealed itself with no prompting—just a topic, and a borrowed one at that. We simply provided Arthur with a time, place, pen, and pad.

Tolstoy made much of two of his students, claiming for them an artistic sense that he felt he himself lacked:

> It seemed so strange to me that a peasant boy, with the bare knowledge of reading, should suddenly manifest a conscious artistic power, such as Goethe, in all his immeasurable height of development, had been unable to equal. It seemed so strange and offensive to me that I, the author of *Childhood* who had had certain success and had earned recognition for artistic talent from a cultivated Russian public,—that I, in the matter of art, not only should be unable to teach anything to eleven-year-old Semka or Fedka or to help them, but that I only with difficulty and in a happy moment of excitement should be able to follow and understand them.[6]

Was Tolstoy exaggerating the gifts of his students? He was a man who tried to master (and sometimes did master) anything he took up (novel writing, farming, shoemaking); so when he uses the word *offensive* he is suggesting, I believe, something of his amazement that what Semka and Fedka possess "in the matter of art," Tolstoy himself could not attain through will or practice.

To the end of his life, Tolstoy strove to attain for himself the simplicity, clarity, and artistic expression demonstrated by the peasant children. To the end of his life, he believed he had much to learn from good-hearted, intelligent people (of any age) who shared none of the privileges of his class, wealth, fame, or education. That humility is one thing that teaching can provide writers and artists.

Note: The Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen Writers' Workshop (1995–1997) anthology is available on request from the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen at 296 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY, 10001, tel. (212) 807-6799. (The anthology is free, but please include $3 for postage.)

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6. Ibid., p. 201.

PLUGS

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To give you extra time to try out ideas with students, we've extended the submissions deadline for our collection of essays, *Classics in the Classroom,* to **April 1, 1998**. Submissions should be 5–25 pages, double-spaced. For more information or to discuss an idea, call T&W toll-free at 1-888-BOOKS-TW and speak with Ron Padgett or Chris Edgar.

Also please note: if you really hurry, there's still time to submit an essay for *The T&W Guide to William Carlos Williams* (deadline: December 1).

People Who Led to Me

Linked Writing Using Adrienne Kennedy's *People Who Led to My Plays*

by Lee Ann Brown

I AM A POET. MY FIRST BOOK, *POLYVERSE,* consists mainly of one-page poems, with a few forays into short series, poems gradually accumulated over ten years. So, in my second book, I wanted to try something different and proceed from an overall structure. I began looking for models for writing longer works. That's when I found Adrienne Kennedy's wonderful autobiography, *People Who Led to My Plays.* Since many younger writers gravitate towards personal writing, Kennedy's multi-sectioned list poem provides them with a wonderful way to work with form. I decided to develop a writing assignment using *People Who Led to My Plays*, which I tried out with my college writing students.

Kennedy's unique book is divided into different periods of her life: for instance, "Elementary School: 1936–1943," "Junior High: 1943–1946," "Marriage and Motherhood: 1953–1960," and "A Voyage: 1960–1961" where she describes her first trip to Africa, "the place of her ancestors." The first page of each chapter lists some of the chapter's highlights. For "Elementary School: 1936–1943," for example, she lists:

> Fairy tales
> My family
> The radio
> Jesus
> My teachers
> The movies, dolls, paper dolls
> JANE EYRE

The chapters then proceed by introducing different characters from Kennedy's life—family, imaginary friends, fictional characters, historical figures, movie stars, and cartoon characters, with their names in italics, followed by a text ranging from one line to a paragraph recounting the reasons that figure was important to her life and writing. For Kennedy, as for many writers, figures from books and movies are just as powerful presences as real flesh-and-blood relatives and friends. We can see how people such as Kennedy's parents and Jesus figured differently in different periods of her life. She always focuses on how figures influenced her as a developing writer. Two of my favorite examples appear early on in the text:

> *People on Old Maid Cards* (1936, age five):
> Through make-believe one could control people on a small scale.
>
> *Paper dolls*:
> You could invent enchantment with paper.

