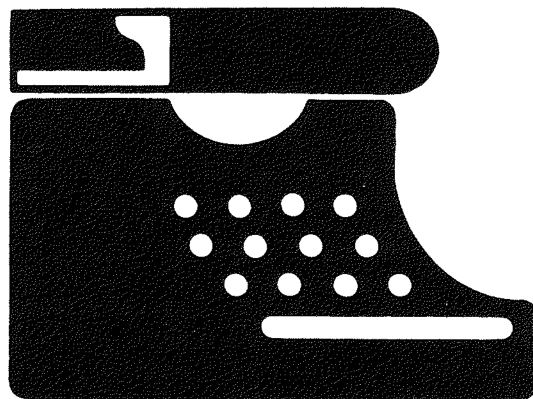
Teachers & Writers



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Allowing the Unconventional

by Anne Martin

IF THERE IS ONE POSITIVE CHANGE IN elementary education within the last decade, it is the renewed interest in children's writing. There are many strands in this minor revolution, including the whole language movement, the influence of new language teaching programs in New Zealand and Australia communicated to Americans by pioneers like Don Holdaway and Marie Clay, the National Writing Project, the Bread Loaf Writing Program, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and, perhaps most wide-spread, the work of Donald Graves and his associates in New Hampshire. The rekindled enthusiasm for children's writing is all to the good, but, as with many other reforms that have swept through schools (such as the short-lived "open classroom" movement), these new practices tend to be oversimplified and misused.

"Process writing" has become a catch-all phrase for a variety of writing programs. Though on the surface these programs may seem alike because they use similar routines and vocabulary, they sometimes have quite disparate assumptions and results. Often, new writing programs are introduced to teachers with insufficient initial training, and, once the program seems launched, not enough follow-up sessions and assistance. Teachers rarely have the chance to meet with colleagues on a regular basis over a long term for discussion of issues, questioning of philosophy or practice, and exchanging experiences and thoughtful reflection on what is happening in the whole classroom and to individual children. In the absence of built-in exchanges, teachers are often left to their own devices to develop their own teaching. It is not surprising that in many classrooms of teachers newly converted to "the writing process," the suggestions and recommendations gleaned hastily from workshops and books are followed to the letter with excessive zeal and punctiliousness, far beyond what was intended originally by the pioneers in the field. The result can be a reformed program just as rigid as the one discarded, though presented with currently approved language and trappings that give the appearance of enlightened change.

The danger of a new orthodoxy was clear to Donald Graves himself several years ago:

The writing process movement has been responsible for a new vitality in both writing and education. But orthodoxies are

ANNE MARTIN is an elementary school teacher who is currently working on a special writing program with Lesley College. Her books include *Reading Your Students* (Teachers & Writers).

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creeping in that may lead to premature old age. They are a natural part of any aging process. Some are the result of early problems in research (my own included); others come from people who try to take shortcuts with very complex processes. These orthodoxies are substitutes for thinking. They clog our ears. We cease to listen to each other, clouding the issues with jargon in place of simple, direct prose about actual children.[1]

However, it seems to me that even where orthodoxy is consciously avoided and a teacher thoughtfully adapts "process writing" (do we really need to use the word "process" every time we speak of writing, which *refers* to a process anyway?) to a particular classroom setting, age level, and school, other vexing questions may arise. I feel almost churlish to raise objections when there are so many good things that are developing in classroom writing programs—including the validation of each child's subject matter; teacher and peer assistance in communicating through writing; cooperation among children; open, clear discussion of writing problems; a new role for teachers as consultants, learners, and researchers; joyful enthusiasm for the written word—but in many descriptions of writing programs or actual classrooms, I find myself troubled by the seeming absence of, or at least casual disregard for, the darker and mysterious aspects of writing. In all the happy activity of first drafts, "conferencing," revision, final drafts, filing papers into writing folders, publishing, celebrating authorship, and public readings, what happens to the offbeat writing that evades a clear beginning, middle, and end, that makes no sense to teachers or other children, that does not lend itself to revision based on other people's questions, that has no clear logic, no details, no showing-instead-of-telling, that is not first "rehearsed" and then tried out with different "leads"? Is it subtly rejected or cajoled into other forms that lend themselves better to classroom expectations?

Theoretically, as thoughtful, tolerant teachers, we attempt to accept wide divergence in children's thinking, but actually, we are often torn between the strong conviction that children's individual expression is basic to education, and the simultaneous guilt that we are not sufficiently doing our duty of training children in writing skills. Once we have worked past the beginning problems of how to get children started on writing, when and how to make technical corrections, and how to encourage a lively writing program, we are faced with more subtle questions dealing with content and form, adult expectations, and children's responses. This was not a problem for me when I was teaching very young children. The non sequiturs and seemingly random jumps in their stories could be justified as both charming and significant in their own terms, as in this dictated story by four-year-old Marilyn:

Once upon a time when my mommy did something, every time she picked the flowers she didn't know they were flowers. She picked more of them, and she didn't want the flowers. And she went home. Once my baby didn't want to go in the crib. She cried and yelled, yelled and yelled. And my mommy cried and cried and cried all day. And I just watched television.

