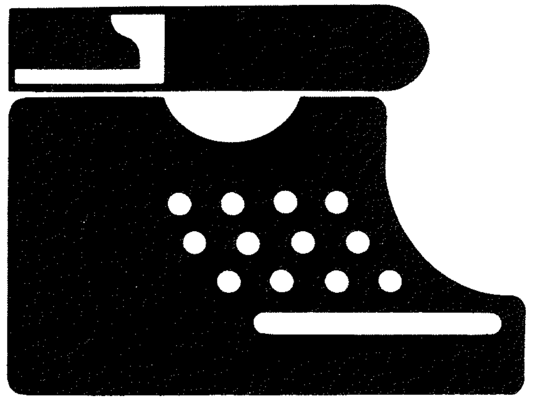
Teachers & Writers



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STORYTEACHING

by Frances Reinehr

BEFORE EDUCATION BECAME AN ITEM OF national concern and national politics, I had begun to experience a haunting. Not the haunting in ghost stories, but a haunting of the heart. The haunting grew out of a fear that my students and I were not connecting. The seeds of the haunting were planted a number of years ago when I was teaching in an inner-city elementary school in Lincoln, Nebraska.

One particular fourth grade class exhibited just about every behavior problem possible as individuals and as members of a group. Not one of the children felt welcome, let alone wanted, on this earth. They had no self-esteem; they operated daily with a good deal of rage, expressed in verbal and physical assaults upon one another, often racially motivated.

My response was "adult." I chose one of their problems —"prejudice"—and conducted a series of lessons to help them confront it. My abstract method was inappropriate. This was a group of angry children expressing their rage. They did not need indirect approaches to their estrangement. They did need nurturing. They did need to hear some good things about themselves. They did need to hear stories that could offer them escape, consolation, and hope.

I should have begun by reading them myths, legends, and fairy stories from diverse cultures, for these kinds of stories contain inevitable lessons about decent human behavior, and I have since learned that my students and I are secret relatives bound by our ability to recognize one another through a story. I believe in the power of a story as a principal way to fill children with hope, for, as Sam Keen says in *To a Dancing God,* "Storytelling raises a person out of the randomness of the moment and inserts him into a larger framework."

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When we tell stories, we "retell ourselves." The very stories we choose to tell illustrate our beliefs, fears, attitudes, hopes, and how we see ourselves in relation to others. Raised by storytellers, I have in some sense kept myself alive through stories. In my family we entertained one another and ourselves with a great many accounts, hilarious and sad, of "what if," and what actually had been—all with a good deal of embellishment. Through storytelling, I believe, we transcended a sense of randomness and came to a place of belonging in the long, continuing story.

I am convinced, now more than ever, that the children of today need stories. They need to hear stories of every genre, and they need encouragement to tell their own stories. In this age of nuclear threat, of a floundering sense of commitment, of the attitude of looking out for Number 1, and of the general state of unsafety in the world, we need the consolation of stories that serve as models to strengthen our view of our own story. We need stories, too, that end with the consolation of "happily ever after." We need those stories, told and retold by every culture throughout time, because we all need redefinitions of what it means to arrive safely after difficult journeys.

What we teach—the curriculum—is important in all it's variety, but it all comes alive when one area of it becomes radiant, illuminating the rest. The area of light for me, now, is stories.

IN THIS ISSUE

1 **Storyteaching** by Frances Reinehr

8 **The Class Newsletter** by Peter Miller

Stories help us make connections with the lives of others. When I tell my students a story to illustrate a point, they listen, because through storytelling I become real. I become real because the stories reflect a way the students and I are similar.

How and why good talk produces good writing and art that in turn becomes stories is the central passion of my teaching. When children become participants in a story—their own or another's—they respond with spontaneity and excellence. They talk. They write. They read and they express a joyful pride in their accomplishments. Life in the daily round of the classroom can be lived with some measure of grace, can reflect a creative hope, can be arranged so that each student realizes a wondrous part possible in the long, continuing story.

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All too often, teachers of writing express a multitude of inadequacies about their own writing: "I don't have time to write much." "I can't write much of anything, but if I do write, I like to write poetry because it's shorter." "My third grade teacher, 35 years ago, froze my writing ability." "Creative writing is not my thing." These, of course, lead to: "I can never think of anything to get my students to write about in creative writing."

But each day, children come to school bringing a wide range of experiences and the language to describe them. They have come to school by car, on foot, on rollerskates, on bikes. They have noticed the weather, animals, pets, siblings, friends, parents, and others. Since yesterday they have slept and dreamed. They have played games and (maybe) tricks on someone else. They have watched TV and have heard neighborhood gossip. Some of them have read something. Once in a while one will have witnessed a street tragedy. Some have heard arguments or taken part in them. Some of them are anxiously anticipating the next chapter of the book being read in class. There are spelling words, scientific experiments, and math to work with. There are all sorts of people to learn about in Social Studies. There may be a play or dances to rehearse. Children come to school brimming with experiences to write about.

I had one class particularly interested in Gothic horror tales. The school was in the middle of an active neighborhood: supermarkets, furniture stores, bars, bookstores; to the north a lovely park; to the west an older home; residential neighborhoods to the south and east. Some of these older homes were elegant, with wooded back yards, connected by alleys. My students and I did a great deal of walking in the neighborhood to investigate.

On one particularly orange October morning, one of the boys came in quite excited and asked if we had a camera ready to go. We did, so he proposed a writing group be selected to go on a photo-taking jaunt because he had discovered, on his way to school, an old tree with a knife stuck in it. So seven Gothic horror fans and an aide went out to take photos. They found the tree stump, an old garage with all its windows in various degrees of brokenness, alley cats in various positions lurking about, a clothesline filled with billowing white sheets, and a man rummaging through some trash. While the children were taking his picture, the aide took notes of what they were saying in response to their excited discoveries. Some of that talk found its way into *Goodbye, Chris Ann,* the story that these children wrote in collaboration when the photographs were developed.

