

# **Lessons of the Heart: Teaching and the Poetic Life of Mind “full” Possibilities**

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### (ABSTRACT)

Education should grow the delicate flowers of our emotional hearts and souls as well as the sturdy plants of our minds; it should awaken us to depths of which the mind alone is not capable. This study presents reasoning for the necessary nurturing of students as whole people. The style in which it is written is indicative of the content itself; unrestricted and constant in motion, much like a free verse poem, the study achieves its wholeness not by wild abandonment of form, but by the embracing of a particular design that is self-generated rather than regulated. The point is to show that just as our lives cannot fruitfully be assembled then categorized, neither can teaching which is linear and disembodied provide a meaning “full” education for teacher or student.

The themes of risk and vulnerability, self-knowledge, self-reflection, and self-hood, the incredible necessity to see our lives as large rather than small, and the overwhelming challenge to open up to instead of shut out the sounds of our lives are the strains that are herein taken up. Another time, another space and the issues would have presented themselves in an entirely different, but just as meaningful light. Again, the point made is how the unforeseen element of creativity rises up when thought is allowed to intertwine itself with the experiences of our lives. When allowed to self-generate, it connects all things to form a whole that once could only have been imagined. It integrates the private unfolding of a person with the concern of the public message to bear new beginnings to the conduct of things.

Though this study is about teachers and teaching, in its deepest moments it is equally about students. For without the active presence of students no study can begin to ask teachers to consider the on-going need to open not just their minds, but their hearts and souls to the young people with whom they daily interact. Without the active presence of students the spirit of a “poetic” life is reduced to the singular lyrical pieces of experience rather than the encompassing epic tale that we understand is the real truth of our educations. Without the active presence of students the work of a teacher is but an accounting ledger of isolated method, a reductive energy that in the end is much about product, but little about life.

**“IMAGINATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN KNOWLEDGE.”**

- - -Einstein



Teaching English  
is like dancing  
on the moon.  
On a quiet  
cloudless  
night  
watch for me.  
I'll be the  
one  
recklessly  
barefooted,  
head thrown  
back,  
skirts clenched  
up and out.  
Drunk on  
starlight  
and  
cosmic punch,  
I'll be.  
You'll know me  
by  
the heart pinned  
luminescent,  
on my  
sleeve,  
by the sparks  
bright as fireflies  
flashing  
soft  
beneath  
my feet.

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## *Preface: Choreographing the Dance*

As an educator, I have worked most of my career years with young adult students. In the course of my work, I have come to understand that the role of teacher goes far beyond the structured, organized activities of daily classroom or administrative life. I have learned that the lives my students live, as well as the one I live, outside of class continuously spill into the community we create together. The everyday bits and pieces of what constitute who we are and how we become who we are in our personal making cannot be filtered or separated out from the dynamics of our educational activity. To do so is to ignore the intricacies of evolving self-knowledge and self-worth.

In an attempt to share with my readers the blend of self, community, and academic discipline that daily confront educators, I have tried to unfold my themes of mind “full” and holistic teaching and learning in such a way that the multitude of voices which constantly play in the backdrop of daily experience show themselves as not only always present, but also always connected. I have done this not only through my use of the discipline of English and how it can speak to us, but through personal stories of self and students, through the inner voices of experience always in attendance, and through a non-linear approach to the discourses that we juggle.

The pathways to the complex work of teaching that I have endeavored to open for my readers include the taking of risks, the importance of listening not only to the intuitive pronouncements that rise from within, but also to the experienced expressions of others that lie outside of self, the necessary consideration of how mind, body, and soul are inextricably bound, the link that exists between a recognition of our failings as educators and how that recognition feeds our ability to improve the conditions of education, and the subtle but gracious joys that underpin our daily work with students. May you find the adventure that I launch you on a creative and fulfilling one.

**taking risks**

\*

“But the good and wise must learn to act, and carry salvation  
to the combatants and demagogues in the dusty arena below.”

- - - Emerson

“For they were deep in the earth and  
what is possible swiftly took hold.”

- - - Jorie Graham

*Sometimes I have these incredible dreams about flying. Body arched, arms flung wide, I hover and plunge, flicker then whirl like spring tree blossoms taken by the wind, summer dust whipped wild by the heat. I am a danseur, my body urged on by rhythm that plucks from within. Animated, dauntless, I ascend and sail in perfect peace. Nothing hobbles me; no temporal state concerns me. I am energy potent and pure, the danseur become the dance.*

\* \* \*

I have just come back from visiting my student-teachers in their home schools. Although I have been trying hard not to make a big deal of it, it is clear that the current educational policies concerning reform of testing for standards of learning have cut deep into the spirit of even my most seasoned and optimistic cooperating teachers. Some are “teaching to the test” because they have been alerted that the scores of their students will be published alongside teacher names. Some are having their students sign off on each anticipated test section to acknowledge that specific textbook material has been covered. Others, scared that the innovative ways of teaching they have come to believe in will be perceived as inadequate, have reverted to the more “traditional” methods of teaching---worksheets, skill and drill exercises, multiple choice tests---techniques that they gladly relinquished years ago in favor of cooperative learning activities, reading-writing workshops, peer editing groups, and portfolio projects. Almost all the talk I hear centers on how the students will test, who will be held responsible for the scores. Good teachers, teachers who daily help students become better critical thinkers and more thoughtful readers and writers, are worried that their imaginative approaches to the learning of language are at risk of being judged just “play” in the face of the all knowing “standard.” In what is only a new variation on the traditional effort of public education to make structure the object of good teaching rather than an active helpmate in it, I see both new and experienced teachers reluctantly brace toward their assigned mission, though they know full well that in learning as in life, the journey is always the only real goal.

Though years of educational research and personal experience have convinced dedicated teachers of the inadequacies of passive learning, politicians and bureaucrats, in allegiance to a socially instituted mentality which believes that teachers should give answers rather than ask questions, have forced once more the notion and value of active learning to the back seat. Unnerving and discouraging as this atmosphere is for me, it is even worse for my student-

teachers. Instead of classrooms charged with the excitement of the possibilities of language, many are faced with veteran colleagues who are frantic for their jobs and with students who are disgruntled and uncooperative about “yet another test.” It has put an edge on their experience as beginning teachers that none of us had quite anticipated. Overwhelmed by the emphasis on the purely technical component of their discipline, several of these novice teachers have started believing they must fragment the creative nature of language from the craft of it. In doing so, the inspiration that first moved them to teach dissipates in a cloud of timorous anxiety. And I, as I sit down to write about what I consider to be the oftentimes unaddressed, yet crucially substantial issues of our classrooms --- avoiding the nurturing of the innermost life of student and teacher alike, what it means to challenge students to new visions of self and community, how to scratch beneath the surface of things to invite and initiate change --- begin to think others may see my agenda as frivolous and impotent. In this on-going political conflict of what people believe the true aims of education should be, I feel the ground beneath my feet turn sharp into rock as what little track I have made in the hardening clay swirls quick and is taken in a gust. If I am not to back away, I realize I have no choice but to open wide my arms to an approaching ominous, forceful wind, knowing well that, as Nietzsche suggests, growth is yielded only through great risk and intensity of belief.

Aside from all the discord that exists in education surrounding issues of canon and curricula, standards and pedagogy, political correctness and true multiculturalism, I know firsthand as a teacher that what happens in the classroom is at bottom line only about three things: my students, how they engage as a community with the discipline, and me. It is my goal not to initiate students to the “post factum” habits of learning, but to invite them to the connections necessary for a meaningful integration of self and “other” into community. In order that they may make a successful transition, I understand that they must believe in learning as a life-long endeavor that is measured not by the mere technical associations of what they know, but by a mindfully imaginative recognition of all there is yet to discover. Maxine Greene, taking her lead from Thoreau’s famous passage on moral reform (“*The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life.*”), calls this inclination of mind “wide-awakeness.” It stands in direct opposition to, but not necessarily in conflict with, the more conventional philosophy of learning that pushes strongly for an accepted familiar awareness of things rather

than a fresh synthesis of them. “Wide-awakeness” requires respectful homage to the intuitive forces that move from within, leery of what must be sacrificed if too much tribute is paid to the graven images that stand without.

It is not always easy, especially in light of the ever imposed technicalities of teaching, to convince others of the importance of the more subtle challenges of the call to teach. Almost any discipline can be easily reduced to an omnipotent convention rather than an omniscient exploration of the imagination if so desired. How relationship and attitude toward subject are initiated and developed is clearly consequential in presentation if it is the teacher’s intent to avoid a purely “intellectual” representation of the discipline and provide a more beneficially expressive one. To ignore the nuance and ever evolving nature of learning is to filter out its most wonderfully intrinsic value, the opportunity to broaden understanding and consider newly disclosed options.

“Seductive” is hardly a word most people would use to describe the dynamics of teaching and learning environments; yet, many of us know full-well the underlying truth of that indictment. Knowledge alone can be irresistible and provocative. But knowledge which seeks power over others is like an aphrodisiac. It arouses a passion that feverishly heightens the urge to possess more and more. Once such knowledge of the world is attained, it is easy for the knower to become consumed with holding tightly to the objects of that desire, never recognizing that in doing so life is strangled out of both the possessor and the possessed. Like a jealous lover, the “knower” hoards and guards his treasure lest someone attempt to steal it away. Driven by an insatiable need to contain the beloved, the ego manipulates and exploits in its attempt to maintain control. The result is, of course, the dispassion of both partners, teacher and student, and a continual turning outward rather than inward for any source of satisfaction. In a vicious cycle of mindless, anxious, intellectual ownership, what was once an endeavor of love crumbles in a heap of bankrupt academic possessions.

To help students recognize this kind of knowing, knowledge for power as opposed to self-knowledge, I realize I must be as vulnerable as I ask them to be. I cannot back down from my own shortcomings and mistakes. I cannot claim undisputed discernments of how things are and unqualified insights as to what they mean. (*“Have the past struggles succeeded? What has succeeded? yourself? your nation? Nature? Now understand me well---it is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary. --- Walt Whitman*) I must take risks if I expect to break out

of the actual into the possible, and risks mean accepting that there may be more to a thing than I or others like me see. I must be willing to share in my students' learning, to be passionate in its unveiling, and not place myself somewhere outside of it, as ascribing to a long list of "standards" might have me to do. I must be willing, alongside of the students I profess to "teach," to grow to know myself better, to admit there is much about me that still remains unknown and much about the world of which I am also unsure. Only then can students come to trust that though the distance we travel is far, it can, if we choose, liberate and not disenfranchise us. Uncertainty runs high, but this is our only chance for real gain. Nothing personally meaningful will come of the rote-memory, standard experience game alone; somehow, students must be encouraged to apply the technical facts of their learning to the personal spaces of their lives. My own learning experiences tell me this. Risk and vulnerability are key issues in education that cannot, without high price, be denied. It is only by "attaching," says Michelle Fine, "what is to what could be," that I authentically, imaginatively invite students to write the indelible chapters of their lives.

*"And how shall you rise beyond your days  
and nights unless you break the chains  
which you at the dawn of your understanding  
have fastened around your noon hour?" - - - Gibran*

**starting from silence**

\*

“I swear I see what is better than to tell the best,  
It is always to leave the best untold.”

- - - Whitman

*Words, it is said, give our lives meaning.*

*But it is the silences, I insist, that give our words life. (ejo)*

Students are just starting to enter the building for the first day of classes as I chalk across the board in bold print “ONCE YOU READ THIS, PLEASE, REMAIN SILENT.” I’m wondering what they will make of my words and if they will take up the challenge. One by one they drift into the classroom we will share for the rest of the school year, some seeing the message straight away, others only catching on when they notice their friends won’t banter back to them. As I had hoped, they are all soon curious and still, looking at me for a sign of what this message forbids, forebodes, or foretells; experience tells them that it is certain to be one of the three.

The teacher,  
able with just words  
to bring joy or fear to life  
silent stands.  
All ears wait for the sounds  
that will unleash or usurp  
in their execution.  
The teacher  
silent, solid  
stands.

(ejo)

My smile throws them. With gestures mimed and words at rest, I establish that I wish the class to (*finger to my lips*) come with me out the classroom door. (*Risk is good, a small voice in my head reminds. Risk is good.*) Wary but game, they rise and we go.

Students come to us acclimated, prepared for a rational plea to please learn for their own good, for the sake of their future, to get ahead. Cliches assail them. Their education is a mission (with an end in sight if you learn everything on the list); a ticket to a brighter future (train will leave without you); an open door (got a bad start, station, share in life? this oughta fix it .). Long before they arrive in our classrooms, they have learned to either tune out these stultifying maxims, make them their own, or simply ignore them. They know they will either travel the road as mapped or not at all. To follow, many have come to believe, is their educational lot. The habitual

manners of learning have been their condition. To stir them to something more requires lessons not found in the book, but central to any discipline, lessons which demand that they move outside of rote and routine learning in order to find knowledge of self and more fullness of meaning. As a teacher, I know I must encourage this thinking not only within the confines of what students will accept, but also within the context of an institutionalized environment. My challenge is not easy. From the ringing of the bells to the sounding of the test alarm, I must wrangle with those who would have the classroom be a testimony to labor and doctrine rather than an inspiration to insight and discovery. Though I know that mediocracy and replication are the blight inflicted by such a conviction, what I hope to accomplish remains a difficult, if adventuresome affair.

Helene (first-year teacher):

“A Clear Midnight”

“It is a challenge to deal with students who are in a class perceived as a hoop to jump through. I talk about the importance of writing and show them reports of how communication and writing skills are crucial for success in their chosen fields. We talk about why writing is important to them and what uses they see for it. Yet I have classes that are just flat out DEAD.”

“This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless, Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done, Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best, night, sleep, death, and the stars.”

(WW)

Out into the empty halls I sail, twenty some teenage students voyaging along with me. A few giggles, a murmured “This is stupid,” and some purposeful dragging of the feet, but otherwise they are playing along. (*I’m thinking of those teachers for whom I would have done anything, teachers [so trusted, I knew they would never do me harm] who [unknowingly?] revealed me to myself. I want so badly to give something of that to my own students.*) We pass the drinking fountain and pause while a few of the thirsty ones drink. A fellow teacher passes and says hello, but I remain quiet. Now we are crossing the path of the main office, a medley of activity with phones ringing, conversations sparking then lulling, the copier noisily scanning and pitching. Momentarily, we stop and we listen. People begin to notice us, the principal for one, and though he looks at me with a question in his eye, he remains still and goes about his business. I say

nothing to him. The students are starting to like this game. They must dip into their own centers (*“From the center,” says the Tao, “all things take their course.”*). A few fellow students pass and try to unsuccessfully engage us in conversation. “What’s up with them?” we hear one ask the other. My students’ feet stop shuffling. I notice they are trying to settle.

Silently, we continue our move through the building. Here we are at the computer lab where the sound of pecking keyboards strikes the ear like the fussing of hungry hens. Jokes and high-pitched laughter mix carelessly with the jangle of dishes and pans as we pass the cafeteria. In the library it is only the hum of the ventilation system that disturbs a solid repose. Each stop becomes its own little world. (*Elaine questions things too much, writes the third grade nun to my mother. Please have a talk with her about that. My mother never mentions the letter, but years later I find it in her scrapbook, stuck properly into the golden corners that elsewhere hold a holy communion picture, my face circled in the laundry of white dresses and starched shirts.*) My thoughts begin to drift as the students and I continue toward the outside.