But what to make of this story by nine-year-old Nancy?

Once a little girl was in the kitchen and drank some milk and started to throw up all over the butter and jam. Her mother didn't have breakfast and her mother had toast and used the butter and jam and the girl was O.K. and the mother. And the mother was allergic to it too and throw upped and they lived happily ever after.

While Nancy's narrative comes through, there is much ambiguity both in the sentences and the meaning, quite aside from the unusual subject of the story. By the middle-elementary grades, there is the strong expectation that stories should have a beginning, middle, and end; that they should be more than a few sentences long; that they should contain detail, maybe dialogue, description, a logical sequence, and sentence variation; and that they should meet various other reasonable criteria for writing, along with more or less correct mechanics. As someone who values good writing, I don't object to these general aims. It's just that they are not always applicable to the stories that nine- and ten-year-olds write. For instance, here is Martha's story about an imaginary vacation:

I went to Las Vegas and won $200,000 and I bought a yacht for $6,000 and a fur for my mother and she loved it! I hired some police to guard all of us with all that money! So one of the police was really a burglar so he held me up and I said, "Stop playing jokes!" He said, "Okay" and he fired his gun. He missed me and all of a sudden my father sat on him and he died!

Unlike Nancy's story, this one has a well-defined plot, characters, logical sequence, dialogue, drama, and a surprise ending. Yet, there is bound to be some uneasiness about it, partly because it is so short. In this story, we get the feeling that a lot is missing. But for the author it says precisely what was meant, as she informed me in no uncertain terms when I cautiously asked some questions to fill in the gaps. In other instances, I might have discussed it further with the author and worked on expanding the story. The chances are that the revision would be an improvement. Again, on principle I am in favor of rewriting or reworking material. But in practice I have often found it counter-productive with primary grade children, and also with older children who are still working out a particular bit of subject matter and are not ready yet to produce a polished piece of work.

In Lucy Calkin's *Lessons from a Child*, the author gives many examples of first and final drafts to illustrate the progress children make when they go through revisions of their writing. Yet the approved final versions are often jarring because they seem so much weaker than the original drafts. Here is a section of a long story by Susie written in the fourth grade: First Draft: "I ran to my grandmother and just hugged her. We were both so happy to see each other. My grandmother laughed and cried at the same time."[2] After her teacher challenged her to lengthen the story because her writing was usually the same length, Susie (clearly an outstandingly able and conscientious writer) revised the passage to this: " 'Hi, Babydoll!' My grandmother said. I gave her a kiss. My

grandmother's eyes were filled with tears but she was laughing. We were so happy." The first version is touching because of its directness and simplicity. The final one seems forced and less deeply felt.

Stories like Martha's are rarely cited as examples of children's work by writing process proponents unless they have undergone many conferences and revisions in order to demonstrate "before" and "after" versions that show improvement. Yet these stories are rather typical in the early grades, and perhaps a necessary stage in the development of narrative. Stories like Nancy's are never cited, probably because they are too oddball. Whereas abstract, experimental visual art is allowed and approved of, even beyond primary grades, writing is generally expected to conform to achievement standards that include acceptable form and content, just as much as improved writing mechanics.

What is acceptable is often narrowly defined in terms of conventional expectations. By fourth grade, with stimulation, practice, motivation, and encouragement, most children can produce at least a few examples of what are considered creditable models of writing at their grade level. But those aberrant pieces of writing that tend to pop up more frequently in classrooms where individuality is honored in other creative areas may be pivotal work for their authors, though neither they nor we understand why. In fact, it may be crucial to encourage some of this offbeat quality in all of us. I believe that the sources of writing within us have to be activated first, before we can impose or train standards of form. The first challenge is to get at the material that needs to be written.

Children themselves, by the middle grades or even earlier, tend to scorn their "weird" thoughts, and are reluctant to play with language in writing. Teachers also are uneasy with material that does not lend itself to routine questioning or revision. It is no accident that poetry was largely ignored early on by the Graves writing process followers, and even fiction writing was approached with much apprehension for fear of the TV-inspired junk writing that would probably emerge. It is true that many children's early attempts at fiction may be imitative and modeled on action shows that they admire, producing problems for teachers on how to respond positively and yet productively. But it is equally true that cutting off children's potential for "crazy" writing may cut out the expression of some of their deepest thoughts and feelings, those that are not understood consciously by their authors and can be communicated only in symbolic fragments.