I picture the young Kennedy improvising with characters on the floor to make little plays. These entries then butt up against those such as:

> *Joe Louis* (the heavyweight champ):
> We listened to his fights on the radio. His fame and popularity crossed racial boundaries.

The result is a strong and complex portrait of Kennedy and how her culturally specific world view and her imagination began to mesh.

Since I am interested in personal memoir writing that is also interesting *formally,* catalogues such as Kennedy's book or Joe Brainard's *I Remember* (a long prose poem consisting of lines and anecdotes all beginning with the phrase "I remember") particularly intrigue me as models. Another exemplary work that uses lists is Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book,* which contains such great lists as "Things That Are Red" and "Things That Are Disgusting." (Shonagon, a 12th-century Japanese court woman, kept a notebook beside her bed to record personal thoughts and poems.)

I've found that lists also work well for my students. The list is a simple but generative form. My students and I can write in small units that we feel comfortable with, such as single lines or paragraph-length anecdotes, and then join these small units together to form a chain. The list poem is also useful in that it frees the writer from a strictly linear narrative. One memory or detail may trigger off another from a different part of life. You are free to play within the form, linking your influences in ways you never realized before.*

The "personal" list poem also appeals to me because I'm very people-centered. When I think of different periods of my life, I define them primarily by the people who were around me at the time and who gave me a sense of identity. I find that my students realize they feel the same, and that this

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* See Larry Fagin's *The List Poem* (T&W, 1991) for more suggestions on how to use the list poem in the classroom.

realization helps them understand that personal writing does not just have to be "I-centered" journal writing. The "personal" list poem takes the students out of themselves, by asking them to think about other people who have influenced their lives, and about how those other people's influences have changed them.

Because Kennedy's book is written in straightforward language, it is a good model for writers at all levels. Another wonderful element of *People Who Led to My Plays* is that Kennedy combines family snapshots with pictures of movie stars and other illustrations. The book's collection of photographs mirrors her "mother's red scrapbook," which makes several appearances:

> *The people in my mother's red scrapbook:* I yearned to know them.
>
> *People my mother dreamed about:*
> In the morning I could hardly wait to hear about them. The stories she told of them were as exciting as the movies of Frankenstein and Dracula that I saw at the Waldorf.
>
> These people my mother dreamed about continued to grow in my imagination. Like the people in the red scrapbook, they often knew each other and had known my parents when they were young.
>
> I would list them in my mind as I sat on the front steps of our house (the steps faced the orange tower).
>
> Her mother who died when she was three.
>
> Her stepfather who was killed walking across an electric railroad track.
>
> Her Aunt Hattie who died when my mother was pregnant with me.
>
> When my mother was making oatmeal on winter mornings as I sat waiting with my bowl at the kitchen table, I secretly yearned that my mother would talk more about people she dreamed about. There is no doubt that a person talking about the people in his or her dreams became an archetype for people in my monologues, plays and stories.

An important figure in American theater, Adrienne Kennedy is known primarily for her one-act plays. These include *The Owl Answers, A Rat's Mass, A Lesson in Dead Language, A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, which received an Obie Award in 1965. Many of her plays involve characters from *People Who Led to My Plays*. For instance, the following character, Sarah Clara, a real-life older girl, served as a model for two heroines of Kennedy's plays:

> *Sarah Clara:*
> When my grandmother went to work every morning, my brother and I walked down the road to Aunt Mary Lee's house, but if Aunt Mary Lee was working (they were servants in the same wealthy household) then my grandmother would leave us at Sarah Clara's house, a few doors away.
>
> Sarah Clara, my grandmother always said, was the prettiest girl in Montezuma. She and her grandparents lived in a yellow-and-white frame house with giant sunflowers in the front yard. Sarah Clara was sixteen and told me stories of high school. Her boyfriend gave her a bottle of Tabu cologne and she let me smell the Tabu and even put a drop of it on my cheek, and she let me see her long yellow dotted Swiss evening dress that she had worn to the high school dance.
>
> Many summer afternoons my brother and I sat on Sarah Clara's porch until my grandmother came home. I daydreamed of a day when I would have a bottle of Tabu and a long yellow dress and walked around the porch. How could I know that years later, one summer sitting in a house on Piazza Donatello in Florence, I would create two heroines, and one's name would be Sarah and the other, the heroine in a play called *The Owl Answers*, would be named Clara.