*Ms. O’Quinn,*

*When you look at these silk flowers we don’t want you to look at them as being cheap, but look at them as a symbol or a memory of us that will never die. Think of the red rose as a symbol of how we have grown to love you. Never forget us.*

*Love always,*

*Larry, Christina, and Birdie*

I study the youthful faces as I hold the door open to let them pass. I wonder what remembrances, what unforgotten pleasures or griefs tug soft too at them.

“This moment yearning and thoughtful and sitting alone, It seems to me there are other men in other lands yearning and thoughtful. . .” (WW)

A swell of August mountain air hits us warm and favorably straightway. Barely inside for twenty minutes this morning, we are all relieved to be back out-of-doors. I head for the grove of pines that set back off the graveled, stadium road. (*“In the woods is perpetual youth,” claims Emerson. “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel nothing can befall me in life,--no disgrace, no calamity. . . which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I*

*become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.”*) The kids look at each other in a way that tells me they can’t believe we are moving toward the trees. Ordinarily, it is “off limits.” (*Risk, I remind myself again, is important. Take a chance.*) The muffled din of tires traveling the four-lane that passes not too far from where we are echoes like a distant ocean. I’m wondering how many of my students have ever been to the sea. Nearby, the slap of the creek hidden in the stand of trees can be heard as it bubbles and splashes over the flat rocks. Together, we make our way.

April 20, 1834

The whole secret of the teacher’s force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening. Get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep, out into God’s universe, to a perception of its beauty, and hearing of its call, and your vulgar man, your prosy, selfish sensualist awakes, a god, and is conscious of force to shake the world. - - - Emerson

*(Jesus, no wonder Jack wants to be buried with Emerson in his hand. There is enormous possibility in his world; there is vision and unveiling.)*

Sammy (first-year teacher):

“How much are we suppose to teach in English? We are expected to teach our students how to write, how to analyze a text, how to proofread, library skills, grammar, and the list goes on. As a teacher I am often overwhelmed. Sometimes I think, why didn’t I choose to teach math? I wouldn’t have that huge stack of papers and journals to grade and grading wouldn’t be subjective at all. Does it ever end?”

“Fire”

“a woman can’t survive by her own breathe alone she must know the voices of mountains she must recognize the foreverness of blue sky she must flow with the elusive bodies of night wind women who will take her into her own self look at me i am not a separate woman i am a continuance of blue sky i am the throat of the sandia the mountains a night wind woman who burns with every breathe she takes”

(Joy Harjo)

Determined to allow my students to find their own sense of self in this (until now) prohibited den of nature, I find a comfortable tangle of tree roots and sit myself down. I don't need to outline any rules. At this point, students have quit looking to me for guidance, trusting themselves instead to the adventure of the environment. Some walk in pairs. Others sit alone or in small groups. A few kneel at the broken edge of the lazy rivulet of clear, shallow water. Rivulet. I think of Whitman, of his poem "Wandering at Morn" ("*Who knows but these may be the lessons fit for you? From these your future songs may rise with joyous trills, destin'd to fill the world.*"), of "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?" ("*I lie abstracted and hear beautiful tales of things and the reasons of things, They are so beautiful I nudge myself to listen. I cannot say to any person what I hear--I cannot say it to myself--it is very wonderful.*"), of "Thought" ("*And often to me those men and women pass unwittingly the true realities of life, and go toward false realities, And often to me they are alive after what custom has served them, but nothing more, And often to me they are sad, hasty, unwaked somnambules walking the dusk.*"). In this place hushed of human voice, I hear Walt whispering to me to somehow free the poet in each of my students. "Rest not," his voice booms large and loud, "till you rivet and publish yourself of your own Personality." I am resolved to do what I can to open them to hear that call. I am convinced that to live life as anything less than poetry, a life bereft of imagination and wonder, is to walk unconscious through it. I will they might find something more.

#### "The Safety Behind Me"

Last night the house was too safe;  
the heated air, stifling;  
touches and topics, calculated, civilized.

Later, I couldn't sleep;  
the digital clock kept me  
waiting for each next moment.

In my robe and slippers,  
I went outside and stood,  
soaking the cold under our streetlight

The houses closed in,  
shouldering the night  
from the glowing street and me.

But I wanted to be cold;  
could have flung the safety behind me,

could have traded each moment

for the thump of fear in a marsh rabbit,  
running to the sweet violence of a mate,  
the direction of the next moment in the wind.

(Rebecca Gonzales)

*(I scorn how school tries to cancel out the excitements and experiences of our natural state, bodies seen as vehicles rather than messengers. In an extended effort to keep an artificial sense of distance between people, teachers are asked to teach as though the corporeal needs and feelings of a body can be suppressed and ignored. Tears and fears, frivolity and commotion, play and harmless banter, and pure and honest affection are generally discouraged. Sterile words, colorless gestures, and narrow signs do not suffice in satisfying the real connection that exists between bodies and minds and souls. I think of all the kids I have hugged over the years, kids who hugged back, some in joy, others in sorrow. There is no other way, of that I stand convinced. Through the body flashes both the morning and night of the soul.)*

The garish caw of a loudmouthed crow reminds me that it is time to start back toward the school; reluctantly, I rise like the unwilling child. No motion, no expression at all is needed to stir my students to their feet; one by one, they join me. We look up as a crop-plane passes near; a few folks wave, myself included. The wings it seems tip momentarily in our direction. As we get closer to the building entrance, the hum of voices flies at us from open windows. Someone loudly shouts the name of one of my students. I hear the jack-hammers of the Main Street construction I know is occurring a few blocks away and the steady beep-beep of what must be the backing up of one of those big yellow trucks. A dog barks just across from the parking lot, and as I open the door, a woman yells at him to be still. The sound of business, labor, and practice smack us full force as we step back inside. My students seem visibly taken aback. As they quietly find their seats in the classroom, a sense of something important seems to take hold. Our “play” takes on new meaning. As though I am some rare bird, the students watch me as I walk to the board and write under my earlier message the words that I hope will serve them well:

“THE PATH OF THINGS IS SILENT.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

IT’S A NOISY WORLD. LEARN TO LISTEN.

Just then, the bell rings.

I begin now to think about how teaching which is dependent only upon the perceived actuality of what we call school life is reticent, deliberate, and reserved. It is threatened by new

ways of looking and seeing, preferring that innovation fill a particular need or serve a certain end. Ideas of new knowledge are seen as disruptive and rebellious because they threaten a breakdown of the status-quo. Our traditional ways of knowing insist upon “received knower[s],” that is learners who believe that only experts can teach what there is to learn. Students have little opportunity to come to know the world through themselves. Instead, they come to believe that their creative natures can be defined and designated and take root in perfectly identifiable traditions and experiences. While seemingly safe and able, this limited means of self-exploration can be censorious and disparaging, offering a mindless, thoughtless, and cramped “one size fits all” way of conceptualizing the world. Industrious rather than imaginative, this type of education seeks first to maintain the conservative, methodical structures of culture, incorporating rather than devising new ways of thinking. Though the format of control may change, the conventional wisdom and hierarchy of power remain the same.

**Journal Entry: I took a risk today that seemed to open my students to the possibility that maybe something different was going to happen in English. Though they were, of course, still tentative as they left the classroom, they were smiling and some even said “See ya tomorrow.” I didn’t get called to the office, and it’s after ten with no phone calls from parents coming in, so I guess I did all right. I’m anxious to see how they respond to our little outdoor adventure. I want them to learn that they can think differently about the world if they have a mind to do so. I want them to begin to trust themselves in ways that foster their growth, not stifle it. I want them to understand that it is only through the risk inherent in listening to the world outside of themselves that they will discover the true nature of the world which grows within. Knowledge can be a prison (Ah, how well I remember feeling that way.) and learning can become mere habit. In all ways, I want to move my students away from that trap. Crossing into new ways of seeing and understanding is imperative. Can there be personal satisfaction in learning and democratic progress in a society without this conviction?**

*“Education becomes the art of taking advantage of the helplessness of the young; the forming of habits becomes a guarantee for the maintenance of hedges of custom.” - - - Dewey*

A new day at school finds a note from Dolores in an envelope on my desk. Dolores. I

know her from another class, long blonde hair, glasses, a fragile young woman who loves Led Zeppelin. I've seen her watch me very closely in the past. Never says much, but sits right up front next to me. I know she doesn't miss a thought I have. The envelope is not sealed:

Dear Mom,

You're really going to hate that I'm putting this in writing, but it just happened to come out of me today when I was involved in this English thing at school. You know me, always drifting off about school somehow (you think.) Anyway, what I figured was that **YOU'VE NEVER LISTENED TO ME.** Sorry, mom, really I don't want to hurt your feelings, but **DAMN! YOU'VE NEVER.** It's so funny, but I never understood until today that you only wanted to hear yourself come out of me, so that is what you have heard. **MOM, DID YOU KNOW THAT ONE OF YOUR HUSBANDS ABUSED ME?** Of course you didn't. **DID YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE THE OUT-OF-DOORS AS THOUGH IT WERE MY OWN SELF?** **DID YOU EVER GUESS, MOM, THAT I FEEL I DON'T FIT IN AND ALL YOUR TALK ABOUT CLOTHES AND OTHER PEOPLE MAKES ME FEEL EVEN MORE DIFFERENT?** Did you know that sometimes I sit in the bathroom away from the others while they watch t.v. and argue dumb stuff? I dream, mom, I dream about being a poet and I sit in there and I read all the labels on the bottles in the medicine chest and all of your boring confession magazines, and I write **STUPID** poems, poems that can't get born on cardboard shirtbacks, and I think about winning contests. Contests, mom, that I've lost? Did you know? Did you know it about killed me when you spilled the mop bucket of water on my sketch pad and threw it away without even asking me if I wanted to try to save it. Threw it away, until I looked for it one day not even knowing it was gone. Did you mom? Did you know? Mom? That once I let a kitten nurse my breast because I had seen you do it with the new baby?

Love, Dolores

[Ms. O'Quinn, Do you think it will be okay to give my mom this note?]

*(Risk and danger, I remind myself, risk and danger.)*

When the papers come in from the assignment based in our walk, I am struck by the sincerity and strength and richness of them. Almost everyone reaches in and offers a thread of personality to which we all connect. Hardly anyone opts out of reading their work aloud. "Seeing schooling small" makes us also see our students in a negligible light. Their papers tell me anything

but that.

**Jack:** “I forgot all about the hot sun and all the walking we were doing. Instead, I started wishing I could find somewhere quiet to go every week. Someplace where I could free my mind of all the B.S. that happens to me. . . . Out of this experience I’ve learned that if you are quiet, you can hear a lot of things in the world that you didn’t even know were out there before.”

**Rita:** “Nature brings out feelings and thoughts in a person that they never could have dreamed of. Our walk made me actually hear my thoughts. It made me appreciate other things a lot more. I think I even appreciate time more. It seems like time really does fly when the most important thing is right in front of you, life.”

**Lonnie:** “The next thing I remember is the sound of the wind in the trees. I started thinking back about my grandfather and how my grandmother used to talk about how he loved sitting under a tree in her yard listening to the wind blowing through the trees while he wrote his sermons for next Sunday. And then that reminded me of when my family was whole. . . . and then I heard the most relaxing sound I’ve ever heard in my life, and that was the sound of the water running over the rocks, and for that little while as I sat and listened, I was at peace.”

**Nancy:** “I believe that our sense of hearing may be the most important of the five senses. I can’t even begin to imagine being deaf. Some of my best life experience happened because of my ability to hear. I was able to hear my cousin’s baby (although the doctors thought she wasn’t going to make it) take it’s first few breaths of air. And I was able to hear the good news that my grandmother was going to live after she had been very ill.”

**Cassie:** “I heard a lot of things on our walk, but I’m going to write about my experience with the quietness and how it made me bring back memories. The memory was of my sister-in-law’s death. She was only 22. When I was at that water, it was so quiet, all I could do was think about her. . . . When you asked us to write about our experience of the hike, I was glad because I’ve always kept my feelings inside and never was able to talk about this much, but writing it down helped me. Sometime I think I will walk down to that water again and just think about her and how wonderful she was. I can do that there because it was nice and peaceful.”

Dolores,

I'd like you to read this poem by a poet named Lucille Clifton and set a time with me to talk about it. Hold off on the letter to your mom until then.

Love, Ms. O'Quinn

"Breaklight"

light keeps on breaking.  
i keep knowing the language of other nations.  
i keep hearing  
tree talk  
water words  
and i keep knowing what they mean.  
and light just keeps on breaking.  
last night  
the fears of my mother came  
knocking and when i  
opened the door  
they tried to explain themselves  
and i understood  
everything they said.

NOTE TO MYSELF: The responses to yesterday's lesson were not what I expected.

Merissa (first-year teacher):

"The main challenge of teaching English?  
Whew. I guess it's the emotional part of it. The part of it that has to do with those students who have a hard time with their own emotions. We deal with words, which are ideas, which are based on all of a person's baggage. Now, though, I must deal with my own emotions. It's hard for me to not be a big sis, or a mom, or a friend to these hard-luck cases, but I can't. Some may say this turning away is institutionalism or that I have been assimilated. Gad. I certainly hope this is not the case."

from "Song of Myself"

"Agonies are one of my changes  
of garments. I do not ask the  
wounded person how he feels,  
I myself become the wounded  
person, My hurts turn livid upon  
me as I lean on a cane and  
observe. I am the mash'd fireman  
with breast-bone broken,  
Tumbling walls buried me in their  
debris. . ." (WW)

Shadows surround my students; shadows of every shade, shape, and size. Personal discouragements, unavoidable impediments, sudden miseries sometimes blanket them, follow them through the day. To interpret and work through the strands of the darker sides of our lives is dangerous because it leaves us so exposed. I see that sorrow and pain and confusion are no less real for my students than they are for me (“*Sorrow makes us all children again,*” [I recall Emerson.] “*destroys all differences of intellect. The wisest knows nothing. . .*”). So that we may grow, I know I must brace for their pain, recognize too my own despairs.

Together we are going to experience Jamaica Kincaid’s Annie John. It is not on the approved list of readings, but it should be. It is a mistaken view that kids on the edge of innocence will falter if certain ideas are revealed, an illusion, it seems, that is often the underlying impetus for what some would have me do in the classroom. This kind of illusion is the very thing of which we need less. At its worst, it engenders growth which is stunted and ill-framed. At best, it mocks what is most real. Kincaid’s story will not be an easy one, but at least it will not sit empty in my students’ heads like a hollow reed downed by the wind. No, though its notes may not always sound golden, at least I know Annie’s story will snap and roll through their minds like a tempest and, on occasion, whisper like a soft breeze:

I was afraid of the dead, as was everyone I knew. We were afraid of the dead because we never could tell when they might show up again. Sometimes they showed up in a dream, but that wasn’t so bad, because they usually only brought a warning, and in any case you wake up from a dream. But sometimes they would show up standing under a tree just as you were passing by. Then they might follow you home, and even though they might not be able to come into your house, they might wait for you wherever you went; in that case, they would never give up until you joined them. My mother knew of many people who had died in such a way. My mother knew of many people who had died, including her own brother.

*(My mother. My mother too knows of many people who have died. Brothers, sisters, mother, father, three husbands, her own son. My brother. My father. I am vulnerable. My own wounds are as fresh as though they were struck just yesterday. I, too, am the student here. Will my own see that?)*

**“Do not go gentle into that good night./Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”**

I am weary of the social voice that tells me my students cannot and will not do what the “standard” considers to be enough. Again and again I recall these two lines in Thomas’ poem, and I challenge my students to rage, to believe in their own abilities, to live with passion, to try harder and harder, to not allow themselves to fall short in trying to make sense of themselves and their lives despite what the voices around them say. We will talk in here of death, of discomfort, of the horrors of our lives. We will acknowledge what is unendurable alongside of that which is wonderful. How can we not?