Goodbye, Chris Ann

The old house with the tall chimney was dark and creepy and you never saw anybody who lived there. It looked like it was watching you. *(Photo of the house.)*

One day Chris Ann was walking by the house. She thought it looked pretty nice, so she went to the yard. She saw watermelons, big, juicy, and plump, lying in the garden. Hearing her mother calling her, she left, but she decided to come back later that night to get a watermelon. *(Photo of the house from a distance.)*

While Chris Ann was walking home, the day got foggy and sort of gloomy. After dinner, Chris Ann told her mother she was going over to Cindy's, her friend's, house to do some homework. She started toward the old house. Walking up the dark, long driveway, she thought she'd never get to the watermelons. She started to roam around the yard and she heard a door slam. She started to run, but when she turned around, the fence gate was closed. She was trapped. *(Photo of the fence.)*

Hearing footsteps coming closer and closer, she turned and saw an ugly looking man. He came toward her. With a start, she screamed, but the man said, "Come in and have some juicy, plump watermelon." Chris Ann thought to herself, "Oh, I guess it will be alright." So she followed the man into the house.

"I'll go into the kitchen and prepare the snack. You make yourself at home." When he went into the kitchen, he put instant sleeping drugs into the watermelon. When he came back to the living room, both of them ate watermelon. Chris Ann's was full of sleeping medicine. The man's was not. Chris Ann fell asleep and dropped to the floor.

The man sneaked Chris Ann down the ladder and out the back door. He tied her neck to the stump and took the knife and do you know what happened next?

Goodbye, Chris Ann

The blood streaked down her neck. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the blood off the knife. He replaced the knife back in the stump. Then he sucked the bright red blood from his victim. *(Two photos: the stump and knife; an old garage.)*

Then he cut off her hair and went to the old garage with broken windows and chipped paint. The trees growing nearby looked like hands reaching down, and bloodthirsty bats flew overhead. He took Chris Ann's head and threw it through the broken glass. It crashed and the head fell into the garage for his pet bats to eat. He went home laughing to himself. Then he took the body and wrapped it in white sheets for later.

At 10:00 PM, Chris Ann's mother called Cindy and asked, "Where is Chris Ann?" and Cindy said, "I haven't seen her since school is out."

Her mother immediately called the police. The police looked all night but found no clues. In the morning the papers, radio, and the TV were all full of Chris Ann's description. An old lady, neighbor to the spooky house, called the parents of Chris Ann and said, "I saw your daughter going toward the old house." *(Photo of the garage with a foggy overcast.)*

So the parents went up to the house. In the garage they saw bloody things sticking into the floor and the walls. "Oh, Chris Ann, did that happen to her?" Across the alley they saw another garage, the one with the broken glass. *(Photo of the stump and knife.)*

They looked and there they saw their daughter's head, bald and bloody. They saw a man wiping something off near the stump. They had noticed her math book near the gate, so they told the man, "That's our daughter's math

book. You haven't seen her, have you?" He said, "Yes, I have, but I don't know where she is now." He said this with an evil eye.

They rushed home and called the police and told them that their little girl was dead. The police came to the house and handcuffed the villain and put him into prison. The house was torn down. The man and the house were never seen again. Moral: No trespassing.

I am not about to analyze this from a psychological point of view. My sense is that this kind of story helps children relieve some of their anxieties and fears, much like the original fairy tales do.

Goodbye, Chris Ann remained in the school library for five years. It was in constant circulation until one child noticed its degenerating, fragile condition, and wrote on the inside cover, "Be Careful of this Book. It is very Old." When student writing is made available, in class books, individual books, and posters, or printed in some way other than handwriting, it becomes more worthy of time and energy. There is no writing my students do, except journal writing, that is not transformed in some way and made available to an audience. We write every day and publish at least once a week. During the school term, every student writes and illustrates at least one individual story and puts it into a bound book.

Good talk generates good writing. I also think careful listening results in successful teaching. For me, there has to be a time each day when the children and I just talk. It is essential for me to know what they're thinking and feeling. If classroom time is lacking, I eat with the children in the lunchroom, or at least rotate myself into their writing and art groups so I can get into the interaction.

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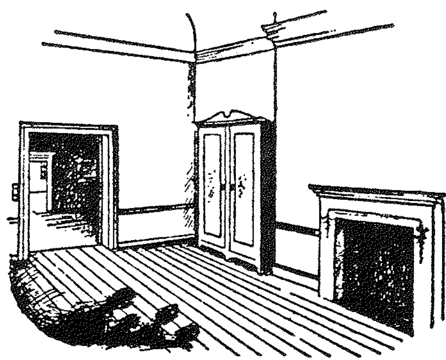
Reading to my students is one of the most important things I do. What follows are examples of what kinds of things happen when we "live through" *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis, *Harriet the Spy* by Louise Fitzhugh, *The Hobbit* by J. R. Tolkein, *Book of Greek Myths* by Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire, and a selection of Sioux myths and legends.



From *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Before I begin reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* I post a map of Narnia on the wall; Narnia is an imaginary land beyond this earth with time occurring concurrently with earth time. On the door I put a huge poster of a lion, with this quote printed in large letters on the lion: "Safe, who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King. I tell you." I also happen to have some newspaper clippings and coverage of the actual "wardrobe," a type of a great oak closet which held clothing in huge British homes and which inspired C. S. Lewis to write the story.

I also post this challenge on a closet door: "What if you opened this door and found yourself in a totally different world? What goodness would you find? What bad creatures might there be? What kind of an adventure could you have in a land that was quite different from the one in which you live each day?" In response to this, the children write adventure stories. Here's one example.

My Adventure

I walked into the closet, pushed the paper aside and suddenly I was in a jungle. There were strange noises in the jungle, but I decided I was not going to let noises stop this adventure. It was very dark in the jungle, but luckily, I had my flashlight. Then I spotted something on the ground. I picked it up. It was a piece of paper that had words and a map on it. Below the map it said, "TREASURE MAP. BEWARE OF MONSTER."

I figured it was a treasure map and I decided to follow it. The map showed there was a cave about three miles ahead. It was late at night and I was very tired and I soon fell asleep. In the morning I found myself in a cave. The cave had electric lights. I thought that was very strange. I wondered how I got to the cave without knowing it.