The female protagonists of Kennedy's plays also represent "parts of herself." In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the character called "Negro-Sarah" is fragmented and multifaceted, existing in relation to four other characters, whom she describes as "one of herselves": Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba.

The Patrice Lumumba character also comes from experiences described in *People Who Led to My Plays*, from the section "A Voyage: 1960–1961," in which Kennedy travels to Africa:

> *Patrice Lumumba:*
> When we arrived in West Africa everyone talked of Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's young and heroic Prime Minister. And in Ghana, at every store and market, there were photographs of Lumumba walking with Kwame Nkrumah. (These men represented a vision of a freed Africa.) I carried the small gilt-edged photo of Nkrumah and Lumumba in my purse. Suddenly Lumumba was murdered.
>
> "They killed Patrice Lumumba," everyone in the streets of Accra, in the restaurants, at the campus of Legon, said. "They killed Patrice Lumumba. Lumumba was the hope."
>
> Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered this African hero, he had been murdered. Ghana was in mourning. There had been a deep kinship between Nkrumah and Lumumba. A few people we had met had heard Lumumba speak. Even though I had known of him so briefly, I felt I had been struck a blow. He became a character in my play...a man with a shattered head.
>
> *My father and Patrice Lumumba:*
> I remembered my father's fine stirring speeches on the Negro cause...and Du Bois's articles in *Crisis* which my father had quoted....There was no doubt that Lumumba, this murdered hero, was merged in my mind with my father.

Here's another example of two characters from the book who later appear in a play, *June and Jean in Concert*:

> *June and Jean:*
> Twins in my class in kindergarten. They walked to school on the same street as I did. I walked as close to them as possible so I could study these two people who looked exactly alike.

Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, in an interview in *Bomb* magazine, asked Kennedy about the transformation of her life into writing:

> SLP: I had the chance to see the two plays, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* and I was impressed by your use of biography. I'm interested in how history spews out biography. You use the idea of life story. But I'm also aware that life story, or biography, means different things to different people, it's not a clear-cut, easily defined thing. And I wonder how....
>
> AK: How I use biography?
>
> SLP: Well, telling a story of someone's life, or telling the story of your own life, your autobiography.
>
> AK: ...I have to totally credit that to my mother. There were two children. I was the only girl. And she just always talked to me. She would tell me things that happened to her...her dreams...her past, it's like the monologues in my plays, it really is. Because her stories were loaded with imagery and tragedy, darkness, sarcasm and humor. She could describe a day when she was sitting on her porch in Georgia and what happened...and my father always gave speeches about the cause, the Negro cause. So there is no doubt in my mind that I try to merge those two things. I'm genuinely fascinated—and will always be—by that pool of stories I heard when I was growing up.

To the question, "Why did you start writing plays?" Kennedy answers:

> I always wrote plays of sorts, little scenes about what was happening. I basically picked on my family, what was happening in school. I saw our house as a stage. When we'd have dinner, I'd go upstairs and write what we said. And then I saw *The Glass Menagerie* when I was about 15. It was at the beginning of the summer, and I came home from *The Glass Menagerie* and started to write a play about our family. I have no idea what it was about, I threw it away. But in the meantime, coincidentally, my high school homeroom was the drama room—it had all the Samuel French editions, and a stage. So I decided to take a drama course. The drama teacher, Eugene C. Davis, used to go to New York every summer for two weeks, and he would come back to tell us all about the plays. He would say things like, "One day I saw Tallulah Bankhead walking down Fifth Avenue," and we were just, Ahh! You know, this is Cleveland—this is Ohio.