Through various poetry exercises and games, older children will let themselves write ostensibly meaningless stream-of-consciousness pieces that often give them much pleasure. Out of these abstract "poems" may come one or two powerful lines, images or thoughts, as in this exercise by Sally (age nine):

> I can see you with my words
> Can you see my words of the world?
> Daddy and Mommy see my words of the world
> cats and dogs girls and boys will cry
> so you can cry but you will not.
> So be very sweet.
> Cookies need more cement and so will you
> Mommy can cry and Daddy can cry too.

After a lot of exercises of this kind, some children will attempt to make use of their own crazy thoughts in a more controlled fashion, such as this parody fairy tale opening by a fourth grader:

> In the thick tangled vines of the jungle, there was a castle with golden towers. In it there lived a princess. Her name was Leonora. She had hair as orange as an orange. Her skin was the color of a peach. Her lips the color of an apple. She was a perfect fruit bowl.

However, it takes a great deal of time and effort to learn to release thoughts and feelings, and then learn to organize them in written form. Not all children can do this in the course of the year, and when I was teaching fourth graders I was perpetually in self-doubt, trying to justify my shaky faith that the children were working towards writing effectively even though I was maintaining my guilty resistance to grammar exercises, English worksheets, and check lists of "skills mastered." Are the children really learning? Would they do better with more conventional demands? These are not rhetorical questions. Every minor or major decision in the classroom depends on basic values, whether articulated or not, and unless there is strong school support for your convictions, there is bound to be destructive self-doubt if you go counter to currently accepted practice.

In the case of Nancy, who wrote the breakfast story, I had special reasons for worry. As soon as she felt comfortable in the room, she decided to set me up as her enemy. She told me she planned to do everything bad that she could, and then said sweetly, "Don't worry, it's just a phase!" Unfortunately, the phase lasted the year, except for occasions when she would forget and talk to me in a friendly way until she caught herself and went back to defying me at every turn. This was a new experience for me. I had always considered myself a child advocate, but Nancy put me in the role of enemy of the people. It wasn't much of a comfort to know that there were family problems, and that the previous year Nancy had spent much of her school time in the nurse's office with stomach aches. I still had to deal with Nancy's daily behavior and the ripple effect it caused.

I am providing this background only because it illustrates something that surprised me. I had always assumed that a trusting relationship between a child and a teacher was essential to real learning. But in spite of my evident failure with this child, something curious happened to Nancy's writing. She went through an evolution from rambling, seemingly pointless stories to concise, clear narratives from her own life.

At the beginning, story writing was one of the few things Nancy liked to do. She hated reading and feared math. I always approved her writing, though she was amazed that I could like the breakfast story that had such indelicate subject matter. As she threw herself into her battle against me, Nancy virtually stopped writing, and handed in only the bare minimum of assignments. Her mood, both at home and school, was expressed in one poem:

I am mad
mad is angry
angry is fresh
fresh is go to your room
go to your room is mad
and I am MAD

While I insisted on her fulfilling daily classroom assignments, I accepted short pieces and tried to avoid making an issue of her resistance. Then one day in April, she wrote another story that closely paralleled the one she had written in October:

Once upon a time I went to the frigerator and drank some sour milk and then I threw up on the butter and cheese and my mother's toast and my mom used the butter for the toast and then we were dead.

Nancy didn't give any sign of recognizing this previous theme. I accepted the story casually without questions or comments. Within a few weeks, Nancy began to write again. She voluntarily spent a whole day with another child writing several pages of a story about a "Goody Two-Shoes" girl. And then suddenly she began to write about her own family and her concerns. One story depicted graphically how her father seemed to neglect her in favor of his new wife and babies. Another was a projection into the future in which her parents were too busy to come to her college graduation. It ended:

I asked why they weren't at my graduation party. They said, "Daddy had to go to Denver for another business meeting. And I had to work overtime." I said to my Dad, "Denver is more important than me. Mom, working overtime is more important than me. I just have two lousy parents." Then they explained they would of losted their jobs if they didn't miss my graduation. I said, "I must of been not quite a mature adult."

This story was so important to Nancy that she spent hours copying it onto a stencil for the class magazine, starting over each time she made a mistake but finally doing it to her satisfaction.

It seemed to me that something significant had happened to Nancy through her writing. Whatever the strange breakfast stories meant to her, they needed to be written and accepted as part of a long-term struggle which led her from obscure, confusing, symbolic stories to explicit, well-written accounts of what was on her mind. This didn't come through conferences, editing, corrections, workbook exercises, or skill lists. Nor did it come from positive relationships with other children or the teacher. Nancy's need to express ideas and feelings in writing was strong enough to impose its own laws and necessities, given an environment where writing was valued, shared, accorded time and respect, and expected of everyone.

This experience suggests to me that mere acceptance of oddball work is important enough to make a significant difference in a child's capacity to learn, even when mutual sympathy and understanding are missing. While it is undoubtedly better to have a good working relationship, there may be some value merely in the faith in children's capacity to learn the skills they need, though their routes may appear unnecessarily circuitous and downright peculiar.