I think of Tommy, my student, their classmate, who has died. Tommy. My God, he was so sweet and funny and kind. And tall. Tall like his father. Tall and kind and funny and sweet. I couldn’t go to the funeral. No, unlike Annie who recognizes the “new order of things” and satiates herself with the funerals of people she doesn’t know so she can begin to understand the experience, I couldn’t go to Tommy’s funeral. I just couldn’t. It was weeks before I could, one warm spring day, gather daffodils and tulips and Japanese Iris from my yard and take them to him. Gently, I laid them on the uncaring ground where his warm smile is forever at rest (*Nothing divine dies,” declares Emerson.*). And I sat and told him how much he had taught me about my own life. Tommy, so tall and funny and ever kind. (*I, too, am the student here. I am.*) We talk about him when we look at the Kincaid passage about funerals. There is silence now in our discussion. Consideration time. Reflection. Spaces open for uneasy thoughts that cross back and forth across time and place. My students are learning to listen, to themselves, to each other. They are gathering their strength, chancing to know what is not always pleasant, often unkind. [*“Ms. O’Quinn, please come to the office.” My father is gone. “Ms. O’Quinn.” Now, too, my brother.*] Together we uncover what it is Annie seeks to understand. It is not easy for any of us. Not for any of us.

Sammy (first-year teacher):  
“I feel that my job is to make my students not need me. By the time they leave my class, I would like for them to know how to find their own mistakes without having to come to me. This is my goal. I spend several weeks pointing to symbolism, foreshadowing,

from “The Sleepers” (WW)  
“I see a beautiful gigantic swimmer swimming naked through the eddies of the sea, His brown hair lies close and even to his head, he strikes out with courageous arms, he urges himself with his legs. I see his white

interesting quotes, etc. so they can get a feel for how it is done. I ask them what they would like to cover in a novel or if there is an aspect of grammar that they feel they are still having trouble with. I want my students to know what is important in texts, to work on those things. When I conference with my students, I want them to be able to see what rules they don't understand. I give them evaluations to fill out to judge how they think the class is going so far. Sometimes they express concern that we move too quickly, not going over enough details. Well, that is my goal. Like I said, I don't want them to need me by the end of the year. I want them to be able to figure things out for themselves.”

body, I see his undaunted eyes, I hate the swift-running eddies that would dash him head-foremost on the rocks. What are you doing you ruffianly red-trickled waves? Will you kill him in the prime of his middle-age? Steady and long he struggles. He is baffled, bang'd, brusi'd, he holds out while his strength holds, The slapping eddies are spotted with his blood, they bear him away, they roll him, swing him, turn him, His beautiful body is borne in the circling eddies, it is continually bruise'd on the rocks, swiftly, out of sight is borne the brave corpse.”

No teacher is stranger to the prescript of the pervasive rational imagination that is imposed rather than allied as a safeguard to standard procedures within schools. Even teacher training, in anticipation of institutionalized rules and regulations, mostly accentuates the message of form and design as the key to a successful classroom learning environment. In fact, so often is a teacher's own experience as a student grounded in the conditions of law and order schooling, that this particular training and professional expectation is, for most, immediately recognizable and, therefore, expected, understandable, and acceptable. Doing what we know and knowing what is resolved to be done on the surface raises few concerns and seems to allow for minimal battle with the uncertainties which rise. A familiar conduct and bureaucratic policies advocated for “the good” of the community can always be justified.

The problem begins when a teacher enters the classroom and finds that there are numerous gray areas which do not quite seem to be accounted for under the proposed operational systems. How are students engaged? Motivated? What makes them respectful, interested in the community of other? Why do they resist, refuse (so it seems) to dip deep? Suddenly, insecurities abound. The

superficially imposed awareness of things blurs and pushes to reveal itself in a different, more troubling light. Conventional habits and assumptions break apart to expose a complexity of issues which heretofore seemed measurable and treatable but that now seem impossible. What at one time appeared meaningful and mindful now lacks vision and originality. Intuitions about what it means to be a teacher may become conflicted and personal insights of the individual are restricted in order that they may exist within the bounded context of institutional “rule.” No teacher escapes these dilemmas; how they will be negotiated is the issue.

“One Dozen Moments to No Strings Teaching”  
(or “Why I gave up Puppetry”)

1. Learn to be a fool.

(The fool never loses his source of receptiveness because he trusts, then trusts again. He will not become jaded and cynical in what he thinks he knows because the one thing he does know is that knowledge fixed assumed over self-knowledge uncovered runs the risk of inhibiting him. His belief in the largess of life is the only protection he needs. In it he recognizes the value of creative play vs. the humdrum of habitual living.)

2. Listen to the silences within.

(Only through a recognition of our own humanity can we hear others express theirs. Insight and understanding can only be encouraged when we are sensitive to the stillness found in our own being. To see the illusion of our separateness is to comprehend the uniqueness of the individual.)

3. Treasure the experience.

(I can no more change the things that have happened in my students’ lives than I can my own. Neither can I predict what the future may hold for any of us. But I can relax and be in the moment of this shared experience. With my students, I can create a worthwhile memory. Something there is here we can hold on to.)

4. Be courageous.

(I will see anger, frustration, pain, death, personal struggles, abuse, suffering

and hopelessness. This will include not only the tragedies of my students, but my own as well. It is easy to wake and act strong in joy. But it is difficult after a night long in grief or despair to come and sit on either side of the big desk. Courage. Lots of it. Yes.)

5. Practice innocence.

(Wonder abounds. Each day, for at least one brief moment, I will stop and accept what life offers beyond all the societal and personal trappings. I will share wonder with my students. I will insist on the celebration that lives deep in each of us. There will be laughter in our days. In innocence will we grow wise.)

6. Remember the creative force.

(Technology, information, and expertise are mere tools used in the struggle to live creatively. Creativity is what my students know best. I will teach them to use the tools of their schooling to tap the sources of their creative energies. I will remind them that no one else on earth can express the energy they possess.)

7. Recognize illusion.

(Of all things I am challenged to do, this is probably the very toughest. Things are set up to prevent me from sifting the illusion from the genuine. If I can remember to look deep within myself, I will uncover the realities and let go of judgments. Illusion is a burden from which I can free myself and my students.)

8. Believe in possibilities.

(I will not wear the chattels of any self-righteous limits. As soon as I say “I don’t believe,” my students begin to drop away like leaves browned by an autumn drought. As soon as I say “That will never happen,” a face disappears from the mirror which only reflects what it sees. I will help my students be that which they long to become.)

9. Be a bridge.

(I don’t know much about many things in the world, but I do know that the long

stretch between childhood and adulthood is a formidable, perplexing swell. In grace and generosity, I can help to ease some of the anxieties of the crossing. All it takes is honesty, compassion, and resolve.)

10. Practice patience.

(So often we take the mystery out of our lives when in haste we force rather than unfold its secrets. Just as I quietly advance in the beauty of each changing season, so too must I rest in the deep woods of my students' growth. I will not allow the spark of anticipation to fan into a consuming fire of expectation.)

11. Seek wisdom.

(True wisdom is never boastful or certain. It is dependent upon the intuitive forces of self-reflection and a complete acceptance of the ordinariness of all things. It can move in many directions, all the while knowing there is a center to be found in all things. )

12. Give, but know too how to receive.

(What I harbor and hoard becomes my ball and chain. What I refuse from the hand of another keeps me imprisoned in an empty, frigid cell. It is only when I take advantage of the endless opportunities to share love, laughter, sorrow, and pain that my life and the lives of my students expand and increase.)

*“Wisdom is not finally tested in schools, Wisdom cannot be pass’d from one having it to another not having it, Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof. . .” (WW)*

A mind “full” imagining of a more creative way of thinking about teaching and learning requires an openness to possibilities. Trust in the natural evolution of things must be accepted. The staid values and principles of how things have always been done becomes suspect; doctrine and ritual are dubious. A thing is obscure, it is clear; it is within, it is without. Paradox is embraced, not ignored. Sick of floating belly up in the still waters of reason, a mind “full”

perception of things strikes out toward the swash of high seas. It cannot abide to bob absentmindedly, stagnant and adrift. Mind “full”ness knows only movement, even in what is still. It is not threatened by the fuzzy borders of life anymore than it is stimulated by them. Concerned with what is imparted rather than counterpoised, this approach to education acknowledges that dangers exist, but leaves the fear of what might be maligned to those who believe that knowledge and meaning are settled and can be finally defined. The mind “full” imagination assures intimacy and aligns self-denial. It probes context and circumstance, but in doing so makes an effort to connect rather than separate them.

**opening movements**

\*

“Promissory note Of the stirred life, Tonight  
I opened the rare book of you And found  
The last page missing. It is six o’clock, And  
you still owe me Everything.”

- - - Howard Moss

**“Step, ball, change. Tap. Front line. Step, ball, change. Tap. Back line. Step, ball change. Everyone. Tap. Again. Tap. Again. Tap... Tap... Tap... Everyone.”**

Sitting at the head of a small conference table, I am looking out at a jury of five faces who will once more decide my continuing fate as a Ph.D. candidate. It is the third, but not the final time I will sit in what one of my committee members has fondly referred to as the “hot seat.” Today the chair is so warm, I can feel it sizzle beneath me. In appearance, I know I must appear nervous and shaken, though probably not terribly so. Inside, I am burning with the heat of uncertainty and a wildfire of self-doubt. I am a grown woman who has nurtured and served hundreds of my own students, an accomplished career professional proved capable of thoughtful decisions, imaginative ideas, and depth of both commitment and understanding; yet, in this room, I become a school-aged child again. [*“Stay quiet. Do as you are told. Good. Be quiet and follow. Good.”*] In the presence of this academic authority, I lose all sense of personal capabilities and strengths. It is only with great effort that I force myself to remain open and alert, lest I miss the magic of my own learning and the wisdom of my committee’s thinking. In the end, they toss me to the wind and bid me soar. They trust me, as I hoped but never dreamed they would, to the sound of my own voice, to the experience of my own sensibilities. But I am dumbfounded by their decree and don’t know why. I have been given the space I need to be true to my deepest passions about language and teaching and learning, but when the verdict is in, I am astounded and surprised. I had anticipated a guided waltz through the sober ballroom of tradition and academia and was fully prepared to accept my fate to that end. I had readied myself to abandon discovery for dogma, self-knowledge for doctrine, creativity for canon. I had resigned myself to the stifling dictate of common method and mourned, but not been prepared to fight for, the potentials of my own imagination. How easily and surely had I relinquished my own self-worth. As an educator, the exam is an unnerving but significant experience. I am shaken to my very core in recognition of the residual varnishes of habit slapped across my own educational expectations. It is weeks before I can process the occasion and with any confidence or sense of direction begin my work.

“In the high country of the mind one has to become adjusted to the thinning air of uncertainty, and to the enormous magnitude of questions asked, and to the

answers proposed to these questions. The sweep goes on and on and on so obviously much further than the mind can grasp one hesitates even to go for fear of getting lost in them and never finding one's way out."

- - - Robert Pirsig

**SCHOOL:**

**CAN**

**EDUCATE:**

IMPOSES

LIBERATE

MAINTAINS

QUESTION

STANDARDIZES

CHANGE

MEASURES

REVEAL

**SCHOOL:**

**CAN**

**EDUCATE:**

LIMITS

CONSIDER

KNOWS

WRESTLE

DOMINATES

DISCOVER

CORRECTS

CONNECT

**SCHOOL:**

**CAN**

**EDUCATE:**

CONTROLS

CREATE

CONTROLS

CREATE

CONTROLS

CREATE

CONTROLS

CREATE

SCHOOL CAN EDUCATE.

(IF ONLY WE CAN)

IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES.

*"For well dear brother I know, if thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die."*

- - - Whitman

Choosing, as teachers do, life work which requires a guaranteed if not permanent reservation in the roadhouse of the mind is not without its demons. Schooling in a society where the lucrative world of marketplace, technocracy, and pragmatic reasoning are enshrined can, to great detriment, make the footpath to perceived truths seem as sanctified as it does obvious. Intent on the upwardly spiraling track that promises redemption and tangible attainment on the gilded summits of knowledge, travelers in this world run the unsettling risk of disregarding the vistas of raw beauty sporadically scattered along the way, of tuning out the subtle strains of nature that are an intricate element of the landscape itself, and of forgetting that another course just as well chosen could quite possibly lead to an entirely different, but every bit as meaningful sight. Focused only on the sober symmetry of destination which pledges an unfolding of fact and fortune at the top, the mind tenses to march toward a concrete goal rather than reveling in the evolutionary dance of being. But educational psychologists, philosophers, and researchers alike have all recognized that the valuable life experiences of our bodies and souls will not be denied or cast out by the keepers of the mind. Indeed, they will demand their due one way or another.

What most who take up residence in the mind eventually discover is that their belief in the structure and economy of controlled experience which was once thought a safe passage to averting questions about life's uncertainties is but an ironic, "mindless" illusion. The persistent storms of discord and the passions of individual circumstance will not be stilled by simple awarenesses and associations. Attempts to establish and promote a solitary way of being, doing, and seeing fail again and again. Instead, it becomes apparent that our vision of what is and what can be remains forever tempered by the clouds that draft and shift through the sky, by the play of both sunshine and moonlight as they embrace the endless distances, and by the current of the wind as it rages to leave us breathless or drapes itself motionless in false repose. The high country of the mind is, in actuality, only an attendant to the complex and complete realities of our lives; an attendant that we sometimes confuse as a god at the expense of all other hallowed deities.

**“I want to think about what I do!”**

I hear myself saying this at least two or three times to my committee members during prospectus.

**“I want to think about what I do!”**

I wonder if they hear it like I say it. I’m guessing they are all running different versions of their own frayed scripts against my words. As both student and teacher, several scenes of my own are playing out.

**“I want to think about what I do!”**

*(“Math is not impossible for you, Elaine. Here, I will help you learn how. We will do it your way; it is not impossible. I will help you learn how. And tomorrow we will do more. And the next day too. Yes, you are very correct, it is much like a big puzzle. See there? You have learned it. Good. You have learned it.”)*

**“D” in advanced composition.**

**My first “real” course as an English major.**

*(“OMYGOD, I CAN’T WRITE. I CAN’T WRITE. OKAY. OKAY. YOU CAN HANDLE THIS. YOU’LL JUST HAVE TO RELY ON WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY MOST OF THE TIME. LOTS OF QUOTES. THE LESS YOU SAY, THE LESS YOU HAVE TO WRITE. THE MORE YOU CITE OTHERS, THE LESS YOU HAVE TO WRITE. USE SIMPLE SENTENCES. PICK MORE CONCRETE TOPICS. SHE HATES YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL TOPICS. TALK A LOT MORE ABOUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE SAY. YOU DO NOT KNOW HOW TO WRITE. A COLLEGE PROFESSOR HAS TOLD YOU SO; IT MUST BE TRUE. YOU WILL FIND A WAY AROUND IT. OMYGOD, YOU CAN’T WRITE. PLUS, SHE LIKES THE BOYS BETTER. YOU KNOW SHE DOES.” )*

**““I want to think about what I do!”**

“What they undertook to do

they brought to pass;

all things hang like a drop of dew

upon a blade of grass.”