Kennedy speaks about her ability to make "little scenes" that create a powerful poetic drama. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro,* for instance, scenes and monologues recur between blackouts. Variations, repetitions, and permutations come from different characters, many of them aspects of "Negro-Sarah" or "one of herselves." *Funnyhouse* is a surreal mystery story in a nightmarish landscape complete with bald heads, white nightgowns, and masks. These things did not really happen to Adrienne Kennedy; as Kennedy says, "My plays are meant to be states of mind."

Like Kennedy's plays, *People Who Led to My Plays* is a succession of discontinuous scenes or vignettes that add up to a multi-layered, multi-vectored story. The book provides a deceptively simple spelling out of how Kennedy arrived at her complex plays. The book also empowers, as it encourages the reader to become a writer in response. As teachers and writers, one of the best things we can do is to find forms that give readers the chance to turn into writers, that make it easy to cross over that boundary between passively absorbing a text, and actively responding in thought and writing.

•

Writing Exercise

In a recent Composition & Literature class I taught at St. John's University on Staten Island, I wanted my students each to write a "Personal Language History," a piece of autobiographical writing detailing their particular relations to writing and language, and how these relations evolved. I had them use both Joe Brainard's *I Remember* and *People Who Led to My Plays* as models.

For the "I Remember" exercise, I asked the students to write list poems with each line beginning with "I remember." "Don't worry about the lines being in chronological order," I told them. "Let your memories flow associatively, one to the next. Some sections may only be one line, others may continue for a whole paragraph. Nothing is too mundane or recent to be a memory."

For the *People Who Led to My Plays* exercise, I told them, "Write a succession of paragraphs about people in your life or characters in books who have influenced you. Try to put yourself back into the feeling of that time, and envision the important figures in your world. These might be members of your family, imaginary friends, characters in books who came alive for you, historical figures, movie stars, cartoon characters—anyone, whoever they are or were, in imagination or 'real life.' If you want to write a longer work, think of the different periods you've lived through so far in your life. Think of a title for each one."

I also asked the students a series of questions to help them focus particularly on their relation to words, and how language shaped their personalities and world-views:

> What language or languages did you grow up with?
>
> What accents?
>
> What are your first memories of speaking?
>
> Are there any stories about your early language life? (Ask your parents if you don't know already.)
>
> What were your first words? Do you remember your first mispronunciations or mishearings?
>
> Did you have any secret words with sisters or brothers or friends, or any inside jokes?
>
> Are there any particular words only your family used or still uses? List them, with their connotations.
>
> What are your first memories of learning to read? Who taught you to read? Who read to you and what did they read? What were your favorite books and characters? Movies?

Cartoons? TV shows? What do you think drew you to them?

How did you learn to write? What are your first impressions of the alphabet? Of grammar?

What are your favorite words? What were they when you were growing up?

Did you ever want to change your name? To what, and why?

Try to use as many specifics (words, events, stories) as you can, to give your audience a sense of your early thoughts, feelings, and relation to language.

Write at least three pages, typed. At the end, include a glossary, in alphabetical order, of your favorite words, with their particular meanings or connotations to *you.*

Interestingly, but I suppose not surprisingly, the students' pieces were perhaps more people-oriented than language-oriented. Here are some of the results:

My Mother:
She stayed in with me the night before my birthday because I was sick. All night she put cold compresses on my head and the next day I was healthy enough to celebrate.

My Father:
He drove me to school every day so I wouldn't have to take the bus. He made me realize that for someone you love there is nothing you won't do for them.

My Brother:
He taught me how to defend myself by practicing wrestling moves on me.

Barbie:
By controlling her life, she lived the life I thought I wanted.

Barney:
He made me happy that dinosaurs no longer exist.

My Teddy Bear:
I received him when I was twelve years old. He saw me through sleepless nights, tears from a break-up, even though I threw him across the room when I was upset.

Freddy Kruger:
He gave me many sleepless nights when I was younger.

Telephone Repairman:
After a week without a phone he looked like an angel when he fixed it.

Firemen:
They would save a human or a kitten. No life is too small to be important.

