

The Accidental Teacher

How Trying to Make A Writer of Myself
Taught Me How to Make a Writer of Someone Else

MARION WINIK

TWO winters ago I edited an essay by a student writer about my own age who grew up in a big house in Pittsburgh with a mother slowly dying of multiple sclerosis. Her professor father and seven older siblings were gone during the day; her younger brother had been sent to live with another family. At four, she was sure this would be her fate as well, unless she proved her worth as a caretaker. Through a series of vignettes, she traced her mother's illness, her father's struggle, the brave, brittle, Cheaper-By-The-Dozen life of the family.

We exchanged many versions of this memoir, each flying back from me to her drenched in red ink. "UNDERSTATE!" I would scribble in capital letters. When she wrote the scene that explained how a tiny girl gets her half-paralyzed mother on and off a bedpan, when she described the sleepless night during the Cuban missile crisis when she agonized over whether to pray for her mother's health or for the deliverance of the country, believing God would hear one and only one request, when she found the dark humor as well as the plain darkness of these moments, I experienced it as sheer, sweaty glory, as victory for our team. Hell, yeah, we did it! This kind of uncomplicated, fist-pumping satisfaction is rare in my life as writer, so I was thrilled when I discovered how abundant it can be in teaching.

I did not grow up wanting to be a teacher, never considered the possibility. I grew up wanting to be the center of attention, and though a teacher does stand at the front of the room, speaking while others are silent, the appearance that she is the focus of the scene is an optical illusion. The leading role in the drama of an education belongs to the student. By the time I was nine, my other potential career choices, acting and sky-



Author Marion Winik. Photo by TK.

diving, had begun to seem second-rate compared to what was obviously the most meaningful achievement in life. To write. Not merely to write, but to be numbered among the immortals.

I think every young writer, or every beginning writer, cherishes certain hopes. Perhaps you know these hopes, the towering, splendiferous, maddening ones that won't stop whirling just out of reach, like a ream of typing paper in a windstorm. I am still chasing those pages now. Sometimes I catch one. You cannot believe, or perhaps you can, the amount of emotional energy and effort expended in this direction. And here's an interesting thing that has come out of all this endless trying to make a writer of myself: I can help make a writer of someone else.

I began teaching writing at the college level more or less by accident, not long after I married a philosophy professor in 1999. While I had gotten my MFA from Brooklyn College in 1983 under the tutelage of Jonathan Baumbach, Peter Spielberg, and John Ashbery, I didn't realize this qualified me to teach anything, and at that point it probably didn't. I had flitted from confessional poetry to autobiographical fiction, seemingly waiting for my real form, creative nonfiction, to emerge from obscurity. Though classes in creative nonfiction are ubiquitous now, there was not a MFA program in the genre until the University of Pittsburgh's in 1993. In fact, I was unsure what to call it when I ended a longish creative drought by writing what turned out to be my first personal essay in 1987, "How To Get Pregnant in the Modern World."

Finding my form was an incredible relief to me; I had been wanting for years to write plainly in my own voice. I was already writing exclusively, if semi-covertly, about my life; now I could pursue openly my instinct that an actual set of experiences was as viable a gateway to truth as any other. And finally, though I would then have

Finding the narrative arc in my students' experiences, helping them hear their own true voices, browbeating them, if necessary, to craft sentences and paragraphs capable of luring, snagging, and bagging an unsuspecting reader—the intensity of my enthusiasm for this project seemed to leap around the classroom like an electric current.

thought it déclassé to go on about "healing," I found that writing a personal essay is for my money the single most potent way to change one's emotional relationship to the turbulence of destiny. Rather than simply being the survivor of your circumstances, you become their impresario—in fact, a version of that is happening right now.

In any case, when my husband's college found itself without a teacher for an already-scheduled writing class, I learned I had a terminal degree in the field. That first course was labeled Magazine Feature Writing, of which I had done quite a bit as a sideline to the pursuit of greatness. I began by assigning the students front-of-

the-book pieces, then trend articles, then profiles, but it was at the end of the term, when we got to the essay, that the class caught fire. As it turned out, I had a student who'd grown up living with her family in a religious cult. Another who'd wrestled with

being gay and liking classical music in high school. Another who had racked up a humiliating amount of credit card debt before turning twenty, and wanted to figure out how it had happened.

These were stories that captivated me as much as my own (which I was by now a little sick of, anyway). Finding the narrative arc in my students' experiences, helping them hear their own true voices, browbeating them, if necessary, to craft sentences and paragraphs capable of luring, snagging, and bagging an unsuspecting reader—the intensity of my enthusiasm for this project seemed to leap around the classroom like an electric current.