---Wm. Butler Yeats

(I’m passing back the first set of papers in a freshman composition class I’ve started to

teach. Lots of red marks. This is good. I can find their mistakes. The red marks prove I can. I can find their mistakes. Suddenly, a student jumps up and starts screaming. He has made a “D”. Accusingly he shouts that I am prejudiced, throws the paper down, and walks out of the room. No one speaks. I am seasoned enough to recover the moment, but inside I am dying a thousand tiny deaths. What have I done? In the instant, I remember he wants to be a writer.) So little we know about ourselves it sometimes seems. So little until our recklessness is acted out across the backdrop of another, until in shaken self-reproach we are able finally to see that we will only go where we know until our understanding of something better, something bigger moves us in a new direction. (I am never again comfortable with grading.)

**“I want to think about what I do!”**

It starts early, maybe the second grade. If it weren’t noticeable, I would gladly wear a sign that says “don’t see me.” Not seeing me means no one pays attention when I fail. No one ignores what I do that seems important. I am not compared. I have no standard to rise to other than the incredibly burdensome one I have already learned to self-impose. [No one knows me away from here, what goes on in my life.]

(I see Leonard hiding out in the back corner. From behind my big teacher’s desk, I watch him move his smaller seat to an angle which keeps him out of sight. Ninth grade; plenty of time to learn already how to fade into a null existence. Day in and day out, he arrives, moves his seat, and stays out of range. He is poor, has trouble at home, knows how to melt away, evaporate while remaining in place. School is an ironic refuge.)

**“I want to think about what I do!”**

My fifth grade poem is rejected. “Not nice,” the teacher says. I have no idea what she means, but I feel dirty and coarse. My heart is in that poem. It is what I know about being a girl. A river of shame rises around me and I feel my body separate from the length of my soul. Mindless pieces bout and spin like balsam wood in wild waters, waters that spill over the levied banks and threaten to flood the tilled and tended flatlands. I am a woman, “not nice.” Flotsam. Jetsam. Wreckage. Tie her hands, bind her feet, watch the bubbles surface as her passion disappears. I become scattered body parts, but the secret I keep is that my soul remains intact.

(Melissa Dunford is missing. Each day her empty seat in the classroom buds larger and larger until it threatens to ravage the whole room. “Sandy Ridge girl,” some whisper in the teacher’s lounge. “Loose,” declare the boys. Drugs. Short skirts. Too much makeup. Party girl. [Her chair flourishes and pushes us breathless to the walls.] Quiet. Often silent. Quiet and still, very still, I remember her. The year passes, no trace. Only the dry bones of her name remain piled in the corner of our classroom, arid sticks of human driftwood severed, then scorched by a brutal, disapproving sun.)

**“I want to think about what I do!”**

I’ve been tracked into 7-10. Ha!

Everyone knows the system, knows that 7-12 is the lowest. I won’t go to college. College bound kids are in 7-1, 2, and 3. Some of my friends are in one of the three vocational tracks, others in just plain “academics,” in case they get more ambitious over the next few years I suppose. But 7-10, 11, and 12 kids are only along for the ride. (I don’t understand. I’ve always been the best reader in my class. Mr. G. told me so, and I know what those SRA colors mean. My sixth grade report card is all A’s and B’s, except for the C’s in science [I’m bad at memorizing. My mind moves around too much.] I was even class secretary one grading period, and had a turn as crossing-guard. I get the vague impression this has something to do with my family, but I can’t quite figure how or why.) Though I associate with the 7-1 kids (my best friend is in there), I really like my own group better. I don’t know. They laugh more real, don’t care what I wear, seem driven more by what will be than what is. We know how to be a part of 7-1 (and sometimes we mix, like in choir or gym or art), but we enjoy the luxury of 7-10. No one to fool. Nothing special to pretend. In silence, in secret, we contemplate our futures and hold on to whatever dreams we can.

(My first English departmental meeting. I’m so excited knowing that today I will find out what I teach. “Low-achievers,” says Miss Jean, “four groups of them and a speech class.” I see my new colleagues sigh in relief. If I have four of these groups, they will only have one each. I hear someone droll out the word “dumb.” I am mortified, immediately distrustful. Too naive as a teacher to comprehend what has been done to me, I never flinch on the students. 7-10 all over again. We will know each other well. Here is Stelletta, tough as a leather boot on the outside, but soft as rich forest moss in friendship [I was in love with her cousin Dickie once, a bad-boy jazz drummer who I surprised

with my new-found seductiveness.]; and here is Frankie, joking always at his own expense to cover the foreign last name; and Mary, always scribbling love notes and poems across everything to which she can put a pencil. We begin where we are, in recognition and exploration of each other.)

*“Always must I*

*think about*

*think about*

*think about*

*what I do.”*

**JOURNAL ENTRY:** Think can't be only one word to be most effective. It must actually be two. **THINK ABOUT.** To truly “think about” is to contemplate the whole of a thing, not just the most convenient or understandable or known part. When I “think about” my teaching and my students, I recognize that there are numerous links and layers to what we are experiencing in the classroom. This is where the difference between mindful (pay attention, recognize, be aware mostly of the breadth and/or quantity bounding a thing) and mind “full” (pay total attention, reveal, be awakened to a completeness and/or quality embodied in a thing) comes into play. I started understanding this difference last semester in some discussions I had with Tome about his work on moral perception. In fact, we toyed a lot with this “ful” vs. “full” idea. He may have even used it some in his own writing, I can't recall. But it struck us both that while “ful” is concerned with tending to a thing from the outside, “full” is occupied by the thing itself and moves from the inside. There is, it seems to me, a critical difference here when we look at students and classroom communities and, in the context of what I am writing about, the study of language. To create meaning among the three, they must be cojoined at every level and not just at a surface site. If I am mind “ful” as a teacher, I consider my student needs. But if I am mind “full,” I comprehend the circumstance of their needs within the context of community and discipline, seeking possible connections rather than simply allowing for particular disjunctions. This doesn't, of course, mean that divisions don't exist, but awareness instead of attention moves us deeper into active understanding. I believe it is a bit like the difference between tolerance and acceptance. No one wants to be merely tolerated, they want to be accepted, thus gaining connection to and not just attention of others.

**This for sure makes sense when I “think about” the way language infiltrates my life and the lives of my students, both in and out of the classroom. We are constantly crossing back and forth between the meanings we make of our lived experience stories, the stories we read, and the stories we compose out of the understandings of both those things. We can’t grow as individuals or as a community without the intimacy that comes only from “thinking about” and acting within the indivisibilities of life that embrace us all. This is not the same as growth which accommodates, a growth layered over with a thin veneer of attention meant to mask a continuing objectification and disassociation. Of this I’m pretty sure.**

*“Entertain every thought, every character, that goes by with the hospitality of your soul. Give him the freedom of your inner house. He shall make you wise to the extent of his own uttermost receivings.” - - Emerson*

Crystal begins crying in class today in the middle of our discussion generated by Kincaid’s book, Annie John. We are talking about Annie’s relationship with her mother and about what the kids think makes for good parents. Crystal’s parents abandoned her when she was five. *(There is risk. Getting beyond it is crucial.)* As the tears drop softly to her chest and bluntly stain the purple shirt she wears, I walk over and quietly excuse her to leave the room. Silence, tender and malleable, stays behind. I look around the room and find that even Josh, who makes a joke of everything, is still and stares hard out the window. “I’ll be back,” I say. “Talk quietly while I’m gone, or write some if you prefer, or be still.” Several students take out their notebooks. But Josh still sits and peers tough out that window. I go to Crystal, but part of my heart remains in the room, open and breaking for Josh. For Dolores. For Tommy’s mom and dad. *(“Parent, child--death ignores protocol, a sweep of its cape brushes this one or that one at random into the dust, it was not even looking. What becomes of the past if the future snaps off brittle, the present left as a jagged edge opening on nothing?” Levertov)*. Death, I know, comes in many forms. My kids are no stranger to its nature. What has it taken from you, Josh? You who live on what is condescendingly referred to around here as “the rag.” Whose face do you see though that glass? A mother? A father? Perhaps your own? The whole of the world?

“I Sit And Look Out”

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all  
oppression and shame,  
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with them-  
selves, remorseful after deeds done,  
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected,  
gaunt, desperate,  
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer  
of young women,  
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love attempted to be  
hid, I see these sights on the earth,  
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny, I see martyrs and  
prisoners,  
I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be  
killed to preserve the lives of the rest,  
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon  
laborers, the poor, and upon Negroes, and the like;  
All these---all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out on  
See, hear, and am silent. - - - WW

**JOURNAL ENTRY: It is always difficult to talk together about family relationships. Bringing the personal into the public is taboo. I tried today to pull wide the door that Annie’s mother’s character opens up. The tendency is to slam it tight. Still, I could see by the look in my student’s eyes that they deeply want to understand Annie’s relationship with her mother. It is not knowledge they want to pursue. It is their own experience, their own knowledge of self. Annie echoes that experience. Together we must explore what it means. Joan was the only one who has learned so early how to make the leap. In our discussion she was adamant when she said “I will ALWAYS love my mother. She is only human.” Joan, your words said so much more than you know. Tomorrow I hope you will help me in getting the others to recognize the fragilities we all share. It is the only way we can make sense, make meaning of our lives. It is hard for us to be so vulnerable to each other, there is enormous responsibility in hearing the personal reflected in our discussion. My students are constantly observing how I share, how I hear what they say, how I bring them back to their own thoughts on a thing through consideration of text and the disclosures of others. It is tough work, a perilous exploration. But in the end, we usually all discover that whatever loomed so large, becomes proportionally smaller when affirmed through the understanding, experience, or imagining of others. Even the things in**

**question are at least opened up so we can have at them. Sometimes in wonder, sometimes in horror, and sometimes in just incredulous insistence, we pause and reflect and turn a thing over until satisfied that at least we have given credence to it in our deliberation. It is the way we find forward movement in the most painful of things. It is what we all recognize as the power of such writing as Kincaid's:**

In the year I turned fifteen, I felt more unhappy than I had ever imagined anyone could be. It wasn't the unhappiness of wanting a new dress, or the unhappiness of wanting to go to cinema on Sunday afternoon and not being allowed to do so, or the unhappiness of being unable to solve some mystery in geometry, or the unhappiness at causing my dearest friend, Gwen, some pain. My unhappiness was something deep inside me, when I closed my eyes I could even see it. It sat somewhere--maybe in my belly, maybe in my heart; I could not exactly tell--and it took the shape of a small black ball, all wrapped up in cobwebs. I would look at it until I had burned the cobwebs away, and then I would see that the ball was no bigger than a thimble, even though it weighed worlds.

**“The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable.  
The years teach much which the days never know.”**

- - - Emerson

Penny (first-year teacher):  
“My mentor here has helped me to see that I should always try to relate class activities to the goals of the class and not get sidetracked. We talk about very practical ideas. Our relationship deals with teaching from a practical rather than theoretical standpoint. There is so much practical advice to be conveyed that the lack of overt philosophical conversation does not seem problematic, although more theory would always be welcome

Ms. O'Quinn,  
I'm sorry for what happen in class yesterday. I thought I could talk about those things better. You know, my social worker gets me to talk to groups about sexual abuse and living in foster homes, and I do that all the time without a problem. I guess it is easier to talk to strangers about those kinds of things than it is people you know.

as far as I'm concerned. Instead, she helps me understand when to turn in grades, conveys the important issues about writing, advises me on fair grading, and stuff like that. I feel like I'm missing a good and necessary chance to talk more about the issues of understanding meaning, authority in the classroom, and other such stuff, but time is so limited while teaching that conversation is very brief."

I'm okay though. I know you were worried about me. Everyone from class was nice to me afterwards. Nobody tried to get into my business, but I could tell they understood. I think reading that book and putting ourselves in it has made us think more about people's lives. It's okay. Honest.

Love, Crystal

"The Illiterate"

Touching your goodness, I am like a man  
Who turns a letter over in his hand  
And you might think this was because the hand  
Was unfamiliar but, truth is, the man  
Has never had a letter from anyone;  
And now he is both afraid of what it means  
And ashamed because he has no other means  
To find out what it says than to ask someone.

His uncle could have left the farm to him,  
Or his parents died before he sent them word,  
Or the dark girl changed and want him for beloved.  
Afraid and letter-proud, he keeps it with him.  
What would you call his feeling for the words  
That keep him rich and orphaned and beloved?

- - - Wm. Meredith

**(The language moves always between the private and the public.)**

I've been an avid reader all my life, though I admit I got a late start. I can't really recall any picture books lying about in the various places I lived growing up, so the earliest recollection I have of books, other than the Bible, place me at least at about age seven or eight, and then what I remember are collections of lives of the saints. Oh, but make no mistake, those were important books. In fact, the first book that I remember reading that had an impact on me was one that my mother probably bought at the back of the Catholic church I attended as a child. It was a biography of Saint Theresa of The Flowers. I am able to so clearly recall the sustaining courage of that young woman who, stricken with TB, coughs blood into her handkerchief and never tells; the strength of a mere girl who would scrub the floors from morning until night in a cold stone convent because others were less able to do the work; the conviction of a child who for weeks could exist in silence as she trained to become a bride to Christ. *(Please, Elaine, tell the class how you feel about this book you have read. What about it means so much to you? Don't be shy now. Sister Mary Martin will sit back here and listen along with the rest of the class. Your mother tells me you have decided to be a saint.)*

**[ I am furious with my 10th graders because they will not read the Steinbeck novel I have chosen for them. They think it is boring and not relevant. I have all of these copies I was able to finally scrounge up and only a handful will read. I try to reason with them. I threaten them. I bargain with them. But things don't get much better. In desperation, I give daily quizzes, assign two page essays, all to no avail. In the end, I sit them down and tell them the story. I paint with my words the pictures of Kino and his family. I ask for personal stories that tell of lessons equally important. I stumble, but I regain my ground. They cannot resist now the lure of such simple characters, so different, yet so similar to who they are and what they too sometimes feel. They tell me their own dreams and what they are willing to give up to get them. They tell me of times when they also have lost sight in the short term for what really makes our lives important in the long run. Together, we decide to make papier-mache pearls which hang from the classroom ceiling in lustered orbs, beaded pieces of the moon. On the string which holds them, each student attaches a statement of a personal dream. On a banner posted at the front of the room fly these words:**

**! ☐7 ☐6 ☐7+( ☐ 5(\$0 ☐☐ 2 7 ☐7+( ☐ 3(\$ 5/ ☐**

*{ I never made it to sainthood, Sister Mary Martin, but I'm starting to understand what it was*

*you were listening for that day you made certain I would be heard.}*

**Like celestial jewelry, the pearls drop pale and shiny across the sky of our room. For two years they hang there, a reminder of Sister Mary Martin and Theresa of the Flowers.)**

“In every life,” writes Louise Gluck, “there’s a moment or two.”

*(I am thankful for mine.)*

From the time we are old enough to understand that there is a difference between right and wrong which translates into an expected way of being in the world, we begin to accept and internalize the cherished codes of the systems which prevail. These codes infiltrate most aspects of our lives, including how we do our work and how we perceive the actions and attentions of others within those particular communities. And though there is no doubt that much of what the organized systems of guarded living tell us make it possible to live sane and relatively safe lives, it remains imperative that we stop and question the habitual roots of our practices lest we become so accustomed to them, we start to assume them as fixed truths. It is only when we reach to examine other ways of knowing ourselves and others and the world we inhabit that we come to more meaningful recognitions about the spaces and life we share.