Calvin Klein:
He used Antonio Sabato Jr. as a spokesperson. I now get to see more of his body than I ever dreamed on billboards and buses.

My Grandparents:
For without all of them I couldn't be here to write this.

—Caroline Moriarty

My grandmother: made me realize how playing the lottery can become addictive. She has been playing since she moved to this country. She is obsessed with playing. I try to convince her not to. I tell her to stop because I am tired of seeing her upset about not winning or forgetting to play. She drives me nuts. But, when she wins it is a good feeling.

Bass guitar: a way for me to escape from reality. Helps me relax. Allows me to express my feelings.

My music (heavy metal, alternative, grunge): makes me realize how corrupt society is. Relates to my life (lyrics).

The movie, Scream: made me realize that I can still be afraid of scary movies.

My friends: made me realize how important friends are. They are always there for me. When my grandfather died they showed me that they care by writing me and supporting me through this difficult time. They helped me realize that life goes on.

—Angelo Cammilleri

My Grandfather:
taught me the value of a dollar. When my sister and I were younger, he would throw money up in the air and my sister and I would catch it or pick it off the floor and he would let us keep it. Now that I have a job I realize that you must earn your money and it does not come easily.

—Kristen Castaldo

Superman:
He was so modest about his accomplishments.

Luke Skywalker;
He tried hard all the time and never gave in to pressure.

Run DMC:
One of the first rap groups who always got me in the mood to listen to music.

My second grade baseball coach:
He had confidence in me when I had none.

Metallica:
They create music that I can relate to and identify with.

Chameleon:
It has the ability to change its appearance and fit in any given situation. That's something I wish I could do.

My old friends:
Watching them ruin their lives on drugs, showed me what I didn't want to become.

Stephanie:
Showed me how to sleep in class without getting in trouble. Our friendship has grown as we struggle through classes together (especially finance).

—Salvatore Zangari

My mother:
She showed me that I must be something in life so that I wouldn't be dependent on anyone, like a husband.

My grandmother:
She taught me to sew and now I can sew clothes, stitch up holes, and I can make pictures that can decorate a room beautifully.

My boyfriend Gerry:
Taught me the true meaning of love and that I can be happier with one great man rather than with ten horrible ones.

My father:
He taught me how to drive, parallel park, how to talk my way out of things, and how to deal with different types of people.

—Stella Gershkovich

My great-grandfather:
He is eighty-something years old. He has had a big influence on my life. He showed me that age doesn't matter, that it's only a number. He is still the last person up on New Year's Eve, and has had the most to drink.

—Dave Moreno

My father:
He was short in size, but big in heart, and mind.

Michael Jordan: He always seemed to break the laws of gravity. His athleticism is something I always wanted but never got.

My friends:
The only part of my life that introduced no cares and no worries. There never seemed to be a dull moment although there were many. I have only memories of funny excitement and total euphoria.

—Michael Torretta

My dog Rocky:
He showed me that no matter how loyal some people say dogs are, they aren't scared to bite the hand that feeds them.

—Eric Catacutan

Some students combined Kennedy's form with that of Brainard's "I remember":

Kristen (my sister):
I remember when we used to play house and I always cleaned up and she always dressed up and put heels on and pretended she was the mom. She would take charge.

Grandma:
I remember when she took me to the pond at Richmond Town and we used to eat lunch and feed the ducks.

Stephan (my cousin):
I remember when he used to come over to my house and play karate with me and my sister. He used to kick us and hurt us. When he hurt us, we would tell. In order for us not to tell, he used to hurt himself so we would laugh at him.

—Danielle Shereen

Martin Luther King:
Represents a man of great strength, courage, ambition, respect. He believed in bringing about equality and peace.

Rosa Parks:
She wanted justice and equality for all.

I remember being accepted into the Alvin Ailey Summer Intensive program.

I remember my mother saying, "Michelle, do not let nothing stop you. You will make it."

I remember my grandmother telling me, "What is for you, the river cannot wash away."

Oprah Winfrey:
Very powerful, strong woman and great role model.

I remember my first kiss.