Some material may be so unclear to the writer that even well-meant help or interference could destroy the fragility of a new or difficult theme. If we impose too many questions or suggestions in conferences with peers or the teacher, we may lose some of the most original and deeply felt writing that children are groping towards. A "first draft" may consist of odd fragments, such as we might find in adult writers' notebooks and journals, to be worked through gradually over time, re-worked in other forms or perhaps discarded altogether when they serve no more purpose for the author. Writing, like all creative acts, is complex and mysterious and no matter how happily we take on the enlightened attitudes of the process writing movement, there will be perplexing questions, great individual differences, and work that is unclear and yet valuable.

In the last analysis, there is no foolproof way to teach writing (or anything else), and too much reliance on method itself rather than the underlying purposes and spirit of a writing program can be as harmful with the new process writing or whole language approach as with traditional lessons. Let us maintain our respect for the complexity of children's thoughts and feelings, and the ambiguity that remains at the heart of any creative work. We need to give children space and time in which to experiment freely with writing, to produce unrevised throw-away efforts as well as undeveloped sketches. Though our job is to teach, sometimes it is most productive to refrain from tampering too easily and too early with children's work. Most of all, I think teachers need to keep talking with each other and exchanging ideas and experiences. We all need help from others to remain open to the wide variations in children's writing and teachers' responses, to strengthen our faith in the children's own drive to master language, and to keep us in awe of the power of the written word in literature that is reflected in the work of children.

Footnotes

[1]*A Researcher Learns to Write* (Heinemann, 1984), p. 185.
[2]*Lessons from a Child* (Heinemann, 1983), p. 94.

Gore & Moral Imagination

by Tom Riordan

FOURTH AND FIFTH GRADERS AT P.S. 3 IN Brooklyn are writing books. Each day, we talk a while, read a portion of one or two books-in-progress, and then write. Everything is moving along prettily in our eight-day program—until Day 4. That morning, I read aloud the start of Elizabeth McLeod's *The Man-Eating Woman.*

#1 The Suspicious Boy
Hello, my name is Elizabeth McLeod. A long time ago there was a group of boys named John, Hungry, Charles, and Tom. They were the bullies on the block. They never went to school, that's why they are so stupid. They always carried weapons. So one day they started picking on someone. They beat him up and took his money and gold. The next day they came to his house. They tried to rob his house, but the boy turned into a werewolf who ate big bullies like those boys. He ate all of them except Tom, the leader of the bullies. Tom got more boys, but they got ate and that was the end of them. Then came a heavy metal group who ate the meat off of him and left the bones. The bones came back together. The werewolf was not a werewolf, he turned into a woman who ate men. The lady went out looking for food at a supermarket. She went to the back where the meat is at and she cut every man who was back there and ate them. One day she went out looking for a job and you guess what happened to her and the people. Now you figure out the end.

#2 The New Guy on the Plane
One bright early morning in Canada the News Reporters arrive at 8:00 a.m. in the morning. They came to interview the men-killing lady. She opened the door and they went inside and started talking. Suddenly she turned into a bumble bee who ate people's eyes and their hearts. She used her antennas and a fork and knife to cut them up and then she ate them all, every last one of them. She turned back into the lady and she got a passport to go to Alaska where it is very cold. She took the plane there and ate everyone on the plane except for this guy who she had met. They went to Alaska and they were frozen, because they thought it would be hot there, but they were wrong. It was love at first sight when they met. They left Alaska and got on the plane to go to Puerto Rico where it is hot. She turned into the bee and died. Her wings turned into hot lava. She blew up like steam.

TOM RIORDAN is a poet and fiction writer completing his first year in the T&W program. He also teaches writing at New York University, and is completing a nonfiction work called *Structures of Sin.*

#3 The Superstitious Voodoo Doll
The lady came back as a beautiful princess dressed in leaves, and eyeballs on her dress so she can see better. She had a voodoo doll for her birthday. The voodoo doll turned her into a dog and cat. The dog will bark and the kitten will purr. The doll killed her. The voodoo doll took over and the lady came back to life. She threw the doll in the garbage truck and that was the end of the doll. Her friend Diane wanted to know all about her. So she said, "Want me to tell you about me?" So she threw her in the garbage truck. Her parents called the police. They arrested her and threw her in the back of the car. She was eating the car all up. Then she ate the handcuffs and she was free to go.

#4 The Suspects
The police called the bomb squad and the navy to be alert of the girl. They spotted the girl. The girl acted like a movie star. She was coming on to them and they fell for it. They were under her spell. They had to do everything she said like, "Go jump in the lake or ocean." That's what they did. Soon as the spell broke they went chasing after her. She had turned them into stone. Suddenly she turned into Medusa. She had no head. She always carried her head in her hand. Her eyes were on her stomach. She had one arm. At night she turned into a zombie. Her faces had patches. Her clothes were grass. She was also barefoot. Mornings she came back to her old self. She sounds like a man, a dog, and many monster sounds. She thinks she's a movie star. She is a psychic person. She can cast a spell on you in one second. She went to the beach and she got in the water. The shark was there and the shark ate her.