The cave was huge and it had a whole bunch of hallways and two elevators. I went in one of the elevators and saw a picture of this thing. It had a dragon head, eight arms, and a body too weird to describe.

Suddenly I remembered the map and I don't know why I remembered it either. I looked at the note on the paper. When I read "BEWARE OF MONSTER," I figured the picture on the wall of the elevator was the monster. The elevator suddenly went up. I stopped on the second floor of the cave and got out of the elevator. There were weapons hanging on the wall. I took a sword, and a net fell on me. Then something knocked me out. I found myself tied to a chair and the monster was boiling some water. I figured it was going to COOK me.

I tried to get out of there, but the ropes were too tight. Then I saw the sword I had taken off the wall. It lay right beside me. I picked up the sword with my feet and cut myself out of the ropes. Suddenly the sword started to glow. I pointed the sword toward the monster and it shot the monster dead. I ran all the way out of the closet and never told anybody about my adventure.

—Randy Christopher, age 10

Before we get to the part where Edmund is eating the Turkish Delight, I tell the children, "I know the professor and will call him to see if I can get a little bit of the Turkish Delight for you to sample." I have a tin exactly like the one in the book, and I load it with just enough of a wonderful chocolate-covered marshmallow and nut candy for each student to have one taste. I tell them the professor came through, and, after reading about Edmund's gorging on Turkish Delight and wanting more and more, I pass out the candy. Some of the children are so caught up in the magic that they refuse to eat the candy, sensing some hold in it they care not to address. Others want more and more. I ask the children what they feel about the candy, and later I write their responses on balloons and post them about the room: "I wanted more and more." "I know how Edmund felt. I wanted more." "It tasted funny, like maybe it had a little poison on it." "I thought it would be some kind of turkey."

Lewis's clear descripton of the White Witch is a fine lead-in to descriptive writing:

On a much higher seat in the middle of the sledge sat a very different person, a great lady, taller than any woman Edmund had ever seen. She also was covered in white fur up to her throat and held a long straight golden wand in her right hand and wore a golden crown on her head. Her face was white—not merely pale, but white like snow or paper or icing sugar, except for her very red mouth. It was a beautiful face in other respects, but proud and cold and stern.

After reading this description aloud, I ask the children to draw a portrait of what they see in their minds, urging them to stay as close as they can to Lewis's description. Their inner pictures of the White Witch are often wonderful. The next phase is to have each child write a description of a witch so clearly that another child can conjure up a drawing to match it. This writing always creates a lot of excitement. All kinds of witches—from Halloween versions to terribly evil looking creatures the children draw—verify for me that their image making machinery is ready to go to work when we provide the oil. We post these all over the room, along with a large printed copy of Lewis's description.

Another writing activity derived from this story involves the list of terrible creatures surrounding the Stone Table when Aslan is killed. I have the children verify this list through dictionary definitions: wraithes, boggles, ogres, ettins, ghouls, wooses, hags, cruels. We have had to call the city library to verify a few of these creatures, but we've always gotten them all. For the final step in this lesson, each child receives a card with the name of one of the terrible creatures. On large sheets of butcher paper, we draw our interpretations of the creatures, first in bright crayon and then with a wash of black tempera over the whole parade. The effect is eerie. The children definitely capture the evil in these creatures.

When we come to the end of the book, we are surrounded with writing, quotations, and art that evolved out of our living the story.

As I read to the children, they often ask, "But it isn't real, is it? There really isn't such a place as Narnia. There isn't really any magic, is there?" My reply is, "Yes, there is magic. Yes, there is a Narnia. The magic is within each of us. And we usually do not know we are in Narnia when we're there, because it is only when we've left, that we remember where we've been."

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Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* is a perfect book to use as an invitation to journal writing. Before we start that story, I make up a blank journal for each student. They are simply stapled booklets with oak tag covers.

From *Harriet the Spy*

Harriet, the principal character, keeps a journal. She writes to record what she has seen during her wanderings through her neighborhood. She also includes a great many thoughts about what she has seen. Her observations are heavily dosed with humor. After we get into the book, I pass out the journals, telling the students that this time their writing is simply for them: I will never see it, but they have the option of showing it to others. We talk about the difference between diary writing and journal writing: instead of just recording what we observe, we will also write about what we think about what we have seen. Some of the journals started during *Harriet the Spy* continue long after we have finished the story.

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There are different ways to read a story to children. One is the reader's theater presentation. This approach requires several readers who can alternate reading the narrative parts and dialogue. Several years ago, my friend and fellow teacher, Pat Kurtenbach, and I returned from the winter holidays with the feeling of gray. You know the feeling. And there were endless days with no sun. The school was surrounded by a moat of ice, so we were pretty much schoolbound. To redeem the January blahs, Pat and I decided to read *The Hobbit* to our collective 70 children each day, right after lunch.

We gathered our children into one room and began by playing "what if": "What if a wise person came to your home on a calm summer morning and told you that you had to leave your home to go on a trip that would include dangers and risks, but also some adventures. If you survived the trip, you would return a richer person. What adventures and dangers might you anticipate?"

Giving the children an opportunity to write about what they sensed as dangerous and exciting brought them right into the story of *The Hobbit.* Pat and I took turns reading and acting out the story. While we read, there were all sorts of activities going on. The only restriction was that there had to be absolute quiet for the listeners who really did want to hear every word. Some of the children drew parts of the story and wrote about it. Others redrew the Middle Earth maps we had brought in, and asked us where Middle Earth is on the globe. We didn't tell them it is more than likely within each of us in our struggles to keep from giving in to the ring, a thing of such power that only love and freedom can keep us from the final relinquishment. We just let them draw the maps, telling them it's a real place.

When we got to Beorn's, we stopped and had a feast, of classroom-baked bread, honey, butter, and Koolaid (our substitute for mead).

After we had met Gollum, whom the children were fascinated with but never liked, we played the riddling game, always giving the children a chance to guess first between Bilbo and Gollum. The joy in the right guess was inexplicable. Naturally, this led to more riddling games by the children, who played them spontaneously during recess and lunch hour. Others went to the media center and checked out books of riddles, trying them out on Pat and me.