I remember receiving my first scholarship as if it were yesterday. When my name was called for the Anderson scholarship: "Michelle Hill," there was such a relief, and a feeling of great joy that reigned inside of my heart.

I remember attending Connecticut College for their summer program. I had so much fun, and I learned a lot about modern logic and also about growing as an individual and maturing as a young adult.

I remember crossing the water gazing at the Statue of Liberty with the sun's high rays.

I remember purchasing a delicious shish kabob from the man at a stand in Manhattan. It was such a beautiful day.

I remember taking the plane and feeling the uplifting elation from foot to foot.

Grandmother:
My grandmother is a very wise woman who I look up to. She represents a guiding light, and she is like a precious stone.

Carlos:
My brother Carlos makes me laugh and at times puts me to think. His intelligence is like a radiant light, from afar. He always has something nice to say.

Michael Jackson:
Very unique and talented individual. His talent and creativity stands out like a shooting star. He is without compare.

—Michelle Hill

The Superfriends:
Superman, Batman, Robin, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, and of course, the Wonder Twins.

Kiss:
Although they weren't on the Superfriends, they could have been, with their costumes.

Bert and Ernie:
Although I never undertood the exact context of their relationship, they were puppets, and puppets were always cool.

Mister Rodgers:
He taught me that the lack of sex can drive a man to the brink of insanity, where puppets ride bicycles.

Darth Vader:
He had great costumes, but he was too evil to be in the Superfriends.

The Unknown Comic:
Sometimes all you need is a paper bag and a sharp pair of scissors.

Puff the Magic Dragon:
I liked to frolic in the autumn mist, too.

Alice Cooper:
He was the guest on "The Muppet Show," once.

Satan:
He looked awfully cool in Walt Disney's *Fantasia.*

King Friday:
He proved that you don't need legs to run a kingdom.

Charlie Brown:
His baldness did not interfere with his self-image.

Linus:
He demonstrated that obsessive-compulsive disorders are not an impediment to a child's social development.

Animal (from "The Muppet Show"):
Violence does not complement children's television.

Mr. Potato Head:
He taught me there's nothing wrong with changing your sex every now and then.

Shaggy (from "Scooby-Doo"): He taught me to go against the establishment: dodge the draft by talking to dogs, stay unemployed, live off your friends, drive a groovy psychedelic van, and never wear socks.

Mr. Hooper:
He was an honest businessman who treated his customers with respect (even though they were mostly puppets.)

Mr. Spock:
Behind the cold exterior was a vicious party animal.

—Jeremy Canter

Here are a few of my own entries:

Japan
Birth–18 months

Mom: Even though I don't have any memories of being there, I feel like I do, especially because of the stories my mother told me and the baby book she made me documenting our life there. There are cute pictures of me illustrated by Japanese phrases like "Are you sure this *mizu* (water) isn't too hot?" as I'm taking a bath and looking at the camera wide-eyed. It's strange to look at pictures of yourself as a baby and to have no memory of looking that way. I was swimming in both Japanese and English language cultures. My mother made sure to get some Japanese story books for me in translation, like the story of Kappa and Peach Boy.

Masako-san & Yoshiko: They helped my mother and carried me around on their backs, as if I too were Japanese. Yoshiko drew beautiful cards with colored-pencil portraits of herself, my mother and me, all with wide eyes.

Obaa: My grandmother traveled from North Carolina to meet me in Japan and we always called her Obaa, which means grandmother in Japanese.

Heilbronn, Germany
Ages 2–3

Uncle Billy: We were on a trip to Madrid to visit him and I had the first playmate I can remember, Maria, who lived across the hall and had six toes on each foot. I remember a frosted glass door in the hall that reminded me of a door of a doctor's office, but was the door she was behind. I remember that I ate earlier than everyone else because Uncle Billy ate at eleven o'clock like everyone else in Spain. And that everyone took naps, even the grown-ups.

Charlotte, NC
Ages 3½–6

Beth: My sister came home from the hospital one Halloween when I dressed as a duck with a little yellow raincoat and a duck mask from Germany. They made me sit down on the kitchen floor to hold her, so I wouldn't drop her.