Schools are notorious for locking into automatic pilot when they believe they have found a systematic approach to learning that seems effective and sensible. They superimpose all kinds of hierarchical traditions of thought which then work only in limited contexts for varying amounts of time. In communities bustling with the story lines of a wide range of individuals, communities such as those which make up our schools, these traditions often come across as heartless and indifferent, as closed societies meant only for those who can relate and reform. Though we can hope that this is certainly not the intent of those who applaud this approach, especially as it applies to schools, it is, because of the seemingly inflexible nature of such systems, the impression that many students get. They see little room for who they are and even less opportunity for who they may want to be. Rather than being viewed as a place where important things happen, school comes to be known as a sterile and stagnant site invented for the interests of those who run it and not those who attend it. Not only do the promises of inspiration and creativity get muddled, but likewise do the issues of care and concern. With the perceived collapse of these critical elements, students become alienated from their propensity for learning and meaningful teaching gets lost in the bureaucratic shuffle.

**“Learning? certainly, but living primarily, and learning**

**through and in relation to this living.” - - - Dewey**

*“A caring school is a place where teachers care about their students as if they were their own child. My school is not caring. They mostly just say ok, do this work with no objective and you’ll receive what I think you deserve.” --- Margie, 11th grade*

*“A caring school should be a place that is like a home away from home. My school is not caring, they just want you to come and do your work and leave.” --- Tu, 11th grade*

*“A caring school is a place where teachers try to help as much as they can. They are easy to talk to and care about your problems. It is a place where everyone tries to help everyone, even if someone is not doing so good or is having a hard time with something outside of school. People at my school don’t care if you pass or fail. The teachers are so hard to talk to especially when you don’t understand something. When you ask them, they look at you like you are stupid or put you off.” --- Tara, 12th grade*

No perspective indicates so urgently the need for a more evolved consciousness of how we approach our work as teachers than do the voices of our own students. Indeed, as Nehring admonishes there is “one voice [that] has been noticeably absent from the chorus of school-reform literature: students. We hear from scholars and policy makers, task forces and think tanks, sometimes even teachers. But what about kids?” In an attempt to understand how students define and think about the caring nature of their schools, a friend and I last year asked for volunteers from a high school academic enrichment program to write without consequence or judgment about their feelings and opinions on the matter. The results were disheartening, as evidenced from the representative words of Margie, Tu, and Tara. Though students were asked to simply frame their answers in a familiar context of “care,” it was clear from their responses that they understood that “caring” is really about a way of life, and that the way most schools “care” is quite disconnected from most of students’ real needs.

While students appeared to recognize what it is that constitutes a caring school environment, most felt that they were not in schools that provided such a thing. At best, they acknowledged that “some of the teachers are nice and are really willing to help” (Shannon, 12th grader); at worst, their experiences told them that “school is caring, but only toward certain

people” (Leonard, 12th grader). Almost all answers were limited in scope by “if and how” schools provide for academic need, with little indication that needs beyond that were ever met and no expectation at all that individual strengths, weaknesses, lives, and situations might be considered the stick by which students would be measured. How they were treated was almost always linked directly to how they fit the “norm” or how they negotiated the rules. Though students recognized that a caring educational community requires a common goal between students, teachers, and administrators, they for the most part saw themselves at odds with those in authority, with school being a place of submission rather than invitation to exploration and inquiry. At a pivotal point in their lives, these young people could clearly hear the doors of discovery and possibility closing on them. Students who responded to the inquiry about the environments nurtured in their schools were almost unanimous in their perceptions of these institutions as places which mostly ignore personal intimacy, human commonality and connection, and the search for self-knowledge. What they saw instead was the repetitive hammer of conformity come to pound away their familiar states. Sternberg refers to this restrained mentality as an “inert intelligence,” that is a closed, limited way of assessing what precludes truly “successful intelligence,” the way in which people really achieve what they want and need in life: “People who succeed . . . are those who have managed to acquire, develop, and apply a full range of intellectual skills, rather than merely relying on the inert intelligence that schools so value.”

By posing the question of what constitutes “successful intelligence,” Sternberg refutes the idea that knowledge is quantifiable, suggesting instead that it is a highly creative act inclusive of more than simple intellect, an act which allows people to explore self in highly unique ways. In our effort to “school” rather than “educate” people, it seems we have forgotten that the very purpose of learning is that students may come to know themselves better and in the knowing decide how they may best make a contribution to the greater scheme of things. Rather have we, for a large part, imposed the weariness of adult habitual living on the blithe spirits of those still striving to understand the complex, ever-changing nature of everyday life. For myself, I see no greater disservice. And students are not the only ones whose sensibilities are negated by this dour denial of imagination. Teachers who come into the classroom in the heady passions of possibilities, who come to schools truly desirous of inspiring and being inspired (“*The function of the teacher is to inspire.*” Emerson) find instead that the doors of enterprise will close also on them if they are not alert. They recognize the attempts made to corral both teacher and student

into a highly mechanized way of teaching and learning, an approach that denies as much as possible both imagination and innovation. Jane Tompkins in A Life In School succinctly summarizes this condition when she offers:

School, by definition, conditions us to believe that there are others who know better than we do; it encourages and often forces us to give up our own judgment in favor of the judgment of those in authority. School by its existence, militates against the very thing that education is for, the development of the individual. This paradox is at its heart.

Gene (11th grade) sees this when he admonishes that schools “need to cut down on the rules. Some of them are ridiculous,” as does Lena (12th grade) when she notes that “at our school its either you do it their way or no way at all.” The imposition of this kind of learning environment, it seems to me, denies a large part of the student’s as well as the teacher’s humanity. Growth in any extended meaningful, mind “full” way is almost impossible.

“When I Heard The Learn’d Astronomer”

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,  
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

(WW)

**JOURNAL ENTRY: When I think about the morality of what is imposed on students and teachers alike, I can’t help but call to mind again how impossible it is to separate bodies out from heads. In all ways, the body dictates much that the mind, try as it might, must work again and again to overcome. We all deal with it everyday, sometimes in very conspicuous and other times more elusive ways. School offers no retreat from this fact,**

that's for sure. I go back to my story that opened this chapter. It is full of the shadows of doubt which color a woman's educational experience. Naturally assuming an accommodating posture, practiced self-censorship, a reduced sense of the ability to reach a dream, and uncertainty about individual potential, women's bodies are the combat zones for the forces that gather to silence them. Men and other groups feeling marginalized for any reason might experience some or all of this also. But women in general, we know, have a difficult time escaping these demeaning practices, so much so that they often credit the good things that happen to them to luck or circumstance or some other such phenomena. They hesitate to define themselves in their accomplishments because they feel the conflict of them so deeply. Throughout their lives, women see and hear the messages that ask of them perfection, that piece by little piece then demoralize and undermine them when they can't meet such an impossible feat or when what they are thinking about is dismissed as fluff and/or womanspeak. While men confidently move forward, women feel the struggle to maintain. They try so hard to work within the rules, that even when recognized at their very best, they resist and sometimes hurt themselves. (*Flotsam. Jetsam. Scattered parts.*) These thoughts have especial meaning to me when I think about the imposed methods of language and how they are used. It becomes abundantly clear that my own struggle with even this project has been in part a constantly surfacing resistance to my feminist belief in the non-linear nature of discourse, a belief that is in direct opposition to the instituted life and language that we accept as hanging mostly across a pegged row of objective masculine expression. (*My soul remains in tact.*)

Misty would know what I am talking about here. She would agree with and understand the eventful implications of a mind seeking to remove itself from the memories of its body. Tough as she learned to be in this world, her experiences in it forced her to a certain position. I remember the first time she told me about her step-father slipping into her bedroom at night and hiding under her bed. Just as she was about to fall asleep, he would jump out and scare her, threatening her with harsh, hurtful words, words imbibed with the poison of too much alcohol. It got to where she would check under the bed and in the closet before going to sleep, and sometimes she would booby trap the door with a chair or a stack of books in case he tried to mess with her in the night. Will he hurt you, I'd ask. No, she'd reply; he knows I will kill him. I felt so helpless for her, calling down to an older sister in Florida to alert her to what was happening, attempting to

convince a brother in Texas to please rescue her; all to no avail. Misty coming to live with them was not a good situation either, they would tell me. Did they know, I'd ask, that Misty's mother when drinking used to lock Misty in the closet and go out for hours on end, leaving her there as punishment for "thinking she was so smart"? Well, mom had never been easy, that's why they had left home as soon as possible, and they hoped Misty would do the same. They hated Misty had been the last born, and so much after them too; at least they used to have each other. They hated she was on her own, but that's how life could sometimes be.

It's late on a summer night. I'm lying in bed listening to the night sounds of the neighborhood, cats mating somewhere in the distance, crickets talking to each other, moths occasionally hitting against the screen. In a slow swirl, the fan above my bed surrounds me with a sweep of warm fragrant air. The phone rings. It is Misty. She is calling from the campus dorm of a summer academic program she is in which I direct. Her mother is drunk, on the front lawn, raising hell, scaring the rest of the girls, yelling she wants Misty to come home. The child is terrified, crying. She doesn't want to go. I tell her to sit tight, I will be right there, and then I call campus safety to go over to the dorm and get the mother off the grounds. By the time they get there, she has driven off in her car. By the time I get there, the mother is on the phone, asking to speak to me. She tells me I can have her daughter (*She is not the only person to tell me I can have their child.*), she is sick of her, and I am a witch for interfering with their life. (Social services has never gotten to my complaint. Misty, though a senior still in high school, is eighteen. She is not a priority. She could leave if she wanted to is their feeling. Where would she go, I ask? Well, there is the YMCA shelter, I'm reminded. [*I've had eighteen year olds before Misty go to the shelter. I don't like what it does to them, but that is another story.*] The mother's reference is to my calling her other children seeking their help.) I take Misty home with me that night and give her a place in the guest room. She cries most of the night. (*My colleagues give me a hard time about bringing a child home. I could get in big trouble. Risk, I remind myself. Courage. Lots of it. Yes.*) She can't believe I would bring her home she tells me; she is crying just as much over that as anything; she is unaccustomed to physical kindness. I let her stay a few days while once more I call and try to convince the sister in Florida to please help. It's to no avail.

When I feel that Misty is out of immediate danger and let her go back to sleeping at the dorm at night, the mother acts as if nothing ever happened, thanks me for taking such an interest in "the girl." Before she leaves my house, I give Misty a stuffed doll she admires that is on the bed

in the guest room she has occupied. I tell her to find comfort in it whenever things are looking impossible, that it won't be long until she can more easily realize the possibilities of her own life. Later she tells me she keeps it with her the whole time she is in college, a reminder of what she must do not only for herself, but for others in similar situations.

I am changed by Misty in a place deep within me. As I write these words I ache all over again for her and the thousands of students like her that I know fill our classrooms everyday. But I am strengthened too in knowing that despite all that happened to her, Misty reached her dream of finishing college and becoming a social worker. It was a rough four years, but she made it. The summer before her freshman year, I let her stay in an empty room at the end of the hall in the dorm used by the kids in the summer program of which she had been a part the year before. I put her on the tab with the other kids for meals so she could eat when not at work. It was against the rules, but when I thought about it, I was willing to take the risk. No one ever knew except the other girls, who would often go to talk with her at night and ask for advice about their own lives. More than I feared getting caught with an extra student in the summer program, I feared that if Misty were to remain at home that summer, she would not make it to college in the fall. Till this day, I keep in my treasure trove of school things her graduation announcement. It is evidence to me of what happens when students learn to believe in themselves, know themselves, take incredible risks despite circumstances which regularly seem insurmountable. I am so proud of her, so very proud.

**bonding body, mind, and soul**

\*

“The problem, unstated till now, is how to live in a damaged body  
in a world where pain is meant to be gagged  
uncured un-grieved-over.

The problem is how to connect, without hysteria, the pain of  
any one’s body with the pain of the body’s world.”

- - - Adrienne Rich

I've noticed lately that Randall Miner just keeps getting skinnier and skinnier. His complexion is that pale translucent color that tends almost to blue. I've been trying to help him get his financial aid form taken care of in preparation for college next year, so I know that he has been living on his own in a fairly rough part of town known for its share of street alcoholics and hard-core drug users. *(He has been denied filing independent status by the university's financial aid office, and we are currently trying to figure out how to make those folks believe he really does live alone but still wants to attend college. My phone calls to them are almost comical, resulting in "we need to talk to his parents." They can't quite get it that if they could talk to his parent's he wouldn't be filing for independent status.)* Still, at the moment I am more concerned about his health than anything. I know he has declared himself an alcoholic in the past, and I worry that his living conditions have thrown temptations in his way that he is not able to resist. Anxious about how he is making it in such an adverse environment, an environment that would require the greatest of courage and determination from the most stalwart adult, let alone an eighteen year-old boy, I one day simply ask how he is managing to stay afloat. He thinks I mean financially and quickly tells me that he has been selling his plasma on a regular two-week cycle in order to eat. I am ashamed that I have thought for even a moment that the reason for his poor physical condition is because of a return to old habits. He, on the other hand, never misses a beat and asks with a smile what our next line of defense is going to be to secure him the aid he needs to continue his education. I am humbled greatly by his unwavering ability to accept the dire circumstances of his present situation, but mostly by the untarnished, innocent trust he maintains in a system that will in the end ignore his incredible spirit. *(Randall never makes it to college, couldn't get the money. Instead, he joins the armed forces. He has tears in his eyes the day he comes to say goodbye. I hope still that he found a way to fulfill his dreams.)*

(Facsimile)

Dear Ms. O'Quinn,

Thank you for writing/calling/visiting on Randall's (Ronnie's, Shirley's, Misty's, T'nita's, Eric's) behalf. Though we understand your concern for this (these) case(s), please know that it is very difficult to prove independent status. As you also must know, we have to be careful that students do not take advantage of this alternative standing available to them. Regrettably, without more proof that these students have left their homes under duress, we are not able to service them in the manner requested. Also, without signed parental income forms we can do nothing to help with federal financial aid. Please let us know if there is anything else we can do.

Sincerely,

The Financial Aid Office

Dear Journal: It's hard to believe that people do not pay attention to what is going on around them. They let the world slip away. The world is talking to us and we need to listen to it before it is too late. I don't want to be left out of the world.

Jeff (11th grade)

"Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant? Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight? Do you think matter has cohered together. . . for you only, and not for him and her?"

(WW)

Because we are physical beings, we cannot live in the world without somehow experiencing it through our bodies. Every day demands a symbolic choice of how we will "walk through" life. ("*[T]he expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face, It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists, It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees .*" ---WW ) In Moral Imagination Mark Johnson talks much about our cultural metaphors of action. Citing the work of George Lakoff and his students, Johnson reports that the group's findings clearly indicate that a physical metaphorical mapping defines how people understand the ways they get to particular destinations in their lives. Bodies are the launching pad for much, if not most, of what happens to us. How people respond to what happens is varied and unpredictable; a dash, a stroll, a head-long charge, or a run for

cover, circumstance usually dictates.

