T&W's 35th Anniversary

Reflections on the Living Experiment

PHILLIP LOPATE

I can't help looking back at the experience of teaching at P.S. 75 and supervising the Writing Team as a kind of golden age, both in arts education experimentation and in my working life. Never were so many manpower resources allocated to one school (three writers and a filmmaker permanently assigned, plus temporary loan-outs of a visual artist, a radio producer, a choreographer, and a musician); never did we have so much freedom to do any project we wanted (filmmaking, publishing, comic books, theater, a radio station, you name it); never were we able to sink roots so deeply into the life of the school and the community. For me, personally, it was a unique work experience because it used up everything I had to offer, pulled it out of me, drained me at times but forced me to grow. It was there I learned that in teaching it's more work to hold back part of yourself than to give your all.

I've tried to practice that pedagogic philosophy since; but it still seems to me I'm coasting, at the university level, compared to what energies were expected of me as a T&W operative at P.S. 75. I used to come home daily and need to take a nap!

When I look back at that experience, what strikes me most, however, was the quality of my colleagues. Not just my arts team members, Sue Willis, Teri Mack, and Karen Hubert (whose premature passing I will never stop grieving), but the regular teachers at P.S. 75, who made it possible to try anything, by their own willingness and comfort with the educational enterprise at its freest. How often their classroom skills and deep knowledge of the kids saved us from folly! I shudder, remembering some of the risks we took, and the many times the regular teachers rescued us.

I also think back with gratitude to the Principal who made it all possible, Luis Mercado, or Crazy Lou, as I thought of him, a disheveled wild man who never played by the book, God bless him, and snared every outside group in creation to work at his school. Lou was an educational revolutionary. He could never be bothered waiting for the bureaucracy to approve an outlay, but simply pulled a roll of bills from his pocket when you needed supplies. And the directors of Teachers & Writers who supported the 75 Team—first Marv Hoffman, then Marty Kushner, then Steve Schrader, then Nancy Larson Shapiro—were also quick to green-light any scheme we might invent, and rustle up the funds for it. How I took them all for granted, assuming then they had no choice but to back me! I was of course a wild man too, with a crucial part of my censorship and caution equipment missing. But I was also following the

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kids, the true action heroes, who (as Orson Welles said about making Citizen Kane) were too green and unencumbered by bitterness to understand what they could and couldn't do. Bless those great P.S. 75 kids!

ADAM HORVATH

Until Phillip Lopate's team entered my P.S. 75 classroom, writing was one of the rote chores of ordinary schoolwork, an exercise meant to prove I'd adequately digested some lesson, book, or class trip. Through the T&W workshops, though, it rose to another level: It became something I might actually choose to do on my own, something that carried the promise of its own exhilarating reward. On a fifth grader's short list, it joined such vaunted pursuits as body-surfing, playing handball, and being a wise-ass.

That was 12 years before I became a reporter, and 25 years before I began to teach writing myself. I'm certain the workshops were part of the reason for both. And yet I can't recall a single specific lecture that Phillip or anyone else gave, or a set of rules they taught, or even a critique of my writing from that time.

I think the reason is this: There weren't any. The folks from Teachers & Writers weren't editors but enablers. They encouraged us to write about whatever moved us, and to keep writing—to not let anything intimidate us, certainly not formalities that could get in the way of passionate and personal expression. I think the method—if it was formal enough to be called that—was controversial then; I bet it still is now.

For me, it worked. In weekly or almost weekly, installments (they never pushed hard enough to give me an excuse to give up), I put together an extended, relatively uninhibited writing effort that would have been unthinkable otherwise. It was a 10-year-old's tour de force, a macabre, disjointed story with an unpronounceable title, full of authorial asides and puns, starring the writer as its hero. Its vocabulary was heavily borrowed from the pages of science-fiction stories; its tone from *Mad* Magazine. But they published it school-wide, like other long-term student efforts, using the desktop publishing technology of the day: mimeograph sheets bound together with what appeared to be red electrical tape. And then they published it for real, as part of a collection of student writing called *Five Tales of Adventure.*

At the time, P.S. 75 was already an unconventional school, a pioneer of the "open corridor" concept, in which students did work at their own pace and time in classrooms set up somewhat like community centers. Having spent my first few weeks in a traditional first grade classroom of the time—taught by a former U.S. marine, desks in neat rows, students' eyes all on the same part of the blackboard, working through each lesson in each subject at the same pace—I understood some of the difference.