#5 The Two Lovers
So she woke up finding herself in the whale's mouth. Luckily she had a knife and a gun. So she took the gun and shot a hole in him. Then she took the knife stabbing him. So he spit her out, and he just sunk to the bottom. She swam up to the top. She found new land where no one had been before. She met a guy who looked like her. They met in a bubble. They were swimming together. Suddenly she said, "There isn't enough of room for the two of us." So she killed him, and she ate his heart, eyes, brains, and his whole body. She left the bones when she got finished. So she took some gold and left. She went searching for another victim.

#6 The Victims
She went searching for another victim to sink her teeth in. She went to the bookstore to get a book on how many ways you can eat or kill a person. She stole the book from the store. She ran home to her kitchen. She was sharpening her knives and polishing her guns. She was blood thirsty. She just had to go get a man and she squeezed all the blood out of him, and she threw him out of the window. She put the blood in the cookie

jar. She went searching for another victim to bring to the house of horror. She went and got another man. She squeezed his brain and eyes out. She threw him out of the window. She went and got another man, squeezed his tongue. Then she threw him out the window. Then she added four cups of flour, two cups of baking soda, and twelve dozen of eggs. She made pancakes for her breakfast.

Needless to say, the kids love it and want more. But reading the kids' work at home later that day, I am alarmed to discover that Elizabeth's fertile, fluid, and gory imaginings have had a direct influence on the writing of one of her schoolmates, Laquana Wilson. Her book had begun innocently enough three days earlier.

My name is Laquana. And I will like to write about Cinderella and her stepsister and stepmothers and the prince and father and the granddoc. And I will like to write about Snow White and the seven dwarfs and the angry mother and the animal. I will also like to write about me. I will be in the story, me and my family. My family goes to work. They wear blouses, pants, shoes, and sneakers. They said all kinds of words. You will like them. So you will know my favorite story.

Once upon a time me and family played together in the park near our house. We were playing hot potato. When my sister was out she said, "That's not fair." I said, "It is fair because when it touches you cold you are out." My cousin Sakematt said, "Stop being silly, Latoya, if it touches you cold you are out. Now let us play." And we played Double Dutch, we played Dis and hop scotch, and my cousin Antoinette could not jump Double Dutch so we turned singer for her and we have lots of fun. And my cousin Chiovn too.

I am describing my cousin. My cousin looks like a girl who wears braids in her hair and she has black thin hair. Her complexion is light skin. She goes to school. She wears school uniform. She always feels like playing house and she likes to be the baby and she is four years old. And she thinks about candy all day and she sounds loud, sometimes soft, and her name is Chiovn Kelly. She is short. She is a very nice girl and her eyes is blue and eye brows is black.

I wish I was super Girl
I wish I was a fairy God mother
I wish I was a special person
I wish I was a woman
I wish I have long hair
I wish I have high hill shoes

But after hearing *The Man-Eating Lady,* Laquana switches gears.

Once upon a time there was a lady. She turn into a monster where her brain pop out of her ears and her ears pop out of her feet and cotton come out of her head and her blood came out of her pants and her hands came out of her nose and her blood look like tomato sauce.

What, I ask myself, does all this violence mean? Exposing ten-year-olds to each other's violent gore, and lending approval to it, is serious—as is the urge to censor that now pops into my mind. Next I read Najiyyah Ali's *Swamp Monsters.* Najiyyah portrays herself and her dog so sympathetically that when I reach the point where she has left off writing—where they're tied to a pole about to be shot—I can't stand it. I can't brook the thought of walking back into class the next morning and handing Najiyyah the pencil to kill herself and her beloved pet. Didn't I want to be fostering something healthier?

If so, what? That answered, how?

Didn't I have to *try* and do something to save Laquana, Najiyyah, and her Princess?

That night at a party I discuss my problem with half a roomful of parents, writers, teachers, students—and even a child psychologist. The group echoes my concern, agrees that censoring would only cap the problem, and encourages me to find a positive way to show concern. "What," I think, "if all the gore comes from thought patterns impoverished of options? Maybe this problem called not for inhibition, but for imagination."

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"Moral imagination" is a term I came across in Marguerite Rivage-Seul's writing on peace education. She used it to describe how feelings of sympathy can fuel our thinking about atomic weapons beyond the technical debate over throw-weights, MIRV populations, and deterrent "needs." The word "moral," then, refers to seeing human-centered options. People are amoral when they are compulsive, unthinking, or deprived of their options by others. "Moral" also describes choices that are important. Choices about which way to walk home or what to eat for lunch aren't "moral" choices unless they involve, say, ideas of vegetarianism, world hunger, or avoiding homeless beggars.