Unfortunately, the processes of schooling are generally experienced as a lock-step drill, a stride requiring everyone to move at a similar pace in syncopated rhythm, a plodding step mostly out of time with the spontaneous, often uncontrollable realities of the rest of life. The imposed cadence of school life is one which narrows experience to count only that which is respectable and commendable and determinable. All else is frequently cast in a negative timbre, as an unpleasantly dissonant chord to be harmonized with little or no consideration. The note of individual experience becomes not one we seek to creatively sustain, but rather rush to mindlessly (or mind “ful-y”) suspend. Still, we know that it is through the deep valleys, across unlikely mountaintops, into timbered lowlands, and over moonlit fields, that the body rises and descends to any number of random fates and possibilities, a mortal being choreographing the unfolding moments of the soul’s experience. What it sees, hears, and understands along the way will be determined by the maneuvers necessary to move across the borders and ranges of life, by the way it must propel itself forward, fall back, and begin again. How it is forced to stir about is a certain indicator of what it will see as it journeys, the condition of its arrival, precluded always by the event of passage. It is only by understanding that our student’s daily lives cannot be separated from their school lives, by accepting the implications to their abilities and capabilities brought on by their genuine conditions, that educators can begin to integrate and expand rather than compartmentalize and limit the whole of student experiences. It is only through synthesizing existing conditions with imagined subsequent ones that we can come to open instead of fixed understandings of what it truly means to educate and to be educated.

Dear Diary:

Mrs. Hemmings is the best teacher and friend I have ever had....It’s hard to find someone who will listen, cry with you, and have helping words....When I first took one of her classes my life was falling apart...I actually thought twice about taking a knife and slitting my wrists.... I love her like family. Mary (12th grade)

“Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you, You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as of a dream,) I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you, All is recall’d as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured, You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me....” (WW)

By faith in rather than fear of self-knowledge and possibility, teachers, students and educational institutions can be brought to a new level of creativity and innovation, a level possible only through the equal embrace of heart as well as head, of body as well as spirit. When we recognize the significance of this attitude, we begin to discover too some of the true differences between schooling and education. Jane Tompkins describes this kind of disposition in its broadest sense. Perhaps the only thing left out of her impression of what constitutes a meaningful and more complete education is the reciprocal effect that such a realized imagining would have on teachers as well as students:

A holistic approach to education would recognize that a person must learn how to be with other people, how to love, how to take criticism, how to grieve, how to have fun, as well as how to add and subtract, multiply and divide. It would not leave out of account that people are begotten, born, and die. It would address the need for purpose and for connectedness to ourselves and one another; it would not leave us alone to wander the world armed with plenty of knowledge but lacking the skills to handle the things that are coming up in our lives.

When we think about things holistically, we not only ask different questions, we invite different ones. We also accept different answers, answers that provide for fresh possibilities. This is where those who would have us think about education only as a product of the mind miss an important point. With their emphasis on result rather than progress, they fail to see that meaningful thought is generated from the life experience of people, not just from what happens in the mind. Failure to recognize this keeps us stuck in the same old parameters of things with little opportunity to expand in new directions. It denies self-knowledge, without which we cannot invent alternate ways of being and doing. For until we can learn to understand ourselves better, we cannot hope to understand the world around us. A mind “full” imagining of the world is what Whitman and so many other poets strive to make us recognize. It is what educational philosopher Ira Shor references when he says that “[t]he answer to deviance, poverty, or injustice is to change yourself, not the social order.” When we can know ourselves, we can work to change the way things happen to us. If we do not foster this kind of learning in our students, we invite them to do no more than stockpile information. They remain clueless about how to use that information to amplify the quality of their lives.

**“The soul, forever and forever, longer than soil is brown. . .”**

(WW)

*[I remember the exact moment in childhood when I realized that my body and my soul were supposed as something locked and sealed away from each other. It was the day after my grandfather died. As my mother was hastening to “clean me up” so that we could go over to the funeral home, she kept telling me that I would not be seeing grandpa again, that he had “passed away,” leaving his body behind but clearing out with soul in hand. This was a remarkable thing to me. What about his pipe, I wanted to know. Did he take that with him? He never went anywhere without his pipe. And besides, I thought to myself, I had just last night dreamed he was in a strange place asking me to please go find his pipe for him, something which I did immediately. In my dream, I had to fly to his house to get the pipe. When I returned, he was asleep, so I just put the pipe on a small table next to where he lay. I remembered nothing else.*

*When we arrived at the funeral home things were in a great fluster. I could see my grandmother and several of my aunts and uncles (there were 12 of them in all) standing and talking in obvious confusion. My mother asked what in the world was going on to which my grandmother responded, “We are trying to figure out how your father’s pipe came to be here.” I remained silent. I never told anybody in the family about my dream. And there was never a logical explanation for the pipe. For years it was assumed that in all the coming ins and going outs, someone had brought the pipe along out of habit and just could not remember doing it. Perhaps it is so. Till this day though, I still feel the weight of that pipe in my hand. The significance of the life of my grandfather’s human body remains yet imprinted on my soul, a testimony to the commingling of lived and imagined experience.]*

**“I do not know how to distinguish between our waking life and a dream. Are we not always living the life that we imagine we are?” - - -Thoreau**

In his famous observation of what he calls the over-soul, Emerson submits that the manifestation of human spirit inarguably moves somewhere outside the common sweep of knowledge: “The things we now esteem fixed shall, one by one, detach themselves like ripe fruit from our experience, and fall.” All hopes, dreams, and despairs live and die in the heart of the soul, though they are filtered always through our worldly experiences. We are, as Whitman reminds us, creatures both earthy and carnal. We contain an element of the divine from which we cannot be separated. “Apart from the pulling and hauling,” declares Walt, “stands what I am.”

Soul is metaphoric for the very essence of our existence. It is the grand substance of that which is most good and capable in all of us. Infinite in its wisdom, profound in possibility, the soul, like a summer night breeze, sways certain with promise and prophecy. In our darkest hour, it carries us when all else fails.

**“burial by moonlight”**  
when the lights flashed twice,  
i knew it was you  
lingering, whispering  
you had made it  
sound to the other side.  
two brief white glimmers  
of cosmic spark  
lit then were gone.  
it took only a moment.  
now i keep seeing  
myself sitting quiet  
on that heavy wooden bench,  
shadows before me  
placing you in the ground  
somewhere near midnight,  
the glow from  
a thunder moon  
scattering the immeasurable stars  
into infinity.  
in the warm and ripened  
summer dark,  
after days of  
relentless sun,  
i let the moon  
cross you over.  
by the moon  
i saw you  
rise  
in the sky,  
stretch,  
and settle  
down to  
the  
endless night.

(ejo)

\*

Western culture has seamlessly bound the immortal soul to a moral tradition arising from the Judeo-Christian tradition of values. Confined by a set of ethics and customs that are believed knowable and absolute without fail, these codes for living are pervasive and uncompromising.

They dictate cultural perceptions not only of how things should be done, but also of what should be done. They allow little space for our own imagined selves. Schools in large part vicariously abide by the rules and regulations which underpin this religious absolutism. As Johnson submits: “These moral precepts allegedly specify for us which actions are morally permissible, which are absolutely forbidden, and which are obligatory for us whenever we have an occasion to perform them.” There are definite right and wrong ways to allow for and tolerate among people. Dutiful standards and dispassionate “norms” are claimed safe and knowing. Johnson goes on to explain that these absolutes continually fail us because they force people to live in ways that are not true to how they actually do synthesize information and make crucial decisions about matters that affect their lives. By linking a prescribed “spiritual” tradition directly to the “laws” of our physical state, proponents of this kind of authority expect to keep our cultural demons at bay. The result is a society of individuals who often live at odds with what their inner self tells them and in conflict with what outer laws suggest.

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of the resulting tension that Johnson talks about is the contest for Huck Finn’s “soul” when he must decide whether or not to let Miss Watson know where to find Jim. In the end, of course, he chooses to “go to hell” rather than give in to something that he recognizes as morally wrong, though it is what he has always been taught as right. In the face of conviction born of something bigger than the self-righteous, mindless constraints of society, Huck gives in to an imagination greater than the conventions which others hope will guide him. It is a mind “full” imagination seeded in friendship, in the ever-flowing force of the river, and in his own evolving sense of truth. It is a vision of the surprises of life rather than the limits of it. It is an understanding of the fact that though we are often subject to the unalterable conditions of our physical selves, we sometimes have the capacity to help ourselves and others rise above the difficulties of life if only we are inclined to do so. Mind”full” living, Huck learns, often requires equal amounts of risk and vulnerability. Ultimately, It cannot be attained through anyone’s truths but our own.

*“Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world,  
and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from  
every abstract thing, from all that is of brain only, from all  
that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes,  
memories, and sensations of the body.”*

- - - Wm. Butler Yeats

“Too Many Names”

Mondays are meshed with Tuesdays  
and the week with the whole year.  
Time cannot be cut  
with your weary scissors,  
and all the names of the day  
are washed out by the waters of night.

No one can claim the name of Pedro,  
nobody is Rosa or Maria,  
all of us are dust or sand,  
all of us are rain under rain.  
They have spoken to me of Venezuelas,  
of Chiles and of Paraguays;  
I have no idea what they are saying.  
I know only the skin of the earth  
and I know it is without a name.

When I lived amongst the roots  
they pleased me more than flowers did,  
and when I spoke to a stone  
it rang like a bell.

It is so long, the spring  
which goes on all winter.  
Time lost its shoes.  
A year is four centuries.

When I sleep every night,  
what am I called or not called?  
And when I wake, who am I  
if I was not I while I slept?

This means to say that scarcely  
have we landed into life  
than we come as if new-born;  
let us not fill our mouths

with so many faltering names,  
with so many sad formalities,  
with so many pompous letters,  
with so much of yours and mine,  
with so much signing of papers.

I have a mind to confuse things,  
unite them, bring them to birth,  
mix them up, undress them,  
until the light of the world  
has the oneness of the ocean,  
a generous, vast wholeness,  
a crepitant fragrance.

- - - Neruda

The wholeness Neruda speaks of is what as teachers we know is mandatory to creative vision. To fragment is to see only a part of a thing, to miss its relation to all else, to know only the limits of something and not the possible. In connective wholeness is where the unexperienced

dimension of self and others is discovered, where perspective is gained on traditions and values, where we learn to distinguish the active potency of our imagination from the passive faculty of mere knowledge.

“I am the poet of the body  
and I am the poet of the soul.”

(WW)

I am sitting here with a glossy photograph in hand of a cast picture from a high school production of Taming of the Shrew. Stage left is a smiling Hortensio, arms wrapped around Kate who in real life is his cousin. Hortensio is dead now. He died a few years ago of AIDS. People used to come from all over the state to have him groom their show dogs, said the dogs just loved him. Never a cross word, never without a grin, I see him still standing strong, trusting in himself:

(“Ms. O’Quinn, till the end, my mother was always thinking of everyone else. When she got in the tub that day, she packed herself in towels so that the from the shot wouldn’t make a horrible mess. I can’t believe it worked. But you know how people talk. Knowing mom, she didn’t want to give them any to talk about than they already had. was like that you know? Yeah, she like that.”)

“Yes my brother I know, The rest might not but I have treasur’d every note, For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding, Silent, avoiding the blood moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows, Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes the sounds and sights after their sorts, The white arms more out in the breakers tirelessly tossing, I, She with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting was my hair, Listen’d long and long.” (WW)

*“The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom, I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the pistol has fallen.” - - - WW*

**“Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth  
that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every  
end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every  
deep a lower deep opens.”  
Emerson (from “Circles”)**

Center stage stands Bianca, shadowed at the shoulder by a bearded Petruchio. I recall still the panicked tremor in Bianca's voice the day she called from college and asked if I could please take her to an out-of-state abortion clinic; her parents would disown her if they knew. She insisted, please, could I go with her. I drove. Among the other faces of Baptista, Lucentio, servants, and the widow, is postured a young woman with long, unkempt hair. Grumio's hand can be seen resting tight around the waist of her flowered sack of a dress. In the instantaneous flash of the camera there shines a glimmer of hope and joy in her eager eyes; too, is there a hint of uncertainty. I am that woman, the picture taken during the spring of my second year as a teacher. Unclouded as a perfect day at sea, the remembrance of that crystallized moment comforts me, takes hold of me even now. I embrace the feeling with a tenderness reserved by most for only lovers. ("Only a lot of boys and girls? Only the tiresome spelling, writing, ciphering classes? Only a public school? Ah, more, infinitely more. . ." - - - WW)

Of late I have had reason to sift through belongings, mementos, pictures, and papers accumulated over the course of years. It did not take long for the diverse relics of my teaching career to begin to surface. Looking around, I note they are everywhere. Secure on my refrigerator is a picture of Randy, now a Master's student in a college in Tennessee. (*This is my mom, he tells people when I go to see him on occasion. We both laugh at their baffled response, for Randy is Black and I am White. His real mom is an ex-crack addict who wants to come and see him, but rarely does.*) Next to him is Lewis' little girl and then Lisa's kids. Here now is a pile of "thank you" notes, one from Dwain another from Anne and here a hard-earned one from Dee-Dee and Shewan. "Thank you," they say, "thank you," "thank you." "Thank YOU," I whisper back to them. "Thank you." (You especially, Shewan. You who taught me how one can be grateful even through the worst, the very worst of things. You especially, I thank.)

A night light from Russia brought back by Michael the year he made the "peace child" program and a clock in the shape of Virginia made special for me by Yolanda and her dad the year she graduated have a place on the basement shelf. There's an engraved crystal clock on the mantle, a framed harlequin print on the staircase, a tee shirt in my closet colorfully signed by students from a long-ago class, and a pin in my jewelry box crafted carefully from a collection of old buttons. Donald's mother made me the pin. "For believing in Donald," she said when she handed it to me. It is a fine pin, a real keeper. And then among the jewelry I find a silver charm that catches me off-guard. A picture flashes through my head of the kids who presented it to me.

On one side of the piece is the mask of comedy, on the other, tragedy. I spin it on its chain and in the spinning cannot tell the two sides apart. It is a gem of a find, a fitting and eloquent treasure. I can bring myself to throw nothing away.

How do we tell someone the stories of our days as teachers? Days so rich in both sorrow and delight that I sometimes feel like a braggart describing my gains to those whose own vocational rewards seem a mere pittance in comparison. How do we express the daily sharing in the lives of our students that augments our own, fills us to overflowing, makes us emotionally fat? (*Ms. O'Quinn: I think this is a great class. Sometimes after I leave I want to come back...Lavi*) How do we benchmark or depict the value of a day made successful by the gain of another's trust or failed because of someone's human frailty (often our own)? How do we, as Robert Coles reminds in quoting Wm. Carlos Wms., keep our " 'craft' [from] becoming 'subverted by thought'?" Though Williams spoke with moral concern for his writing, educators must ask of their own professional lives the same piercing question.

"Two Kinds of Intelligence"

There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world. You get ranked ahead or behind others in regard to your competence in retaining information. You stroll with this intelligence in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This as other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid, and it doesn't move from outside to inside through the conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is fountainhead from within you, moving out.

- - - Rumi (13th century poet)

The only way we can remain true to the essence of teaching is to recognize the whole of the experience of it. This means braiding body, mind, and soul to the filaments of our classroom community. It means believing that the very best of what our students are, what we are rises out

of us only after much reflective consideration and cannot be forced or infused. It means striving for an integration of lived experience and classroom interaction, of human strength and weakness; it means trusting that out of these unions will come meaningful insight into the realm of possibilities that exist for us as individuals, as a people. Mostly, it means acknowledging that teaching is a highly personal experience that falls flat when reduced to method and manner or split into technical halves. To offer a lesson from the heart means to live in the knowledge that we only touch others when we allow ourselves to be touched by them.