But even in the looser, open-corridor setup, the visits by Teachers & Writers were different. We called them by their first names—Phillip (Lopate), Teri (Mack), Sue (Willis) and Karen (Hubert). They had an enthusiasm unburdened by the multiple responsibilities of classroom teachers. To my fifth grade mind, they seemed like they were there because they wanted to be—not because they had to be.

In turn, it was up to us to take as much from their presence as we chose. Writing for their eyes felt like an opportunity, not an obligation. If teachers were analogous to parents in the classroom, responsible for discipline as well as encouragement, the folks from T&W were like friendly aunts or uncles or family friends who visited frequently but briefly: We'd want to impress and entertain them, and vice versa. They brought us out.

It was there that I learned that in teaching it's more work to hold back part of yourself than to give your all.

Likewise, the writing we did for them was clearly different from the other writing we did in school. Other "creative writing" exercises always seemed to demand a riff on some arbitrary topic, often dictated impersonally on a color-coded card or textbook. Teachers & Writers exercises were personal: the seeds might be planted one way and then grow in an unexpected direction, nourished by class discussions and the suggestions of us kids—who were being asked to do the writing and therefore, it seemed, should care about the subject.

The result was an explosion of creative expression about students' fears, their daily lives, their dysfunctional and neurotic families. We learned to make close observations of the world around us, or concoct our own worlds, or combine the two. We confronted death, which one friend of mine wrote "feels like everything in your body has gotten a traffic ticket, and has to get off the road." We did role-playing and wrote plays. We wrote brief, almost nonsensical items that seemed throwaways; we wrote brief, almost nonsensical items that seemed like poetry.

Reading over the old Teachers & Writers newsletters and anthologies, I realize now that I avoided heartfelt outpourings in favor of concocting my one smart-alecky narrative, a sort of Sam-Spade-meets-the-Swamp-Thing, 100 years in the future. But I was rewarded with publication nonetheless. All this, of course, helped make me think that if I wrote, people would read it, and respond. Although every student didn't get that level of recognition, the idea was the same: Write with passion; write to connect.

BILL ZAVATSKY

When I think back to the beginning of my work for Teachers & Writers in 1971, I seem so young to myself—a mere lad of twenty-eight. T&W sent me to P.S. 84, a school that is right across the street from Trinity School, where I have now taught for the past fifteen years. After a few years there I went off to a junior high in Riverdale, then to a high school in Lynbrook, and between these jobs I taught at C. W. Post College and for New York State Poets in the Schools. I could trot through my teaching résumé for a couple of more pages, but I'll skip to my standing joke, which is that the only population groups that I have not taught are the unborn and the dead. And I am convinced that there must be a way to write grant proposals that will open up those areas to me and other enterprising poets.

If all of this sounds like I joined the circus rather than taught poetry writing, you wouldn't be far wrong. There was certainly a three-ring performance aspect to what a lot of us did in the early years of what has come to be called the "poetry in the schools" movement. And sometimes we found ourselves not in the main tent, but doing back-flips on the boards of the freak show off to the side. Once, in Staten Island, I was ushered into an almost-auditorium in which the entire elementary school had been assembled and I proceeded to dance around the green-felt stage with Pablo Neruda and his socks until we both corkscrewed off into the starry sky—or so it felt like to me that day. At Mepham High School on Long Island (the high school that comedian Lenny Bruce flunked out of), I was put into the "Sub-Sub Program," where everybody from scuba divers to Mr. Lucky and His Dogs (this is the Lord's honest truth, I swear it!) were called in to substitute for absent teachers. Hence the title of the program: Substitutes for Substitute Teachers. These were the days when I carried a cheap leatherette briefcase that looked like a little suitcase. A kid sidled up to me and said, "Hey, ah yoo Mista Lucky an' iz dogs?" "Of course," I replied. He looked at me suspiciously. "So wheahza dogs?" he asked. "Right in here," I told him, lifting up my cheapo briefcase. "There's six dead lit-