By the time we got to Smaug's cave, we were all more afraid of dragons than ever before. I posted this quotation of mine on a large piece of paper: "Everyone knows a dragon, but everyone's dragon looks different." We had lively talks about dragons, especially when I would announce I had again seen one just the night before. The children would quiz me and I would relate some terrible thing I had had to do the

night before, or I would tell a story about someone afraid to give for fear of losing something precious. My dragon metaphor was becoming clearer for them. They began to draw dragons, which seemed to put them in closer touch with the metaphor.

Pat and I brought in felt, yarn, cloth, needles, and thread so the children could make puppets while we read to them. Others pasted scales on the outline of the huge paper Smaug we had made.

When we finished the story, we held a splendid celebration. The children showed their drawings, acted out parts of the story with their puppets, and told about the characters they remembered best. Gandalf and Bilbo always get top billing with this story. One child said he liked Gandalf best because "he was so filled with justice and good magic." Another liked Bilbo because "he did not know how to be a hero, but learned how in the adventure." There are children who admit to not liking *The Hobbit.* When I hear remarks such as "I don't know. I don't like stories like *The Hobbit.* Bilbo seems silly to me," I feel as if my mother has been attacked. But most of the children wanted to have been along on the journey with Bilbo, the dwarfs, and Gandalf. At the end, the halls, walls, and cafeteria were all one large collage tribute to the story we had lived through together.

In this experience the skills developed were interchangeable. Listening became art that became writing that became talking that turned into reading material for others. Listening also found form in puppets that retold parts of the story.

Pat and I wanted to teach *The Hobbit* because we both held a deep affection for the story. We also wanted to "live through" the book with enthusiasm and fun, so we planned every activity to engage even the most reluctant reader. As Bill Martin, Jr., said, "When I read a good book, I just want to do something with it." You come to the end of a book that has been a total joy, filled with energy, and now it is over. This regret or loss is probably why I have come to try to "live through" stories again with children.

There are some stories, like *The Hobbit,* that almost always work with children. The students find something worthwhile in them, they listen to them, talk about them, draw scenes and characters from them, and write in response to them. Because this story is a fantasy, it readily provides image-making possibilities. It liberates the imagination.

Also, *The Hobbit* is comforting because it is the kind of story where "all rules are fair and there will be wonderful surprises." Children want so desperately to be members of a world they can trust. I believe this is a major reason that stories like *The Hobbit* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* issue an invitation of hope to them. Some children value little because so little of real value has been offered to them. These are especially the children who have no responsibilities and too much pocket money. It doesn't take them long to see the world as a place of things, a place as disposable as a styrofoam cup.

Some years ago, Madeleine L'Engle wrote, in the April 1978 issue of *Language Arts*:

> Now we're approaching the 1980's and we've discovered the hard way that the real world isn't very real after all; the joys of technology are smothered by the stupidities of technocracy. Technocracy has provided us with vegetables and meat smothered in plastic packaging; tomatoes are being grown so that they can be picked by machines instead of human hands and there's no way to make them tough enough without sacrificing taste; and there are some people who have never smelled the aroma of freshly brewed coffee.
>
> And we're rebelling. We're going back to baking our own bread. . .and so once again people are writing fairy tales and reading fairy tales, because the fairy tale world is the real world, the world of the whole person, where we aren't limited to our intellect at the sacrifice of our intuition.
>
> When we read fairy tales to children, we're opening up the world of reality to ourselves, as well as the child, because we all, grown ups and children, contain within ourselves all the elements of fairy tales.

Madeleine L'Engle is right. As we proceed into this more developed technological world, we will have to find more and more ways to keep in tune with ourselves and each other, or we will suffer further estrangement. Consoling stories, fairy tales, and fantasy bring adults and children encouragement and hope, and to a deeper search for what is real.

One of the central questions we all ask ourselves—in one way or another—is "Who am I?" Bruno Bettelheim maintains that fairy stories are expressions of our cultural heritage and provide some of the answers. He describes a fairy tale as "a gift of love to a child." Tolkein saw the function of the fairy story as threefold: recover, escape, and consolation. As a parent and teacher and someone who remembers some of the time what it is like to have been a child, I want to preserve the tradition of fairy stories with the children I teach.

When my mother or grandmother told or read me a fairy story, I distinctly remember thinking, "Why, this story is about me." Those princes and princesses who suffered as I did were sorting out their greed, selfishness, and sibling loathing just as I was. I remember the actual book of fairy stories read to me long ago. We kept it in the piano bench. It had a dark blue cover with a lovely illustration of the Frog Prince on the cover. The very memory of this book comforts me.

To listen to fairy stories is to listen to my name being called. In the quest of finding out who we are, we discover that we are always more than we thought we were. As Madeleine L'Engle says, "We begin, somewhere along the quest, to see ourselves as the younger son, the true princess and the true prince, the stepmother too, at times, and the enchanted beast." This is what I mean by "hearing our names called" when we participate in a fairy story or fantasy.

These stories are also important because they have a healing power; they are about confidence and dragon slaying. "In the fairy tales, the cosmos goes mad, but the hero does not go mad. In the modern novels, the hero is mad before the book begins and suffers from the harsh steadiness and cruel sanity of the cosmos," wrote G. K. Chesterton a long time ago. This is one of the main reasons many modern novels bore me. I prefer children's stories because the heroes and heroines in them refuse irreparable loss.

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But Where Is Zeus Now?

Reading the myths of different cultures is broadening for children, and a knowledge of mythology certainly helps children understand other literature. But I like the six weeks we spend on myths during the school term because they're just plain exciting.

I read the D'Aulaire translation of the Greek myths to my students because, although the originals are adapted for children, the integrity of the stories is preserved. When the children come into the room and see posters of monsters, the names of the major gods and goddesses on big cards hanging from the ceiling, maps of Greece, pictures of gods and goddesses on the walls, books of myths and about myths on the reading tables and chalk trays, they plunge into a sense of high excitement. For the fifth and sixth graders I have worked with over the past 17 years, the myths have brought us to intense writing and art work. My copies of the D'Aulaire books have been worn out and rebound many times.