Not too long ago I was on the interstate driving north when I saw a sign for Harrisonburg, Va. My mind flashed back to the life of Renne Hickock, a former student of mine who had attended JMU. Arriving back in Harrisonburg after her Christmas break, Renne was abducted in a local mall parking lot by two men who drove her out into the country, raped her repeatedly, beat her to death with some large rocks, and left her body half naked and totally exposed in the middle of nowhere to the harsh winds of January. It seems it took search teams about a week or so to finally find her and bring her back to Roanoke to be put to her final rest. Renne was an only child of two parents who had her late in life. They had not finished high school and were simple, honest people who wanted all the goodness life could bring to their child. She was their pride and joy, a model daughter from all indications, and they had done all they could to insure her life would be easier than theirs had been.

The events of that whole horrible affair came flooding back to me while I was driving as though they had just happened yesterday. I could see Renne standing at my desk the summer before she went to JMU, so proud of herself to be able to go to college, so eager to do well and make her contribution to the world, to “give back,” she said to me, “some of what she had been so fortunate to get.” My next image was of her funeral. I recall walking into a small, unpretentious church on a narrow little side street in Salem. Scores of people were there in support. The first person to walk up to me was a former classmate of Renne’s who was ahead of her by three years in school. He had gone to mortuary school and was working at the funeral home that Renne’s body was brought to when she arrived back in Roanoke. He had only been full-time at his job about four months when this tragic event happened.

“Ms. O’Quinn,” he said to me, “I can’t believe what they did to Renne. She is not even recognizable. Why would someone do this?” As he spoke, great tears were running down his face. This was Peter, unshakable, tough-minded, certain at all times that life would never get one over

on him, looking earnestly at me and asking why. I had so little courage for myself to be there, that I wondered if I could possibly find a way to comfort him even a little bit. In the end, I simply stood with him and held his hand while we both cried silent tears; taking strength in each other's sorrow was the best either one of us could do. Even now, I feel his hand in mine.

Renne's death was incredibly hard on me. For weeks I had to keep forcing myself out of a depression that threatened to overwhelm me. The vision of her young body swollen and bruised beyond knowing would surface in the middle of the night and bring me to tears that would sometimes last well into the early morning. I felt physically sick and emotionally devastated. I kept seeing her parents, arms around each other in an attempt to take some shelter from the incredible pain and grief, and it seemed as if my own heart would break in sheer empathy. And then one day I decided I would not let Renne go under the conditions those two men had imposed on her. She was so much more than that and deserved a remembrance indicative of the cheery and mirthful person I knew her to be. So I wrote a small, but meaningful poem for her and painted a picture intended to honor her memory. It was a simple picture, just a lone, bright candle glowing out from a darkened night. But in the creating of something new in her honor, my grief subsided and I began to live again in the brightness of what her short life had meant to me.

Renne Hickock was a straight "A" student. She blew the top off of the SAT's and was going to be an accounting major at JMU. In her life, these were the things that most everyone commented on when they spoke of her and the thing about her of which people took especial notice. Without a doubt, she was smarter than most. But Renne was so much more than what the numbers and grades and reports could tell. She was helpful and honest; selfless, tender, and kind. Renne was a quiet girl, spiritual as well as spirited. She was a young woman who humbly accepted whatever came her way, one who gave always without being asked. These characteristics were the true worth of her life; they are the qualities for which I will always remember her, the attributes that mean something still.

I tell this story not as a tragic ending to a life, but as a hopeful beginning to the recognition of how much bigger our lives are than we sometimes stop to remember. As teachers, we cannot afford for one moment to forget the stories of our student's lives, for they are the stories of our own lives and of our collective consciousness and humanity. They are the stories that so much make us who we are as individuals. How we choose to live in them will determine much about how we choose to live in the world. These are the stories which have the potential to, as Philip

Jackson says, transform “us in ways that have relatively little to do with knowledge, per se. They leave us with altered states of consciousness, new perspectives, changed outlooks, and more.” These are the stories that imaginatively connect us across what Martha Nussbaum has called “the fragility of goodness.” As teachers, it is our place to allow them, to speak them, and to honor them. They are the body and soul of our life work.

“Foot Soldier”

Bravery is the vanguard of youth.  
Against false agent and  
leering captor must it protect.  
Against the splintering tensions  
of rampant fools and miserly  
hoodwinks must it steel itself,  
muscle a steadfast front line.  
Like the tender prairie weed  
knuckled breathless to the ground,  
the season’s choicest flowers  
surrendered dizzy to the rain,  
youth in a vanguard of bravery  
must constant, certain rise  
to a storm of crushing charges,  
must learn fast to birth wild spirit  
to the wind and urge it fly.  
So it is. So must it be.

(ejo)

**waltzing with the muses**

\*

“The chief work of poetry is not to teach anything,  
not to explain anything---though it may both teach  
and explain---it is to intensify life.”

- - - Wallace Stevens

“A poet owes it to himself  
not to be trapped in miles-per-hour;  
let him resound at the speed of light  
like angels choiring in the stratosphere.”

- - - Voznesensky

**“Poem Words”**

(ejo)

The form deceives While it cunningly exacts proud attention the  
energy thought within seeps electric toward open space  
Wave and particle at once eclipsed by mould and model the  
trickle counted (falsely) dammed flattens its way past style past verse  
to sink to deeper ground Set prominent on display the hollow  
carcass of design poses bleak blue with cold (meaning’s  
blood spills dry from its veins) At river’s mouth a groundswell rises  
notching (as lightning swords an evening plain) a passage for  
the steady cleansing rain Poem words won’t be contained

**“conceal’d or unconceal’d the seed is waiting.”**

(WW)

As a teacher of language, I feel immensely fortunate. I have as my ally in the undertaking of the teaching of my discipline the words, wisdoms, and queries of the ages. Certain it is that I must guard against leading students to think all truths are found in the proposed discourses, but through them they are able to see the potential for opening various plot lines in their own lives, as well as contemplating the meanings found in those stories which speak of the shallow and unjust. In a space that exists as purely symbolic until they choose to bring it to action, teachers are able through their teaching of language and literature to help students recognize the limiting

experiences of the unawakened mind while inviting them to wrestle with the disturbing discords that are inherently necessary in the creation of a more mind “full” one. Both teacher and student are able to do this in safety because what is done with the discoveries of the aesthetic imagination is a personal choice. Language understood as such is our life in poetry. If freed, its power can change and expand our worlds.

**JOURNAL ENTRY: If I believe this, why am I so worried about how I talk about language in my writing? I know I need to say something astute about the aesthetic value of my subject, but I struggle with what exactly that is, especially in the context of teaching. I can’t think of anything concrete to offer up for consideration or any trick of the trade to demonstrate that hasn’t already been told or done, nothing that would add a thing to anyone’s knowledge base. Perhaps I should forget all about methods and practice and ideas. Hundreds of people have written a gazillion books on those topics. Maybe I should talk instead about something else, like how language and our connection to the aesthetic imagination frees us, or why as teachers we must more fully comprehend the value of helping students experience lives enriched, as ours have been, by what appear only to be mere words. A big part of the problem I am having is that language puts me in a quiet space (*Listen to the silences within.*) ; the irony is that much of what surfaces academically about the discipline is noisy. Activity and projects and how to get the task done is what people want to hear. They want to find new ideas that work, ways and means of bringing their students to the technicalities of reading and writing and communication. I worry sometimes that in all the hoopla, we forget the pureness of the art itself, of its incredible power to affect people’s lives in simple, solitary performance. Sometimes, when I think about it, I believe that in our anxiety to stay lively and stimulating in our teaching, we take the soul right out of words, dismember them into fragmented pieces of form and substance, separate what they are from what they mean. We forget that words have an innate voice that speak strong and clear in their own right, if only we can teach students how to listen to the message. Maybe that is what I should be considering, the sensibilities, the abundances, the insistences of the aesthetic imagination that rise up of their own accord, that are dependent upon nothing but interpretation, integration, and vision. It is the reason, after all, that we as teachers first come to this place, for it is the passionate mind “full”ness of language that calls to us, that asks us to set it free. Like the dancer who in the end only**

**wants to dance, all else is but the narrow confine of tedious practice. Our lives, we have come to understand, are like the immortal poetics of the aesthetic, embryonic buds profoundly comprised of tightly compressed secrets waiting only to unfold.**

It is early in the first six weeks of my new career as an English teacher and I am standing in front of my 10th grade class reading aloud from Walt Whitman. I am eager and animated. As we come to the end of the poem, my students are stunned by what I am reading. It is heresy. I remember the exact passage. It is the final lines from “Song of Myself,” poem 25:

“Writing and talk do not prove me,  
I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,  
With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic.”

We have been discussing the poem up to this point, so the students are well aware of the succinct message implied by these words. As I finish reading, I close the book, look at them, and ask, “So, what do you think?” Nothing. I recite the last three lines again. Walking down the aisles, swooshing my arms through the air, pounding my fist at one point on a desk, I repeat, “Writing and talk do not prove me....” I wait. This time George, whom I have noticed is already out of school more than he is in it, says in a brazen voice, “No one cares how we really are, only what they think they can teach us to be. Who we really are doesn’t matter.” I am bolted into silence. In the first six weeks of school I have started to discover the underlying truth of his words, but this is the first time that truth has been articulated. The voices of my students have been stilled in direct irony to the point Walt tries to make. We pause and look again at the poet’s words, this time through the lenses of our lives. (*Poem words won’t be contained.*)

One of the earliest lessons I learned about teaching was that as a teacher I was endowed with no more “power” than were my students. I, too, was expected to abide by a training list of rules and regulations, though I had never consciously recognized how long would be my list, how intrusive the rules and regulations. It is true as Michael Apple notes that “one of the main criteria for the hiring of teachers is their agreement with the overall curricular, pedagogic, and evaluative framework which organizes the day-to-day practice.” But as a new teacher in search of a first-time job, I, like many others I am sure, gave very little thought to the reality of the subtle conflicts awaiting me in school, conflicts brought on by what in my case were major philosophical differences in determining curricular needs, experimenting with pedagogical practice, and encouraging individual as well as community growth. I uncovered these

dissimilarities only after I began to teach. In fact, before entering the classroom as a teacher, I had never thought much about “power” in any extended personal sense and had recognized even less how even a perceived lack of it has the capacity to undermine the foundational strengths of people.

George’s exclamation was my first true testimony to the fact of this insight. Like my students, I had generally just ignored the bureaucracy that seemed to come my way accepting, for that most part, that some things were “just like that.” However, it did not take me long in my new position to see that the idea of “power” through “reasoned” expectation truly was the big stick used to measure progress in schools, mine as well as that of my students, and that ignoring that point was submitting to something that made me feel very much like I was under house arrest. My classes could move, but only within a restricted arena. Initially, I was just flat out overwhelmed by this discovery. I could not figure out how to preserve the elements of the wonder of language that I felt conducive to a progressive class learning environment and also appease the many “reasoned” demands of the bureaucratic system of which I had become a part. More so, I could not believe the toll that this frame of thought was taking on my belief in and ability to unleash the creative dynamics of the classroom community. For months I walked around amazed at the differences between what I had anticipated my classroom would be, what I was being asked to make it, and what from their experiences the students were in reality expecting from it. I felt I was being asked and assumed to disown not only in myself but also in my students all but the most superficial principles of self-expression. It was a confusing, distressing, and horribly alien feeling. Students rarely questioned, knew better how to respond than reflect, and almost totally separated the culture of self from the culture of learning.

“Morality is affected by fear,” says Noddings, “but it is inspired by love, and it is demonstrated in loving relations.” In thinking about my situation, I came to understand that the decisions I needed to make in the context of my classroom while indeed personal, were very much grounded in my love for students and language and not in my fear of bureaucracy. These decisions, I finally discerned, required not only the courage to stand by my convictions, but a keen ability to “imagine” beyond the mere imposition of the authoritative standards which were outlined to suit the “power” to control much more than they were to nurture what I saw as the camaraderie of connection between self, others, and subject. I decided I could not teach unless I could liberate myself and my students from what I was now beginning to recognize as a frightfully

unimaginative experience. But I realized too that to put all of my energy into defying authority would paralyze my teaching, even though it would be for what seemed just cause. Opposed to the idea that rationality is everything, my devils of risk and passion, in a struggle for my soul, fought it out with the god of rules and rationality. In the end, the devil won.

It occurred to me that I had been allowing myself to become victim to the very kind of thinking I had always so heartily opposed. Because I, very much like my students, had started “reacting” to the situation I was in rather than engaging it, I found myself being much more rebellious and defensive, uncooperative and difficult with my colleagues than had ever been my nature. In short, I was exhibiting my own mind “less” sense of imagination which was certainly no better than the one being thrust upon me. “The problems,” says Dewey, “are not even recognized, to say nothing of being solved, when it is assumed that it suffices to reject the ideas and practices of the old education and then go to the opposite extreme.” Dewey is correct. I had cut myself off from considering that possibilities for my ideals still existed, that it was just a matter of letting myself flow through the form in place rather than consistently trying to resist it.

It was this revelation which freed me to once again believe in the teaching of language in the way I deemed most meaningful. When I quit contesting and started instead to again simply adventure into the being and doing of learning, my upside down world of the first few months started to right itself. This is not to say that my way of being and doing and seeing was not challenged and itself sometimes inclined to the resistance of others, but my personal struggle became minimalized, and I left the will to constant dispute in the hands of those who wanted to waste their energies on it. My own energies were, I realized, much better spent in earnest commitment to my students and in learning how to be most receptive to their needs, which in the end I knew were the truth of community needs. Because of my fear of giving up something I believed to be philosophically “correct,” I had begun to act in what I knew was a mindlessly “incorrect” manner. I had turned the heart of my thinking into the head of it and lost sight of what mattered most, liberating learning and recognizing illusion.

*“O the puzzle, the thrice-tied knot, the deep and dark pool, all untied and illumin’d! O to speed where there is space enough and air enough at last! To be absolv’d from previous ties and conventions. . .” (WW)*

Empowered by what I was now able to see, I began to work with my students to learn how to act on things, to understand that they could reconstruct their ways of thinking and seeing,

to consider through various frameworks of language and communication how to question and interpret for themselves the meaning of things. In doing so, we found ourselves immersed in the moment as opposed to being lost in the shuffle of the times. (*Something there is here we can hold on to.*) Fortunately, I was savvy enough to recognize that open revolt would only jeopardize my efforts to action. It was not complaint and disgruntled conduct that would change things; it was quiet revolution steeped in invention and not impulse that would make a difference. So I brought in supplementary readings and personal writings and ideas from the world outside of the class and had the students do the same. But we interspersed those things with choices made from the text, suggestions explicit in the curriculum. And I learned how to keep the classroom door closed, not in any attempt to keep something out, but to insure instead that my students' experiencing of language might expand from within. We were artistic in our endeavors, contrived nervy projects, played with song and dance, reveled in what we knew was the constant motion of things. Too, we talked long and heatedly about self and social responsibility and what it meant to have a quality life; we laughed and cried and got angry at each other and learned to let all not only speak their mind, but asked that in doing so they begin to unravel the source of it. Mostly, we became intimate with the body and soul and head of the sometimes familiar and sometimes not so familiar disturbing beauties of the aesthetic imagination.

When the year ended, all of us had grown in our understanding not just of language, but of the value of being human. We came to understand that our intrinsic worth would not be groomed through correction, but rather through clarification and compassion. (*Ms. O'Quinn: I've learned that if you actually listen to what a person is saying, instead of just hearing the words, you can get a message. Crystal*). Together we discovered that leadership and agency is dependent not upon the standards imposed by the dominant community, but by the unleashing of our personal vulnerabilities, by an individual recognition of the forces that break people down, and by a determination to move from a mind "less" acceptance of things to a more mind "full" consideration of them. Though all of us lost some of our innocence in the endeavor of a truly literate experience (*In innocence will we grow wise. Paradox is embraced, not ignored*), we found the heart necessary for a broadened vision of what it means to truly grow (*There is a center found in all things.*). It was an electrifying year in many ways.