tle puppies in there," I told him to his face, and (this too is the Lord's honest truth), I think he believed me. This too was the school where I received the greatest compliment any student has ever offered to me. After one of my classes a girl came up, smiled at me straight in the face, and said, "Y'know, Mista Z, you're a real pissa!"

All of this teaching was what is gently referred to as Seat of the Pants Flying. What I had learned as a comparative literature major at Columbia, and what I had learned in the M.F.A. writing program at Columbia, well, neither of them prepared me for making it up as I went through the door of Mr. Isaacson's English class somewhere in Westchester. Even then, Kenneth Koch's ideas about kids and poetry writing were circling around. Sometimes I used them and sometimes I didn't. (I was a student of Koch's at Columbia, and I loved his classes and still love his poetry, but I remain unconvinced that poetry ought to be confined to the kingdom(s) of wishes, lies, and dreams.) What I did understand from Koch and other inventors of this field of endeavor, though, was that the style of teaching was the writer. In other words, we poets formed our own teaching ideas out of our practice as writers, for good or for ill, and it still strikes me that this is how it ought to be. There is no single way to teach poetry writing, and don't ever let anybody tell you that there is. The glory of Teachers & Writers was that it let all of us young upstarts develop in whatever direction we went. It believed in us, and for that reason it was possible for us, as untried, improvising teachers, to believe in ourselves.

JULIE GOLDMAN, CAROLINE KAPLAN, & AMY ROSENFELD POUX

When we were asked to contribute to this 35th-anniversary issue of *Teachers & Writers* Magazine, we thought long and hard about the best way in which to approach this task. The first step, however, was trying to find a time that the three of us could actually focus for half an hour between careers, family, and the thick of city living. Such a long way from the mid-1970s when the main logistical decision concerned whose house to eat lunch at that day. Almost 30 years later (gulp!), a clear line can be traced to the women we've become from the impact of our fifth and sixth grade T&W experiences.

We grew up on Manhattan's Upper West Side at a time well before gentrification, when the population was still a melting pot of ethnicities. Rents were affordable, families, teachers, artists, and hoodlums all lived amongst one another. Our elementary school, P.S. 75 (the Emily Dickinson School), was a public school that benefited from the innovation and experimentation of open classroom education. While we were never quite schooled in the algorithm for long division, we gladly exchanged that for classes in culture, art, even aviation.

Above all else we were riding on that dizzying learning curve that moved us from girlhood to adolescence. Our daily life consisted of hanging out in cliques, talking behind each other's backs, wanting to be better than the boys, and trying to avoid being teased (or possibly mugged) on the way home from school. We were truly coming of age in the '70s. We practiced the hustle, we loved the Beatles, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, the Hues Corporation, and notably Carole King, Carly Simon and, yes, even Helen Reddy...hear us roar. Back in our day it only cost 99 cents for a 45 record, and the first Gap store opened up a block away from school—right next to the Black Panthers' bookstore, Seize the Time.

This teaching was what is gently referred to as Seat of the Pants Flying.

On the home front, all of us were raised by parents who took activism seriously, who were politically motivated, and who instilled progressive values in their children. Great as this was, in some ways our parents prepared us for a world that didn't exist—the real one around us was still reeling from Vietnam and Watergate.