The next fall, my husband took a new job at an art school in Baltimore, and I joined him there, conducting a class in the personal essay. What I offered my students first was an invitation to candor, and kids quickly realized they could tell me anything. I learned about raves and beer pong and other innovations in youthful decadence. That kind of bravery paved the way, and then a girl wrote about growing up hungry, even on Thanksgiving, when her fatally proud mother took them to a soup kitchen for the day—to serve, not to eat. Another girl had been raped, she thought, but wasn't sure, and had yet to discuss it with anyone. One of the girls in the class had been very wild in high school. Her story involved Jack Daniels, a slut named Misty, and a memorably described “gritty penis,” all written in pellucid sentences without a drop of shame.

Absolute silence followed the reading of some of these pieces in class. No one had any idea how to respond to what was both an attempt at art and a courageous, intense, sometimes harrowing act of self-revelation. Sometimes students were crying a little, or staring fixedly at their desks. I too felt panicky. I was not a therapist or even a very good role model—did I have the skills to steer our ship through the waves of emotion, vulnerability, empathy, and judgment suddenly swelling around me? I groped my way into some principles of navigation: though we could acknowledge whatever pain or personal truth had just been shared, we would approach what we'd heard not as a trauma but as a story, as a work of art. *Let's help this writer figure out how to sew up the narrative, find the right beginning, the right tone*, I would tell my students. This requires, I would admit, a kind of hardening of the heart.

A slightly harder heart is not always a bad thing.

When you publish a piece of writing, you imagine you are offering something to people but you don't get to see how they receive it. For a teacher in a classroom, it's right there. They unwrap your gift. They try it on. It fits. In fact, it looks great on them. What a delightful relief from unfulfilled ambition, to learn you already have something so durable and useful it can be given away again and again.

Meanwhile, my strategy to avoid stumbling into a Jerry Springer free-for-all worked most of the time, notably the semester a girl haltingly began to write of the beatings she'd suffered at the hands of her father, a minister—emboldening two other students to tell their own childhood tales of physical abuse. As this unfolded, my dedication to avoiding in-class melodrama grew steely. I got pretty smooth at making the

When you publish a piece of writing, you imagine you are offering something to people but you don't get to see how they receive it. For a teacher in a classroom, it's right there.

jump from the emotional reaction to the discussion of the first sentence—the lede, as journalists call it—and the balance between dialogue and description, between showing and telling.

But occasionally there were disasters, there were tears, and there was worse. One time I had a boy and a girl who had been friends before college, back home in Florida. He was a loudmouth and a playa, and I already didn't like him much. Then he read us an essay about a night that he had babysat a little girl, the younger sister of a friend of his. Once the child was asleep, he smoked some pot he found in a drawer, then had sex with the mom when she got home. By the end of the story, his old friend was looking at him with her mouth open.

Yes, it was your mom, he said.

Oh Christ, I yelled. And then I could think of nothing to do but give the entire group a cigarette break, suggesting that even non-smokers might consider taking it up.

Jerry Springer might have done a better job with this one.

Further, my theory that telling the story provides mastery over the problem was not always borne out. This was particularly true when the problem was in the present. A boy from the south who had a rough but certain gift for storytelling was also certainly

This was the other part of what I had to teach: the obsession with sentences and grammar and logic, with the balance between sentiment, self-deprecation, and humor. To go deeper, to tell more, to make memory give up the goods.

an alcoholic. I kept writing on his paper, do you want to talk? He didn't. There have been others like him, and I think about them all through the semester and afterwards. But they do not want a mother, and they signed up for a writing class not—as I myself state so clearly in the syllabus—a therapy session.

Right. Like the dark-haired, unusually self-confident girl who responded to the assignment to copy the list style of

Sei Shonagon's first-century pillow books—"Hateful Things," "Elegant Things," "Things That Cannot Be Compared," "Things That One Is In A Hurry to See or Hear"—with a truly splendid and smart list of a twenty-two-year old's pleasures. Men's bodies, rock songs on the radio, free cigarettes from the Camel girl in the nightclub. I kept the piece, but I've lost track of Aleta herself. I believe I ended up annoying her, because the fact that she was having so much fun being young and wild and sexy made me nervous, and I worried that she was only pretending to love it all, and that something dangerous was behind it, or beyond.

Though Aleta's was the rare essay that is nearly perfect on the first draft, usually I made the students work their pages over and over, as I did my own. This was the other part of what I had to teach: the obsession with sentences and grammar and logic, with the balance between sentiment, self-deprecation, and humor. To go deeper, to tell more, to make memory give up the goods.