"Moral imagination" in writing, then, is not about what color a blouse is, how many eyes a Martian has, or what a character's toenails look like. Nor is it about plot details of how to achieve a certain ending or effect. In fiction it's about what happens to people. Will their marriage lead to divorce, counseling, murder, or reconciliation? Will Kim die or go to detox? Does Cal betray Angel? Will Jim lie, steal the money to repair his dad's car, come clean and be punished, commit suicide, or work Sundays at the body shop to pay for the repair?

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On Monday the kids and I talk about horror. They tell me why they like it, why they don't like it, and why they like it *and* don't like it. It's a topic that excites them and they spill out all kinds of stories about what scares them. Then we talk about story lines. I point out how the story of Adam and Eve starts out happy, then is jolted by something scary.

"Who can save the day?" I ask. "Think about your real life, when something scary happens, who can save you or help you? Or do you usually get blown to smithereens or have your eyeballs fall out, like in your stories?"

"God?"

"Who else?" I ask.

"Superman?"

"The policeman?"
"Your mother?"
"Your teacher?"
"The doctor, when you're sick!"
"Your friends!"
"Your*self*!"
"The writer!"

"Yes," I say. "The writer's imagination can think up all these ways to help. Some are 'super' beings like God or Superman. Sometimes it's adults like your parents, your teacher, the policeman, or the doctor. And sometimes it's your friends—or yourself. A lot of the time, it's both yourself *and* somebody else. Like what happened just this morning in Ms. Olabunmi's class. This story started last night: I was all happy, eating a wonderful soup that I made full of garlic. But then today, something scary happened. I had garlic breath, and I didn't know it!" Everyone had a good laugh at the garlic-breath teacher, and at the silliness of the story. "But *then*," I continued, "my friend helped me! My friend Tamika told me that I had garlic breath and offered me a Certs!"

The kids shriek. They can't believe I'm telling this. "So," I continue as the laughter dies down, "here's the special thing I want you all to think about today as you go back to writing your books. Those of you who are writing scary stories, and something scary is happening to one of your characters, I want you to use your writer's imagination to think about all of the ways that your character could find some help, or even help themselves. And those of you who are writing nice, peaceful books, I want you to think about what kind of problem might happen, and then what the people in your story could do about that problem."

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Day 6, and I begin to read Najiyyah's *Swamp Monsters* to the class. The kids, oblivious to my concerns, listen to her story, rapt.

My name is Najiyyah Ali. I am writing about my favorite dog named Princess. She gets lost in the forest and I can't find her because a swamp monster has her. The monster is going to eat her if I don't get to her on time. "There she is," I said. The monster is about to rip her apart. He was about to eat my dog but I jumped out and smacked the monster. As I smacked it the slime came off of its face. Then the monster got mad at me. It chased me until I got tired of running so I picked up a stick and whacked it across the face. I whacked it again and again until it died. But I didn't know it laid eggs.

I went home and took my dog. She was as scared as I don't know what. I got home and took a bath. Then I put Princess in his bath.

The next day the eggs of the monster were hatching. I woke up. I saw little foot prints of slime on the carpet in my room. My room was a mess. I got out of bed and followed the foot prints. It led out to the backyard where we had the pool filled with water. There were 8 baby monsters. They were in the pool. I saw them growing big like their mother. They jumped out of the pool. I ran in the house as fast as I could. I had to find a place to hide. In the closet I ran. I was very quiet so they could not hear me. I didn't hear them so I tiptoed out of the closet. There jumped out a monster. It bit me. I might catch the rabies. I knocked the monster on the floor. Next I ran to the phone and called the chief of police. I told him that there were monsters in my house. He came as quick as possible. He knocked on the door and then the monster jumped in front of the door.

I knocked it on the floor. I quickly opened the door. I hugged the chief and said "Am I glad to see you." He came in. I told him that there were eight swamp monsters. He said "What." I said "It is eight swamp monsters in the house. Now take out your gun and kill them. There is one in my bedroom, one in the bathroom tub, another in the cellar, and another in the kitchen eating up my food. There are four in the backyard in the pool. Let's get the one in the kitchen."

So we went in the kitchen and there the monster was standing there eating. He saw me. The chief shot him before he was able to run. Then he went to the ones in the pool. They had my dog in the pool about to drown. I wondered why I could not find him. The monsters turned around. The chief shot one then another and then another and then he shot the last one. I said, "Let me shoot some of the monsters, chief." He gave me the gun. We went after the monster in the tub. He was listening to the radio and the radio was near the tub so I knocked it in the tub and the monster got electrocuted. "Now my bedroom," I said. This one was jumping on my bed as if it were a trampoline. I shot him when he was in the air. Then we went to the cellar.

When we got there the monster was sitting on the steps. I shot him in the neck. Now the monsters are gone. "I have to find Princess," I said.