How wonderful, then, to have this amazing initiative called Teachers & Writers come into our classrooms, intercepting this time in our lives. Here was a place of our own. Under the magnificent direction of our T&W teacher Teri Mack—a filmmaker in her own right—we wrote, acted, directed, and edited. But mostly we tapped into our creative spirits, to our compassion and sense of community, to our facility for friendship and collaboration.

Mack's class, which focused on the collaborative creation of short films, allowed us to work as a team, to come up with an overall story and setting and then to explore our individual voices as we wrote dialogue for our own characters. We were able to approach technology without inhibition, learn to work with cameras, lighting and editing equipment—quite unusual access for girls to have in those nascent days of feminism. We even went "on location" to shoot exteriors at the Cloisters and interiors at Karen Hubert's Brooklyn Heights apartment. And we squirmed with a mix of pride and embarrassment when these videos were screened for the entire school.

While the products were hardly masterworks, they were, more importantly, a testament to a time, to earnestness and the beginnings of the creative process. Over the years, we've joked with each other about these videos, how we could blackmail one another by showing them to boyfriends, husbands, friends, and colleagues. But the truth is that there is still this part of each of us, captured on film, frozen in time, that takes pride in our courage to explore what our potential could be, our confidence in our ideas, our power of creativity.

All three of us have grown up to become active members of the arts in our careers and our communities. We owe a great deal to T&W for initiating us into the wonderful, gratifying, painful and exhilarating world of expression and ideas. So thank you Teri Mack, Karen Hubert, Phillip Lopate, and T&W. We hope we have fulfilled the promise that you had for us.

RON PADGETT

Since I am writing this shortly after the death of Kenneth Koch, my memories of Teachers & Writers Collaborative keep going back to December of 1968, when he phoned to ask me if I would like to take over his job teaching poetry writing to elementary school children once a week at P.S. 61 on the Lower East Side. I had no particular interest in teaching. It wasn't just that I didn't see myself as a teacher, but also that I had doubts about the whole enterprise. Now that teaching poetry writing to children is widespread, it is hard to believe that in 1968 the prevailing assumption, was that such a practice would be either too difficult or simply impossible. But I felt obligated to Kenneth, who a few years before had been my mentor and protector at Columbia and had helped me get a Fulbright to France.

Also he was terribly persuasive. "Don't say no yet. Just come visit the school with me. Then you can say no." Since the school was only three blocks from my apartment, I could find no excuse for refusing.

The moment we walked into the first classroom, the students gave out a rousing cheer. Kenneth introduced me to the class, and I was heading toward a seat at the back when I heard him say, "Okay, poets, I have a new idea for today, but first Ron is going to read you some of his poems."

He had asked me to bring along a few of my poems, just in case, but hearing my name jolted me. Since I feared that the children would have no interest in anything I had written, I had hoped that Kenneth would forget about my participating. With the feeling that I was about to make a fool of myself, I shuffled to the front, made a few remarks about having an infant son and about bestiaries, and read three short poems about animals. One described an electric eel that, when it twisted its body into the shape of the word eel, lit up. As I read the poem I drew the eel on the board, and when I got to the illumination part I added cartoonish lines indicating light coming from its body. All this took perhaps two minutes. The students looked interested.

"Can you read a few more?" Kenneth asked.

"That's all I brought."

"Okay, those were good. Now, on to more poetry!" he said, taking my place at the board. Then he presented a poetry idea or model. I noticed that he talked to these sixth graders in much the same spirited and thoughtful way he talked to his college undergraduates, but with extra liveliness. Yes, he adjusted his diction, but he never talked down. In general he radiated an energy and excitement about writing poetry that leapt like an electric spark into the students. After introducing the day's poetry idea or reading a model poem and talking about it, Kenneth asked the students to volunteer example lines or images of their own. Soon the air was filled with raised hands and wild images. "These are all good," he said, "but I can't hear them all at once, so write them down on your papers." The students attacked their blank pages. Whenever someone had a question, Kenneth would dart to that student's side and offer a friendly suggestion of the "Don't worry about spelling" and "That's good, but keep going!" variety—no fussy criticism. After ten or fifteen minutes he collected the drafts and read them aloud, to the great entertainment and sometimes surprise of everyone.