Embedded in the myths are transformation stories, how one thing became another, such as "How Arachne Became a Spider" and "How Argus Became a Peacock." These transformation stories are read and retold by my students in various forms, including comic books. Recently my sixth graders produced a 18 x 24″ comic book of their interpretations of their favorite transformation stories. It is filled with humorous insights into their understanding of "hubris," the Greek word for pride, which caused the transformations. The gods did not tolerate any human presumptuousness or boasting.

One student adapted the story of the goddess Artemis and the hunter who dared to look at her while she was bathing after a hunt. The illustrations and captions demonstrate this student's sense of humor. The first frame: "One day after a long hunt, Artemis, goddess of the hunt, decides to take a bath." (Artemis is decked out in hunting gear, near a pond.) Frame two: "So she took off her clothes and got into the water." (Artemis, bathing, singing, "La, de, da, da.") Frame three: "Meanwhile, farther down the road. . . ." (Hunter appears: "Hi, ho, I am a hunter.") Frame four: "Then the hunter saw Artemis: 'Wow!'" (Artemis throws up her arms, with a bar of Tone soap flying.) Frame five: "Since no mortal can look at her taking a bath, she turned him into a deer." (Explosion, with Artemis wielding a zap gun.) Frame six: "The hunters, thinking he was a real deer, ate him." (Piles of bones and bloated dogs, bellies up.)

The children also write new transformation stories, showing pride as the source of downfall for those who dare to try to surpass the gods.

Our vocabularies are enriched as we identify words from the stories, defining and illustrating them and putting them into bound class dictionaries. *Hygiene, Promethean, echo, narcissistic, nemesis, macho, morphine, tantalize,* and *panic* are some of the words we learn as we come to a new understanding of words derived from ancient Greek.

Although I do not work as a bibliotherapist—except in the sense that anyone presenting literature to children is allowing them opportunities to match what goes on inside them with what goes on in stories—it is apparent to me that the myths open up for children new ways of looking at power. The Greek myths are about power, and in the D'Aulaire translation the message is strong and clear. The real power source is Zeus. He is the favorite of most students, no matter what socioeconomic group they come from: "I like all the gods and goddesses, but Zeus is the best of all because he is so strong" and "Zeus, man, is the baddest god of all."

Children also respond strongly to hero stories, particularly those of Hercules. When we finish reading about him, we brainstorm heroic qualities, male or female. I've done this with at least ten different groups of children, and the list characteristically looks like this: 1) heroes must be strong physically or have a special talent; 2) heroes must be attractive; 3) heroes must have class; 4) heroes must be able to do things better than anyone else could do them; 5) heroes must be able to take risks no one else will take; 6) heroes must be the best at what they do; 7) heroes are always protectors of their people; 8) heroes must have the trust of their people.

Once the list of qualities is compiled, I ask the students, "Do you have any heroes? Do you know anyone who has any of these qualities?" Sometimes children have nowhere to go to identify a heroic person except to the pantheon of current TV shows. However, most find a heroic figure in their familial pantheon. Many children write heroic tales that exemplify some of the qualities we've identified. Here are two pieces by ten-year-old students.

My Hero Is My Brother

My brother can do all those things. He can jump over big wheels and over six of them at a time. He is not that good looking, but I love him. He has a clean-cut class. Some people believe in him, too, like his girl friend and me. He is good at what he does. He can and does protect me when I get in trouble with big kids. He can jump one truck when he tries. He can lift 60 pounds, 21 times, up and down.

John Dutton, My Hero

My hero is John Dutton because his team is the Colts. He came from Nebraska and you know, if they come from Nebraska they are tough. Sometimes, John takes a risk by charging the quarterbacks. Sometimes John is attractive when he is playing. John does his part on the team so good that his coach thinks he has a lot of class. People believe in him a lot and so do I.

Another way we get in touch with the gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines is to trace our own shapes on large pieces of butcher paper and transform the shapes into the characters we've just learned about. We use paint, magic markers, and collage. For example, a recent Dionysus was decked out with leaves entwined in his hair and around his feet, holding a large collection of wine bottles cut from magazines. Theseus wore a button, "The Minotaur Slayer." Hera is always the least admired goddess. The children detect too many qualities they dislike: her pettiness, her distrustfulness, and her constant nagging. One child pasted pictures of Comet, soaps, and other cleaning materials onto Hera's hands. Zeus, of course, held huge thunderbolts dramatized with a good deal of Reynolds Wrap. The halls were alive with this big paper collage of the characters the students had come to know about and admire. Each group of students brings fresh interpretations of the stories to one another and to me.

The children do some rather sophisticated work, but when we come to the end and read, "Everything must come to an end, and so did the rule of Zeus and the other Olympian gods. All that is left of their glory on earth are broken temples and noble statues. Also, the Muses fell silent, but their songs live on to this very day, and the constellations put up by the gods still glitter on the dark blue vault of the sky," many children lament, "But where is Zeus now?" Some of them come to believe that if they could just get to Greece, they would get at least a glimpse of Zeus. Others say, "There really is no Zeus. He's just a character in some stories." The argument over what is real and what is "just in some stories" comes up year after year.

The stories never fail to excite and entice children into a new way of looking at things and expressing those perceptions in writing, art, and lively talk. Their enthusiastic entry into these stories confirms, for me, that children today are still quite ready to put their image-making machinery into action. As one four-year-old said to me not long ago as we sat on a dock, early one morning, "See that fish? He jumped out of the water and woke the sun up." Piaget has pointed out that children and myth makers share similar ways of explaining natural events. That child on that particular morning perceived the fish acting as a cosmic alarm clock for the sun as a natural event. It was, for him, the way things happen naturally, if one but observes. So it is with the Greek stories and other mythic tales available for use with children.

I present the myths year after year because the children love them. I believe they love the stories because in them they see parts of themselves. They identify with the weaknesses of characters like Arachne, Niobe, and the others who dare to boast. The heroic episodes hook them because there is in those stories a challenge of great proportions held up for them to contemplate. When the children say the hero is always the protector, they are seeing a correlation between their own sense of the hero and that of the hero of the classics, the one who is responsible for fighting great battles, the one who places the needs of the community above his own needs and desires, the one "who takes risks no one else would take."