"There you are." She was hiding in the hamper. I picked her up and took her to the doctor to see if she was okay. I had to go too. I got bit by the monster. I didn't forget, I said to myself. There was the chief of police standing at the door waiting for me and Princess. When we got outside we got in the chief's car. We drove to the hospital to see my doctor. He said, "You have something in your blood." I started to think. I said to myself, "Maybe I will turn into a swamp monster."

"Oh no!" I said very loudly. "I have to warn the chief before I turn." I ran down the stairs instead of taking the elevator. I crashed into the door. I told the chief that I was going to turn into a monster. He said, "What?"

"The monster bit me before you came into my house," I said. "We have to take Princess to the animal doctor, he got bit too. I didn't know that until the animal doctor said she got bit by something very unusual," I told the chief. "I will have to kill myself and my favorite dog, too." I started to cry slime. He said, "Quick, get in the car." He drove us back to the house and we got the poles out of the basement. We went in the backyard and stuck the poles in the dirt by a tree. Chief went back inside to get his gun. He tied the dog and me to the pole. . . .

I stop. The silence in the classroom is audible. This is the point that made me stop, worry, and ponder two nights ago—and now the kids are doing the same thing. "What will happen?" I ask.

"The chief shoots them and kills them."

This is the most passive, unsurprising, and unimaginative solution.

"She and Princess burst open and the swamp monsters come flying out!"

"The chief turns into a swamp monster too! So they don't get shot!"

The wheels of moral imagining are beginning to turn.

"It starts to rain and they all melt!"

"Somebody saves her!"

"Her friends!"

"Her parents?"

"A doctor!"

"*Herself*!"

"Her imagination?"

"Well, let's see what the writer decided," I say, and then read the end Najiyyah had written the day before, after our class discussion of "writer's imagination."

Then my friend knocked on the door. She had brought her new dog over. I have to find out a way to stay normal. I either have to let her in—or I won't answer the door, and stay quiet. So I just have to make sure she does not go around and come to the back. "Chief, quickly untie me," I said. "You and I and Princess will have to go through the front door. Here she comes. Untie Princess." We ran to the front as quick as possible. Out the door we ran. We jumped in the car and drove off. I said, "I think we better go to a scientist or something." "OK," said the chief. We drove very fast to a scientist. When we got there we told the scientist whose name was Doctor Drupy to make a cure to take this swamp monster blood out of me and my dog Princess. He said "What is wrong? Tell me how it happened to your dog and you." I told him the whole story. After that he made a cure. He put garlic, onions, tomatoes, potatoes, broccoli, and collards with some kind of potion. He put it in a blender and he told me to drink it so the spirit of the swamp monster will come out. My dog had to drink it too. We drank it up. It was good. It tasted sweet like candy canes. I felt different than before. The cure worked on me and my dog. We started to act normal again. We all hugged each other. We went home. My friend was standing there waiting for me. "I have to clean up my house," I said. We cleaned up and we lived happily ever after.

The class laughs and applauds! Najiyyah's "vegetable cure" had sounded horrible to them, but they love it that she had saved herself and Princess. They see that Najiyyah had used many of the "saviors" they had named and put on the blackboard the day before—including her writer's imagination—and they are happy to think they helped Najiyyah out of her jam. Kids' choices *away* from violence now had a seal of encouragement too, and the next day, one character on the verge of suicide because she was pregnant went and got help instead. A cop and a mugger went to court. A wife-beater was restrained by neighbors. Several new kinds of denouements had started popping up in the books.

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There's a broad pool of writers at P.S. 3, not just young Poes. Some fill page after page with snappy dialogue—or with long strings of fond, uneventful activities with their friends and family. Ripples from Najiyyah's triumph reach these writers too. At first reluctant to bring tension or danger into their books, some now imagine how to do so. In a book about a happily married writing teacher named Tom, one author moves ahead to ask the question, What would happen if the wife disappeared—just *disappeared*. Another boy explores what he and his carefree pals do when an old woman on the block asks for help after a crack fiend takes her wedding ring. A third imagines her rosy future as a parent and doctor challenged when a distraught mother—drenched with her empathy—brings in a little child who "speaks to spiders." Since hidden fears stay fearful, using moral imagination to probe a story situation for its vulnerabilities is as valuable as then using it to help heal or transform them.

Of course, other kids continued their tales of mashing and maiming undaunted. Perhaps they stored our class theorizing away for future use. Some kids go through three stages in a writing program. First: they don't, can't, or won't write much of anything. Then: blood, a "testing" stage where kids think up the most revolting gore they can in order to test the teacher's willingness to read and embrace their stage 3 writing: their real, painful feelings. For some, this "testing" stage is extended. Ms. Henderson, a 5th-grade teacher at P.S. 3, agreed: there *is* life on the other side of the gore, and she was going to encourage her kids all through it, and then be there to welcome them out the other side.

Helping to make sure there is "another side" can be a big job. Monsters, grisly blades, maiming, rape, and murder seem to be imprinted indelibly on many children's minds. The source of these violent images is reality. Shootings and stabbings are now common in some neighborhoods. Drugs and drinking bring insensitivity, ugliness, and violence home. Horror films are a secondary source of violent images, as Roselyn Ali describes.