When it was time for us to move on to the next class, the kids groaned. "Please stay!" "Let's write some more!" "When are you coming back?"

I was stunned by the enthusiasm of the students and by the freshness of their work. Of course not all of them were gifted writers, but all had written, and there were many good images and lines even in the average poems. And it hadn't been a fluke: the next two classes produced similar results.

As we walked out of the school and onto the sidewalk, Kenneth placed a helmet on his head and straddled a motorcycle. "I'm so glad you're taking my place," he said with a big smile, and before I could reply that I hadn't really made up my mind, he added, "I'll send you all my teaching diaries and students' poems" and roared away.

I taught poetry to children for the next ten years, and ended up editing books for Teachers & Writers for another twenty. Kenneth, with his gift for sensing what step would be good for one, knew how to open the door and give a nudge, radiating optimism.

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We envisioned a collaboration that would entirely transform the way writing would be taught.

HERBERT KOHL

Teachers & Writers Collaborative actually began two years before its official founding. In 1965, Bob Silvers of the *New York Review of Books* and Nelson Aldrich, a college friend of mine, invited me to a conference sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education and the National Science Foundation on the teaching of writing in the schools. The meeting was part of the Tufts Conferences called by the White House to reform the curriculum in public schools in all subject areas after Sputnik. While the invitees included writers and academics, it struck me immediately that there was only one writer of color, William Melvin Kelley, in the group, and that I was the only practicing classroom teacher. (At the time I was teaching sixth grade in Harlem.) I remember pointing out at the meeting that there were many teachers doing wonderful things with writing in their own classrooms, that teachers didn't like to be told from the outside what to do, and that despite the general impression of the group many of us were intelligent, well educated, and sensitive, and had a lot to say about the teaching of writing.

After the meeting, Bob Silvers and Tinka Topping of the Hampton Day School asked me to set up another meeting, with the goal of creating an organization dedicated to reforming the teaching of writing using the knowledge of writers and college writing professors. I initially demurred, because I didn't, and still don't, think writers know enough about teaching young people to reform anything without utilizing the knowledge, experience, and intelligence of K–12 teachers. I therefore suggested that the final meeting consist of writers *and* teachers, and added that the teachers should be given time to read some of their students' work and talk about their approaches to teaching writing.

Bob and Tinka agreed. The event took place at the Huntting Inn in Southampton, New York, in the summer of 1966. What we learned there would infuse the beginnings of what became Teachers & Writers Collaborative with the spiritual, artistic, pedagogic, and political energy that allowed us to survive the first rough years.

I had asked the teachers, all of whom worked with children who lived in urban ghettos, to bring examples of their students' writing and some of their lesson plans. In those days there was an attitude that these children were "culturally deprived" and not capable of sophisticated and complex work. As the teachers read the student work and described the lessons they had developed to elicit exceptional creative writing, I could sense that the writers and academics were surprised and delighted—two of the writers, Anne Sexton and Muriel Rukeyser, so much so that they became inspired to work with young people.

The next day the writers gave a reading from their own work, a "present," they said, to the teachers. The reading, held at Topping's home, was one of the most memorable performances I have ever attended. I spoke to the teachers afterward, and they felt the same. The writers were reading for *them*, and displayed a respect for their work as educators that these teachers were unaccustomed to receiving. Most of them were working under pressure, and sometimes threat, from administrators who considered them mavericks. They were discouraged from teaching "creative" writing or allowing their students the freedom to express their experiences, attitudes, and opinions.

The natural next step was to develop an alliance of teachers and writers which that bring not just writers but imaginative writing itself into the classroom. We wanted young people to see writing as a vehicle for sharing thoughts, feelings, ideas, and dreams with their peers, teachers, and communities. We envisioned a collaboration that would entirely transform the way writing would be taught.