I had a slight, bespectacled boy named Austin, who didn't even seem to care about being a writer, but had so much talent the class and I would just look at each other and roll our eyes when he read his work to us. There was one essay about being in a car

accident with his divorced dad, another about his unrequited loves as a young songwriter. He rewrote the essays two, three, four times, never doing exactly what I said, which was fine with me. I had begun to understand that you can't teach writing if you don't respect the righteous stubbornness of someone who knows what they're doing.

ONE of the assignments I gave as a break from the intensely personal was to write about a time when your private experience intersected with a major public event. One of the best of these was written by a Korean-American girl about the Rodney King riots. She was from L.A., had experienced at nine the violence and combustion that occurred between that city's Blacks and Asians and other minorities. She saw that her parents' reaction had so much to do with the psychological history of their generation of Korean immigrants, and she tried to put that history in there too. It was more ambitious than anything I had ever tried to write myself, and it was bigger than she could actually manage, but what the hell. It was an honor to work on it.

Later on, I had an older student, a heavyset Pennsylvania Dutch woman who used a walker to get around, who insisted that her life had never intersected any major public events. I didn't believe her, I said over and over, until finally she remembered Three Mile Island. She could just about see the towers of the nuclear plant out of the window of the house she shared with her seventy-year-old mother at the time of the accident.

Very few of the young students in this class—at a college in central Pennsylvania, mind you—had ever even heard of Three Mile Island. They were spellbound by her scary, funny account of the evacuation, a world-changing set of events that had become, through acute personal detail, her literary property. Who knows what her eye would come to rest on next?

Often those who couldn't think of a topic to suit this assignment would ask if they could write about 9/11. I ended up prohibiting 9/11 stories, unless you could convince me you had a rare one. The girl who had run away from home three months before the attack and was living with a bad boyfriend in a state park off the grid in the Southwestern desert, and found out about the plane crashes from the one guy in the place who had a transistor radio, after which she finally headed home—she convinced me. "Tuesday Morning," the piece was called, and I had her write it so the reader had no idea, for many pages, that it was about 9/11. Just trust me, I said, and she did.

IN 2005, I became a creative nonfiction mentor at a new low-residency MFA program at Carlow University in Pittsburgh—by this time, the unknown genre was riding high. Teaching graduate students in a program like this was pretty different than working with undergraduates. In general, they were more stable and less nerve-wracking. They read my many edits and suggestions on their papers more carefully, and they read the books on the syllabus, too.

I had begun to understand that you can't teach writing if you don't respect the righteous stubbornness of someone who knows what they're doing.

That first semester, I had five in my group: two were grandmothers, two recently out of college, one my age. Most were not sure what creative non-fiction was. Some felt they did not want to deal with sensitive personal material. All were taken aback by my tough talk from day one and my dismissive reaction to the work they had submitted in their applications—no more grandchildren stories, I hissed. Then we spent

It's embarrassing to show pride in one's own achievements, and bragging about one's children or grandchildren is hardly better. But to appear briefly in a stranger's life, alter its trajectory, and have a pile of papers that proves it—damn.

ten days together, and five pieces of writing came out of it. We worked so hard on those pieces, from the selection of the topics to the debating of words and punctuation marks, reading them aloud over and over, I could almost recite the essays now.

One of the grandmothers, a speech therapist named Rose who works with autistic children, wrote a stunningly sensual essay about deer hunting. Another told about the suicide of her lifelong best friend, a story fraught with misplaced blame and

unexamined lies. The young journalist wrote a quiet heartbreaker about the deterioration of her boxer grandfather from Parkinson's. The other girl wrote a dreamy thing about the generations of healers in her family. And the woman who was my age did a little essay about visiting Paris with her husband, which was important mainly because of how hard I had to push to get her to listen to me so we could spend the rest of the semester on the real work, the subject that drew her inexorably while scaring her to death—which was the rocky childhood in Pittsburgh mentioned earlier.

I sat in the audience the night of the student reading at the end of the residency. *Jesus Christ*, whispered someone in the audience as Rose read her hunting essay. I was so proud of them all, I couldn't stand it. In fact, I had never felt so proud of anything in my life without also feeling gauche and overbearing. It's embarrassing to show pride in one's own achievements, and bragging about one's children or grandchildren is hardly better. But to appear briefly in a stranger's life, alter its trajectory, and have a pile of papers that proves it—damn.

I doubt I will ever be free of the dream of becoming a writer for the ages. Just around the corner of my life, I could find the door into a part of my imagination I have never seen before, an undiscovered continent of talent waiting lush and pristine all this time. But the focus of my teaching—and what my teaching has focused me on—is process. A good lede, a honed paragraph, a killer ending. I know most of my students want much more than that, and I sympathize with them. Perhaps we all have to torture ourselves by imagining the elusive annunciation.

Which is fine, as long as it keeps us coming to class.