My name is Roselyn F. Ali. I like to set down in a book. I like to write scary stories. Real scary. So scary that people that read my stories can't go to sleep. My book is going to be about people in my school or people I see in the theater.

My friend she has short soft hair. She has dark brown eyes. She weighs 60 pounds. She has soft skin. She is very quiet. And is very soft hearted. She sounds like a deer crying for help.

The people in my school look normal but the people I see in the theater look like green slimy brains popping out of their stomach, purple hair that are worms, black toes, blue body, and dark green legs.

If kids are going to develop, they must learn to transcend or transform these images of external and ingested violence. It is particularly important for kids living in ravaged neighborhoods where economic escape is just not a possibility, and psychological escape disastrous. But now the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood is revitalizing itself, rallying for its children, and P.S. 3 is a hub for that revitalization.

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When children write about violence, the violence feels keen and unadorned to me. Where better to look for the roots of moral imagining? We shudder to see these innocents dive headfirst and firsthand into the deep quarry of violence and pain. We don't want them to hurt. Often, innocently, we then encourage kids to dull their quickness, so as to dull their pain.

When this happens, as kids learn to address moral questions, they learn too to euphemize the pain that provokes such questions in the first place. Abstract ideas such as freedom or justice become central to the children's moral thought—while suffering is increasingly devitalized, devalued, disguised. Finally, it is secluded from their sympathy so much that locating any moral response at all becomes the real crisis.

Whether reading about nuclear disarmament, divorce, hobgoblins, or drugs, don't we look to writers for stretching moral imagining to envision outcomes beyond those that leap readily or customarily to mind? Creative writing after all is a transforming process using sympathy, imagination, and choice. Successful, it asserts our primacy over violence. As in life, blood and death recur. But a writer's challenge is to meet such pain at the pencil point and to bring to bear the weight of human feeling. Tafari Brown's story, below, does this. She meets pain head-on in reality; she un-isolates herself, welcoming the emotional reverberations of others, both giving them sympathy and acknowledging their support; and she transforms a story of pain into one of growth. In the end, her insight and compassion are stronger. It is subtle, but does bloodshed triumph, or humanity?

I would like to write about my family. It would take place inside my house. It would be about the rememberance of my grandfather. It would be inside of my house.

Once upon a time, my family and I were just coming in from the plane from Jamaica. I was just inside of my mother's womb at the time. We have come from Jamaica. Now I was two weeks old at the time. We came back at a two-week vacation. But it wasn't such a vacation because my grandfather, whose name is Eustas, has passed away. The top of his head was bleeding and the doctor put the bloodcloth on his head to stop the bleeding but it was no use, he has died. Now the people are dressing him up. They have put a bandage on his head and a hat over it. At his funeral the family and friends cried with sorrow as if they know him (which they really did.) We took several pictures of him to remember him by. He was special in the family.

Now it is "1980" and my brother is born. My mother had me in 1978, and my brother was born in 1980, his name is Alphonso Brown. Me and the family have changed over the years. I wish my grandfather was alive to see me. The family and I miss him all ready. He has black hair, brown and black eyes, and a mustache and beard. He has a clear voice and a clear throat.

My grandma feels very sad about it. But she has to live her own life. I have nightmares of him. We miss him very much. Some of us feel like dying with him because we love him very much. Even though I wasn't born I know he was special.

One day me and my cousin were going to New Jersey, and we were climbing trees and we found a bird's nest. His name is Hassan. We had lot of fun. I also had a nightmare, I screamed but I didn't know I did. But almost everybody in the house woke up. My cousin and I were putting on our clothes and we snuck outside. We went home at three o'clock. My brother and other cousin missed us. He also said he was crying for us. We understand.

I am by no means suggesting that good writing be of the fluffy happy-ending "Polyanna" variety. In both gratuitous gore and Polyanna, the author isn't in touch with sympathy or human reality enough to make any kind of moral hay. The writer's choices don't feel important because the characters are isolated from the reader—in a vacuum of reality in the case of Polyanna, and of humanity in the case of gore. The result is boredom, withdrawal, passivity. Good writing, though—even when bleak—excites compassion, pain, hope, anger, dread, sorrow. We feel that what happens matters. We become interactive. Active, our moral capability lengthens into the situation. We feel the writer is in possession of important choices, and we sense the value of our important choices too.

"I have learned," fifth-grader Erika Brown wrote, "that I possess my words." Learning more about their moral imaginations has helped the P.S. 3 authors to possess the creative power not only of their words but, I hope, of their lives as well. First sympathy, then moral urge, then recognition of important choices, it is this sequence of feeling that Laquana, Najiyyah and Tafari's writing made *me* feel—setting off the chain of thought that led to my writing this. ●

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