•

I also work in detail with the mythic stories and legends of the Sioux Indians. Because I teach in Nebraska, I choose the Sioux because they have represented a dominant culture in this geographic area and I want the children to know what has gone on, historically and socially, on the very ground they walk on. I want them to recognize the heroic Native American chiefs who placed the needs of their community above their own personal needs. It is also my goal to help the children understand that although the great legendary chiefs were heroic, they were real people with their own personal dreams, visions, and goals.

We begin by learning about the buffalo, how it was an important source of the Sioux economy and spiritual beliefs. There are some superb films available for this study, but the best is *Tahtonka.* This film conveys the Sioux's reverence for the buffalo, and it gives a fair historical survey, ending with the battle of Wounded Knee. We also do a lot of reading, visit the local Indian center with our questions written out for discussion, and invite members of the Sioux tribe who live in Lincoln to come to the classroom to talk with us, to tell us stories, and to listen to ours.

After this background information, I give the students some titles of Sioux myths: "How the First Buffalo Came to Be," "The Legend of the White Buffalo," "The Great Flood," "How the First Rainbow Came to Be," and others. I ask the children to write the myths, trying to imagine themselves living here long ago, in touch with the land and the buffalo. Here are children's pieces on "How the First Rainbow Came to Be."

> With the beginning of time, there was a God, a happy God. He loved sunshine. He loved clouds. He loved snow, but most of all, he loved rain. It helped the plants grow and gave animals ponds to drink from. It gave a fresh smell of pine from the forest. Because the rain helped everything, he would do something. Something that would please everyone. So after each rain, he made some paint and painted a rainbow for everybody to see. Everyone who saw the rainbow thought it was beautiful. So after every rain, the happy God has painted the rainbow for many, many centuries.

•

> The first rainbow came to be one beautiful day in the month of May. The Lord would cry because the picture he was painting looked wrong, so he cried all over the painting. The paint dropped into place in the sky and that is what the Indians believed was true.

•

> Once upon a time there were some Indians and some different people from China, brown, red, yellow, and blue. The China people were all kinds of different colors of all sorts. Then the Mighty Spirit thought about this and decided that they should not die when winter came. So now after a refreshing shower we may look up in the sky and see all the colors of the flowers and it will be a rainbow.

After they've written and illustrated their stories, we compare them with the original Sioux myths. It is uncanny how closely my students' stories relate sometimes to the originals.

Mythic stories are retold in all cultures. I want to make these retellings available so that my students begin to know the stories that people everywhere, throughout time, use to teach their young the rules for human conduct, through metaphors for bravery, greed, faithfulness, envy, change, pride, order, lust, and laziness. Myths and legends teach us what happens to people when they attempt to overcome the weaknesses that are in all of us. These stories belong to each and every one of us. Children can look deeply into myths, see themselves, and make connections between themselves and all the other people who live and have lived. Children enjoy myths, because way down inside, they experience in them the stirrings of self-recognition.

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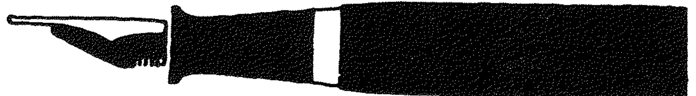

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The Class Newsletter

by Peter Miller

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, MANY teachers have designed their own writing activities to help students discover their powers of self-expression and communication. After such an activity in my own classes, I used to ask my students—college freshmen, mostly—to answer "feedback" questions about what they had written that day and about themselves as writers, and to follow it with a discussion of the whole exercise. I used to think that it was both good and necessary for students to be more observant and reflective about their growing fluency, and to be able to say what they were doing. I still think it is necessary, but often it is not good enough.

Although my students came up with insights about their writing and about becoming writers, they frequently passed through these moments of awareness without being strick by their importance. As the end of the class approached, I was left with an uneasy sense of its inconclusiveness. I seemed to be missing a final step, some way for students and myself to step back from the day's exercise and bring home its meanings. How might I conclude a class so that students could hold on to these moments of awareness for themselves and share them with each other? And as their teacher, how could I see more clearly what they had learned or not learned?

To make their insights less fleeting, I began asking students to keep a writer's log or copybook. But this did not allow students to share what they had discovered privately about their writing. As a second attempt, I asked students to comment, during the final ten minutes of class, on what they had learned from the day's writing exercise. This method was public and could be shared, but it had serious disadvantages. The remarks were sometimes short or hurried, quickly forgotten, and not so reliable, since students would often repeat each other or say what they thought I wanted them to say.

Although I have not abandoned either of these methods, my most recent method, which has been yielding some interesting results for the past several years, has been to create a class newsletter. In response to a question I ask about that day's exercise, students write comments, at the end of a class, about their writing and themselves as writers. I gather these comments, duplicate them as a newsletter and hand them back next time for all the students to read.

A class newsletter combines some of the best features of a writer's log and public commentary, while offering some advantages of its own for students to learn from each other about becoming writers. It has the virtues of the privacy and anonymity of a writer's log, along with the potential for immediacy and candor. Students usually write more openly and honestly about their attitudes and habits without borrowing their neighbor's words or trying to write what they think I want to hear. Also, they quickly realize that they themselves are the real audience of the newsletter.

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A class newsletter is non-judgmental, collective, and cumulative. There are no wrong answers in a newsletter. Nor is any student singled out as having the "correct" answer, since no student's remark tells the whole story. The anonymous entries in the newsletter simply reflect the collective personal truths of the day's writing experience as each student perceived it. As the term progresses, the newsletter becomes a cumulative record of what the students are learning.