Dodo: My great-grandmother told us many stories about growing up on a ranch in Hysham, Montana. Her mother, Dora Dunlop Woolfolk Draper, had been married to a riverboat captain. They brought supplies up the Missouri River, and she learned how to pilot the boat. She divorced him because he was an alcoholic. She bought the ranch at the top of the Missouri River and later married a man known as "Big Gada." She then became known as "Little Gada." My great-grandmother and grandmother met many Indians. Once, a Crow chief offered to trade a whole herd of horses for Dodo and her piano. She told me she played "Pretty as a Pink, a cross-hand piece." She went away to a Catholic girls' boarding school in Missouri for further education, but was called home upon announcing she wanted to be a nun. (Her family was of Scots Presbyterian heritage.) I have a silk-covered hymnbook from this

period, in which she penciled, "Women either Love or Hate." In her eighties and ninties I heard many stories as I knelt beside her "Tip Top Tilly" (a flat reading desk, covered with wood-grained contact paper), where she read the many newspapers she subscribed to, including *Women's Wear Daily* and *The Hysham Echo,* until her forearms were black with newsprint.

Ruby: She scared me when she did this game "Bore a hole, bore a hole" with her finger heading in a spiral towards my bellybutton. She made "Ruby Carrots" with lots of butter and white sugar and "Ruby Cabbage" with lots of pepper and fatback. She took care of my great-grandmother. They would sit and watch Lawrence Welk, soap operas, and the Watergate hearings while my sister and I would use her walker as a jungle-gym. She loved baseball and once won a sweepstakes through Marlboro cigarettes. With part of her money, she chartered a bus and took everybody to Atlanta to see the Braves play.

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Five Writing Ideas from the Netherlands

Frederice Van Faassen

I like to have my students write about moments when they or somebody else was wrong about something. First I tell about such an experience I had and then I invite a few students to give other examples. Then I suggest that each student make a list of such moments and choose one to describe in more detail. With small groups, I have the students read their pieces aloud, after which we go through the pieces line by line to make sure everything's really clear.

Karianne Den Boer

I ask my students to write about someone who entered their lives for just a moment last week and who still lingers in their minds. I give an example of a retarded couple I saw on television, talking about why they were getting married. Their motivation was more lucid than that of many other couples. After a few more examples, I ask the students to make a list of people who have stuck in their memories. Then I have them pick one person and write about the moment just as it was, without any explanation or beautification. Then everyone reads his or her text aloud.

Tonnus Oosterhoff

I ask the class to describe a particular experience of someone, someone whom they dislike, but to do so from the point of view of this person. The students' pieces need be only a page or two long.

Another assignment involves describing a scene in two different ways. I ask the class to write two descriptions of the landscape at the edge of a forest just as it is starting to thunder. The first description should be from the point of view of a person deeply in love, the second description from someone who is about to commit a murder. I emphasize that they should try not to identify the person or the state of mind, but 80 percent of them do so anyway. It's interesting to see how people handle various assignments.

Cocky Van Bokhoven

Generally I give very open assignments, so that students can discover the effects of their own texts. When I give more directed assignments, they usually focus on real-life events. If I encounter students who tend to write in rigid patterns and clichés, I immediately give them an assignment to make them more aware of this habit. For example, one student had written a short stage scene about a married couple that was filled with clichés. I asked him to write a second scene, this one between a brother and sister. It too was filled with clichés. Then I asked him to switch the names, so that the married couple's dialogue became the brother and sister's dialogue, and vice versa. Some wonderful things happened, and both scenes suddenly became very original. This procedure is a good way both to highlight and then break through cliché.

—Translated and adapted by C. W. Swets and Ron Padgett, from Er Staat Wat Er Staat (It Says What It Says), *a collection of essays by Dutch writing teachers collected by Aly Freije and Nirav Christophe and published by Stichting Lift voor Schrijvers, Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht, The Netherlands, 1996.*