All these features of a class newsletter are especially beneficial to beginning writers who in the past may not have been asked to look closely at the attitudes, habits, and abilities that enable or prevent them to write. The newsletter reinforces the methods of the class: students come expecting to write and to reflect and comment on their writing experience. Through thinking about what they have done and observing themselves do it, they come to understand its meaning more clearly: they become better writers. The remarks in a newsletter record the results of a particular day's exercise, and provide a modest but probably truer reflection of its effectiveness than any lessons I might think they had learned. The newsletter relieves me of convincing students of any truth about "writing" or "the writing process" (Whose "writing" and whose "writing process' is it, anyway?), and relieves them of accepting any truth about these concerns without its meeting the test of their own experience. Instead, the class newsletter keeps asking students to rely more and more on themselves and keeps locating their growth in discovering their own resources and best ways of working.

Our newsletter works like this. Each issue centers on one question derived from the exercise of a particular class period. Near the end of the class I ask students to write an answer to a question like "What did you learn about yourself as a writer from today's exercise?" or "What did you find difficult about today's exercise?" Often, the question is dictated by the particular circumstances or problems that came up in that period. I can decide on a narrowly focused question about part of the exercise or a larger question about the exercise as a whole.

Whatever the focus or format of the newsletter, it is important to duplicate and return the results by the next class meeting. I produce a newsletter for almost every class—two or three times a week in the first month of the semester—then less often thereafter, particularly when exercises take several class periods. Once this convention has become established, students look forward to getting the newsletter so they can see their words in print and read the remarks of their classmates. Sometimes I ask students to put a check next to those remarks that are true for them, but written by someone else.

Finally, a class newsletter occasionally gives me the chance to create a more responsive follow-up exercise. For

instance, in one newsletter about an exercise on the use of questioning in writing, I asked, "What made it possible today for you to come up with as many or as few questions as you did?" One student answered, "Who cares?" I chose to read this response as a wisecrack that masked a serious point. So in the following class, I asked students to write as many questions as they could imagine on a subject I hoped they knew nothing about ("the gentle and primitive Tasaday of Mindanao"). We went on to talk about whether wanting or not wanting to create questions was important in doing so, and to what extent knowing about the subject was or wasn't crucial. Besides letting me see more clearly what students were learning, the newsletter has given me some good clues for the next step.

Following are examples of newsletters created over the past few years in developmental writing and composition classes on the college-freshman level.

College of Staten Island
English 111/1910

Newsletter #6

What Did You Learn About Yourself as a Writer from Today's Exercise?

Today I learned that the expansion of a story is virtually unlimited. I already knew this but today's class reiterated the fact.

•

Today I learned that as I ask questions I become interested in the topic I'm asking questions about. I also learned it was easier to use my imagination and write than I thought it would be.

•

Today I learned that every question that you ask about a writing has another question in it.

•

I learned that there are a million and one questions that can be asked about any situation. If I ask the questions I can write forever.

•

After all the questions I couldn't find a story to write. I kept thinking and finally came out with a short story. After the two questions were asked of my work, everything seemed to flow and I wrote easily.

•

I learned that with a little thought, you can come up with a lot of different questions to one statement. With the help of a few questions you could come up with a long and interesting story.

•

I learned that I didn't ask enough questions. Also, you can get a helluva lot more detailled now. I think that's pretty good.

•

I learned that there is an unnumbered amount of questions a writer can ask and by looking at every possible question that relates to the story, you could never go wrong.

•

I learned that I liked answering a series of questions by relating them into one long but interesting story. I enjoyed creating a bizarre story.

•

I learned that I have a better imagination than I figured, and also I answered the questions I was asked easier today. I also learned I can write a script for a soap opera.

•

I learned that I could write about one small statement for 15 minutes and have more ideas after the 15 minutes.

•

Today I learned that from a simple statement I can ask questions, make up a story from those questions, and ask some more questions. It's like I'm going in circles. I could never have to complete a story, there's always more to be asked.

•

This exercise was helpful for fiction writing (could always just BS). But for non-fiction writing I could not see myself writing as much so easily.

•

I learned that when you as a writer create your own characters, you get so involved that you just want to keep on, your thoughts flow down. Also I learned that the more questions I ask the more I wanted to know.

•

I learned that the more you write about, the more questions you could ask.

•

This exercise is the pits. I learned I have a vivid imagination.

"...it's like talking to the paper and it doesn't answer back, it just listens."

College of Staten Island
English 111/1910

Newsletter #7

Was It Harder to Question Your Own Writing Than Someone Else's?

I found it harder to ask questions about my own work because when you write the work you think you include everything in it. I feel it's simpler to see what's missing in someone else's work.

•

I found it harder because it was my own writing. I wrote on how I viewed the situation. Someone else reading my writing could say, "Oh, but what about this apsect?" And I wouldn't have seen it that way because I was sort of close-minded because of the picture I had already painted in my mind.

•

I couldn't find it harder to write questions on my own work. I am always critical of the way I write: Was I clear? Did I answer the question? Is there anything left unknown? Does it cover both sides?

•

I didn't find it much harder to ask questions of my own writing, because I read my writing as if it were done by someone else and look to see what was missing that I'd be interested in knowing.

•

It was harder to find questions. When you read your own work it is hard to find faults. Everyone thinks their writing is good. To make it easy, you have to reread your writing as if it were someone else's.

•

When you write something, you believe you have covered all possible weaknesses. For me to find something, I put myself in an unattached person's place. Someone who did not know anything about the situation. Someone standing on the outside.

•

I felt it was very hard to create a question about my writing because when I read it to myself it seemed as if no information was left out for a question to be asked about. I finally asked myself a question after reading it a few times.

•

It was harder to ask questions on my own writing because I put everything I could think of in the paper, and in order to answer the question I had to go over the story a couple of times to look for parts that I had missed.

•

I didn't find it hard to ask myself questions, although I had to look through my story a couple of times. It's just like looking for questions in anyone else's story. If it's a good, complete story you won't have many questions.

•

It was harder to create questions on my own writing because I thought I answered them in my own letter.

•

I found my writing hard to ask questions about because I know to myself that I wrote the letter. To ask myself questions I had to think that I was someone else.

•

On such a controversial subject and one that angers me so much, I could not see me in that case. So I found it hard even to write the letter. And when I wrote the letter I thought I covered all the bases. In more frivolous writing I think I could detach myself from the writing. How about a letter from summer camp?

College of Staten Island
English 001/1650

Class Newsletter #2

What Are You Learning About Yourself as a Writer by Keeping a Journal?

I learned that I write more when I am mad. I think the Journal is very interesting.

•

1) I learned that I can get through it but I must fight to find a new subject. 2) I'm going to find something or more to write about. There must be more. I just don't always want to write more.

•

I learned not to forget to write in the Journal.

•

I have learned that I like to write. When I do the journals it's good to do. I learn a lot about how I write.

•

1) I have learned that I write better and I have become a better writer because of it. 2) Forget the work and do it another time.

•

1) I learn to find something that interests me to help me write better. Also I can see my writing skills improve. 2) Well, just find a good subject to write about. Now I'm just going to write when I feel like it.

•

By keeping a journal I found that I can write about whatever I want. By writing I found out what my intersts are. I like to write but sometimes I don't have time. When I do have the time I don't mind writing for 10 minutes or longer.

•

I don't want to brag about myself as a writer, but I do better when I'm angry at somebody or when I know what I'm writing about. If I'm bored I will close the book and do something else.

•

I have learned about myself that I can just sit down and write without being given a topic. Well, I guess I'll have to try to get into it more.

•

I learned how I could become a better writer and to try to find the areas I need help in. I find it enjoyable to write journals. If I'm bored with my writing I would find something that interests me.

•

I learned that I can write out or express myself in words instead of keeping it locked up inside me.

•

I have learned that I am starting to write more in 10 minutes than I used to, so I think that's good.

•

I can write something I know about and that I don't have to fake what I'm writing. I never feel bored about what I'm going to write and if I'm bored I won't write anything at all.

•

To be honest I'm very bored by writing a journal because you don't learn anything from it. All you do is waste your time by having to do it for an assignment for your teacher so you can pass the class. What I would like is to stop writing journals and get other work.

•

I found out it keeps me in touch with words I don't usually spell. The thing I found out is that if I'm bored about writing I read for more ideas.

College of Staten Island
English 111/1650

Newsletter #1
What Made It Possible for You to Write Today?

I just keep my mind on what I'm writing about and try to avoid any distraction going on in the room. If I have anything that is troubling me, just writing about it makes me feel like I'm telling someone about it, so I'll actually write more freely and write more. I don't worry about grammar or sentence structure.

•

I think of my past experience. Write about my feelings. Write about the exciting things in my life. Write on something that would hold my interest. Write about things that make me happy. Write about my pain. Write about things I hate.

•

My imagination. Not worrying about punctuation. Not worrying about other people reading my work. Writing more.

•

Try to have an open mind, think about the topic, and remember, if I can, anything that can help me.

•

Concentration on what I am writing. Watch my spelling and grammar.

•

I just write about what comes to mind. If it comes to mind easily I will write easily, for the most part.

•

Past experiences. Give thought before pencil goes down. Try to keep going on.

•

No worries, just have something to speak about.

•

I don't worry about anyone reading my writing so I can just write freely.

•

I am able to increase my writing by using: pictures, images in my mind, thinking about the past, not worrying about time too much, not worrying about grammar, punctuation. I can write freely about my feelings.

•

Find a topic that you can relate to or easily discuss with others. Discuss the topic to the best of your ability, relating to past experiences, examples or situations you might have been faced with. Then analyze your facts, opinions, and views and try to relate them to the topic discussed.

•

Writing freely, not worrying about grammar, spelling, or puncutation. Being able to release my frustrations about a subject, and writing about it. Having a clear head helps me to write more. Allowing my inner part to be free, which helps me to write more. Not holding back on things I want to write.

•

Lately I've been writing in diary form. The remembering of any past experiences. Something that annoys me.

•

I'm not doing anything special. I'm just writing down things that stuck in my mind over the weekend.

•

Finding a topic that I know a lot about. Not to worry about mistakes in writing. Trying to think fast so it makes me write fast.

•

College students, the education. My teaching job and the pre-teenagers. My children and our relationship. Then school, their hobbies, sports. My parents, brother, sister-in-law, and nephew, my friends, the opera, racquetball, the singles scene, being a parent, a daughter, my husband. Being a wife, mother, and my expectation of myself. The weather.

•

The way in which I write easier and more. Memory of the past. Remembering the events. Picturing the events. Reliving. Experience. Being in the mood to write. Writing about an interesting topic.

•

Trying to write about things that interest me. Writing in a different style, conversations and arguments, and just trying to enjoy it.

•

At the time I am writing I would write about the place and time and the surroundings of my writing and where I am writing at.

•

I think of things that have happened to me on a daily basis, then I write about what has happened to me, or things that I have done. This is how I find topics to write about.

•

I just relax, I concentrate on a topic. I don't let my mind wander.

•

I'm not really doing anything physically but I write about how I feel and that makes it easier to write, it's like talking to the paper and it doesn't answer back, it just listens.

•

Write without regard to what is written or where it is headed. Ignoring sentence structure or grammar. Practicing writing often.

•

When I am feeling well. When I am interested. When I am in the mood to write.

College of Staten Island
English 001

Newsletter #3
When Someone Else Reads My Writing I'm Afraid That:

Everything is wrong, or some of it
I'm stupid that I misspell a word
that I'm a dope if the form is wrong
I'm stupid for handing it in that way
they'll think I'm not smart or slow at learning
they'll find out too much about me
it's mumble jumble
there are too many run-ons
they are not going to know what I'm talking about
only I can describe it
it's not up to the potential of a good writer
the vocab is not college level
they'll laugh
I'll get embarrassed
they'll think I'm silly
won't know what I'm saying
make a joke about it
they won't understand me
won't take it seriously because they don't know about it
they'll find my writing boring or doesn't make sense
the person will not be interested
it's too sloppy to hand in
someone will pick it apart and put me down
I don't have enough detail
they won't understand what I'm writing about
the reader will get confused and mixed up
I'm not clear
they don't know what I'm trying to say
they will laugh at me and I can't stand that
they will laugh if my punctuation is wrong
they will be saying things in their mind about me, not out loud
people will think my writing is tasteless and dull