**ANNOUNCING TRY-OUTS FOR Li'L ABNER**  
**EVERYONE WELCOME!**

When I approach my chair about doing a musical with the kids, she tells me that I can talk to the principal, but that a senior play done by Mr. Hadley is about all the kids around here will do. She says that he never has more than a handful of kids try out, and that he has to hand-pick those so he can count on them to take responsibility. I get excited about someone else here at PHS actually caring about theatre and go to talk with him. Ha! He won't even look at me when I come into his room. In fact, he will not have the conversation and talks right over and around everything I suggest. The only thing I get out of him is that HE will be doing "Harvey" with the seniors. I am NOT invited to help. Okay. I am undone by my colleague's refusal to share in our mutual love for theatre, but determined not to let him squelch my enthusiasm.

My next step is to approach the choir director. I've seen her around and am hopeful. Anyone with long red hair who smokes Salem menthols out back at lunch can't be too bad. (*My suspicions about Ms. Jones are correct; she is eager to be a part of something so fun.*) Mr. Petes and Mr. Gilchrist are a little harder to convince. Especially Mr. Gilchrist. Shewie! They call him "Bruiser" around here because when he paddles he means to leave his mark. (*Mr. Gilchrist doesn't trust me, I can tell. He is always asking me how so-and-so is doing in my class and does he need to have a talk with anyone about behavior and am I "coping" and blah, blah, blah. I always smile and say there is no problem, but I don't think he believes me.*) But Mr. Petes is the main man and he is much more genteel. He simply puts his feet up on the desk and asks me how much it will cost. I lie. (*Risk more than others think is safe.*) Well, I don't really lie, I simply subtract what I feel certain we can make on the production and give him the bottom line figure on whatever money he might possibly be out. He tells me I am quite ambitious, but if I want to have at it, so be it. He then reminds me I need to check with Mr. Hadley about the stage use and work around Hadley's schedule. I lie again and tell him I felt sure there will be no problem, that Mr. Hadley, being a theatre person, will certainly be pleased to see the stage being used for such an appropriate activity. Ha! Mr. Petes likes that response. Mr. Hadley will hate it.

I've been talking to the kids about the play and they are leery, but interested. They especially love the fact that we might use real animals for the opening number, "Dogpatch USA." Jerri says we can get a piglet from her dad's farm if it really happens. (Mack is very eager to help me design the set [what an artist he is!] and already has had a great idea for papier-mache rocks

and trees.) Josh says he can bring some caged chickens. Kathy offers twin dalmations that might look pretty cool (already I see someone with a polka-dot dress on stage with those two dogs on leashes! What a visual.), and Mark said his aunt has a real pet groundhog that would probably behave long enough to get through the scene! My God, a pet groundhog. Who are my students and what richnesses of life have I, as a mostly to this point city dweller, missed that they have not only enjoyed but rejoiced in?

“Wild”

- - - Mary Donahoe

Most late summer evenings  
my dog sits about the door and howls,  
I toss under a full moon,  
admire the hair on my legs, under my arms.  
By day geese eat our grain  
and tolerate our trespassing.  
They look to the sky

far into light  
a V of honkers  
follow their hearts  
to the northland

When it rains,  
we strip and run through trees  
our bodies free to dance,  
and in the night  
I'll make a song that satisfies  
like no other lover,  
and when sleep comes, I dream  
of shuffling through a forest,  
licking bark and stones,  
floor wet with leaf and pine,  
growling over a bed of boughs,  
breasts hanging to my cubs mouths,  
I,  
the woman who wakes in my house  
to make morning coffee,  
to butter toast,  
I look to the sky

far into light  
a V of honkers  
follow their hearts  
to the northland

## CAST CALL

**ABNER:** Tom Lewis (What? say the teachers in the lounge. He is the smallest kid in the whole school! Abner is suppose to be BIG.)

**DAISY:** Juanita Simpkins (But Daisy Mae is a BLOND! Juanita has pitch black hair.)

**STAGE MANAGER:** Ricky Stevens ( Ricky carries a lot of weight among his peers. They respect him and will follow his lead. I think this will keep him from being out partying all the time.)

**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:** Dolores Jennings ( I know it will thrill her to no end. )

**And a cast of 38 or so more. . .**

Ms. O'Quinn,

To a very beautiful woman and a very beautiful person. I'm writing this letter, but I don't think there would be anyone that was in our class that would disagree with what I'm going to try to say. I'm writing this for two reasons. 1. I think everyone has told you how they feel, but if you put it in writing, as you say, it is there for all time. So that's just to show you that I am sincere. 2. I'm afraid you might start crying again, and I don't like to see girls cry, but then I'm not fond of those that don't, if you know what I mean.

You accomplished more and proved more in your short time here at PHS than many teachers have that have been here a lifetime. The attitudes of the students and the teachers at our school toward sports, school spirit, and especially anything that would involve a lot of student participation was at an all time low. They couldn't even get students to yell at a pep rally. Then you came up with the idea of Li'l Abner, an expensive play to put on, a musical, 40 students who weren't even friends, acting and singing at our school. BULLSHIT, I guess was the first thing that came to most people's minds when they first heard about it. Can't you just hear it now? What's this new "Radical" teacher at PHS trying to prove. It's impossible. Then it happened. Packed house. People sitting in a hot auditorium for 3 hours, laughing and actually enjoying themselves tremendously. Called on for an extra performance, and the man from the Barter saying it was the most professional play he had ever seen put on in a high school.

You proved to a lot of people and the administration that if someone is sincere and really cares that the students at PHS could be motivated into doing anything if only they have a teacher's help. You also proved to the students that they could do things they thought they couldn't. You built up confidence in a lot of people that really needed it. I could go on and on,

but let me say a few words about your class first.

When I first came into your class and you told us we would be responsible for talking in front of others, I honestly thought that the first day I had to do that would be my last. But as I sat there and listened to you I realized that this wasn't a teacher in the front of the room telling us to shut up and ordering us to do this and do that and mostly just trying to do and keep a job. Instead there was a woman who was trying to help us know that life can be as good as it is bad and she was confident that she could help us see that. And that was just not what we were use to.

So I just wrote this to say thanks to someone who really cared and never had anything but our own interests at heart. I wish you a lot of luck when you return to school, though I know you won't need it. As you have continually told us, you can do if you can understand enough to believe.

We all love you.

Don't forget us.

Mack

Teachers use the tools of their discipline in a variety of manners in furthering student growth. Each of us chooses a very different path toward discovery. In retrospect of my own way of helping students interpret and fuse the poetic details of their lives with the images, objects, spirit, and epiphanies of language, I recognize that the intimate nature of my approach to the classroom is not something executed in an attempt to assimilate students to my way of thinking. Instead I offer it as a hopeful inspiration to a way of learning to listen to language. I endeavor through refusal to separate the personal from the public to strengthen connections to the world both outside and inside of self. In words and in the necessary aloneness of self-reflection that they offer to the larger understanding of things, I travel with my students side-by-side on the highways of light and darkness, passion and conflict. Through text and the reflective sharing of it are we able to distinguish and refine the differences between living deep and living shallow. Reading and writing are the links that, if so chosen, allow for the conversation of our thoughts to take up arms, ask for the comfort of them, or understand better the urgent need to extend them. In so doing, I have found that the wonder and revelation of things is not lost or quickly dismissed, but readily gained. [*"I didn't know that I could really write from the heart and not just a bunch of notes."* - - Linda (12th grade) *"I never used to pay much attention to what was being said around me or to me, I was too busy worrying about the graded part of an activity, comparing myself and how I*

*did to others. But now I have learned to let what I read and hear take on meaning for me.” - - -  
Jennie (12th grade)]*

I have also discovered with my students that the only real power in learning is that which comes from a deeper understanding of things; without this, all else is trivia. What these understandings are vary from person to person and cannot be equally measured or linearly restrained. (“Learn,” says Merlin in *The Once and Future King*, “why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting.”) For one student this disclosure might be a simple clarification of what the sounds of nature provide [*“I never knew a person could be so quiet on a journey. It almost felt like I wasn’t me as I heard all the different sounds and then actually remembered them and could write about them. . .It’s different to listen and not always just be speaking out.” - - - Johanna (12th grade)]*; for another, a more complex awareness of the statements of a parent’s love [*“Through my many experiences in my 17 years in this world, I can say that I am just beginning to learn how to listen. . .I know now that there have been many times when I didn’t really hear what my parents were saying and I made the wrong decision.” ---Kate (12th grade).]* Students who have never spoken their minds in front of others can, in an intimate environment, learn to believe that their originality of thought is a voice that can meaningfully challenge and bring to consideration ideas every bit as urgent as the voice that seems always intent on telling them how to think and act. (*I will help my student be that which they long to become.*) James Berlin gives an excellent discussion of the repercussions of this way of thinking about language as applies to the moral, contextualized nature of how we ask students to read and write. Reiterating the social and political nature of language, he reminds us that unless teachers through attention to praxis engage student voice, learning remains only and always an objective experience.

Does this mean the students in our classes should still learn how to write those dreaded five paragraph essays? In a purposeful way, yes. Is it important that they know their way around the infamous rhetorical modes? If properly approached, it will only help them. Should they be adept at business letters, seeing the difference between a sentence and a fragment, knowing the colon from the semicolon? Indeed they should. But these are not the things that will feed their desire to learn, so we must be certain to somehow temper the above with that which engages them, pushes them to dig deep. It is the spirited discussions, the unveiling of disparate ways of

thinking and knowing, the opportunity for silent reflection, and, always, a certain commitment to each other, the subject, and the classroom community that invites students to learn and believe in the true power of education. It is taking time to listen not only to the voices of self which emerge struggling from within, but also to the voices of others which strain with equal difficulty to be heard from the bottomless wells of introspection. These are the ways that will free students to a visible creativeness of their imaginations, ways that will allow them to live out their classroom experiences as poets in the world, as keepers of a spirit that will not be broken nor denied.

For the student of language, the comprehensible stitch of another's words threaded through the fabric of their own life is what binds creative instinct to imagined possibilities. Just as Whitman believed that "the substance of poems must be derived from the concrete materials of the world," so too will those immersed in the experiencing of language come to their own enlightened relationship with the world around them. It is critical that in our students' appreciation of the power of language they believe that writers and readers alike come to insight in similar fashion. In the words of Whitman: "folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls." Meaningful writing can only do this for us if we are aware of the possibilities of mind "full" reading. And students themselves can only write meaningfully when they have learned to be mind "full" of the wholeness of things, of the activity that lies deep beneath the surface. The product of this creative marriage is the imaginative mind.

"I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination," writes Keats. Only by risking to know what is possible can we begin to understand the outlying reaches of what is true. And even though truth, as the poet suggests, is elusive, it is not inconceivable. It does, however, require a mind "full" imagining that engages wholeheartedly in the act of becoming and cannot abide one that assumes always a homogeneous or infallible progress. It is dependent only in part on the individual, and attaches itself always to that which is contextual and situated. The inherent truth of language is that it helps students see not only who they are or are not, but also who others are and are not. It invites them to see too who they and others still might be. The truth of language lies in how it encourages students to an understanding of how they may, if they so desire, continuously write the stories of their own lives and how sometimes those stories are written for us whether we like it or not.

*“Metaphor” (Eve Merriam)*

*“Morning is a new sheet of paper for you to write on. Whatever you want to say, all day, until night folds it up and files it away. The bright words and the dark words are gone until dawn and a new day to write on.”*

Language and how it is approached is a living thing for the teacher of English. Its connections to our student’s lives are real and immediate. The stories we choose to share with them, the stories they read and write and share of themselves, and the stories we create together from our varied interpretations and reflections are mirror images of the lives we know or can know or must know. We cannot read Gary Soto’s “Oranges” (“*I peeled my orange that was so bright against the gray of December that, from some distance, someone might have thought I was making a fire in my hands.*”) without the remembrance of our own winter day. A line from Langston Hughes (“*She stands in the quiet darkness, this troubled woman bowed by pain. . .*”) charges the air with immediate emotion and personal experience. And Dickinson, if carefully framed, brings students to that inner place that requires they dive deep before surfacing for air. (“*Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell.*”) A teacher’s challenge is not merely to explore the themes of language with students, but to open them as a passageway to an understanding of the profundity of surrounding things as well.

“Oysters”

Oysters we ate,  
sweet blue babies,  
twelve eyes looked up at me,  
running with lemon and Tabasco.  
I was afraid to eat this father-food  
and Father laughed  
and drank down his martini,  
clear as tears.  
It was a soft medicine  
that came from the sea into my mouth,  
moist and plump.  
I swallowed.  
It went down like a large pudding.  
Then I ate one o'clock and two o'clock.  
Then I laughed and then we laughed  
and let me take note---  
there was a death,  
the death of childhood  
there at the Union Oyster House  
for I was fifteen  
and eating oysters  
and the child was defeated.  
The woman won.

(Anne Sexton)

Where self intersects with language and community is where the passions, curiosities, sensibilities, and imaginations are stirred. It is where what is known is exposed in fresh ways, where what is unknown might be cultivated. And while differences in experience become abundant and evident, similarities are also discovered and considered. Through language can students become aware of matters previously missed or ignored or thought unimportant. But this is not accomplished by teaching that sees the imaginative power of the aesthetic as a problem to

be solved or a cognitive difficulty to be “worked” through for understanding. To unlock the insights of the written or spoken word, students must be led to recognize an organic familiarity of language, a familiarity inclusive of the potentially disruptive forces as well as those which resonate, forces which have the power to reconstruct lives in addition to clarifying them. A true understanding of the power of language recognizes that words are symbolic of what can be and are not bounded just by what is. It is an acceptance that allows for the risk of breaking away from previously held beliefs and values, recognizing that the experience of life can be “known” without actually “knowing,” but realizing too that there is little that can be “known” for certain.

Thinking about language in this way acknowledges that while words can offer a safe space, a space which does not insist upon anything, they can also create a danger zone in their capacity to disturb as well as produce. Language can be enticing and provocative, tempting its audience to step outside of what Wayne Booth calls “scripted culture.” Effect is risky business, and in the voice of language lies a precarious propensity, a summons if you will, to transform. It is an utterance that at times sounds far too willful to those who prefer no break from routine. Like a rainbow, the aesthetic imagination’s existence is only visionary, seen only in representation, counting on human attention and action to give meaning to it. By its nature, the imaginative power of words stop short of the creative act of application (*“To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them, to gather the love out of their hearts...”*). In and of themselves, they have only the potential for agency and remain a passive form of literacy, a static reality until the rhetoric of their poetics is activated (*“...To take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you...”*). The true power of language lies in something outside of its form (*“...To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.” WW*), and while the study of it may open doors, none are required to walk through them .

To carry this out means, of course, a certain naivete’ that acknowledges that there is much to consider in language that is unfamiliar and possibly disturbing. It means extending the boundaries of “known” realities. Language has the capacity to unveil new experiences and to unite the unrelated. It invites and evokes a “playful” rather than “working” relationship with the world, stirring the emotions, interests, and senses. It allows for creative choices rather than stale habits. “All we can do,” says Maxine Greene, “is cultivate multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues in a world where nothing stays the same.” For many teachers, simply revealing that the world of words operate at different levels of meaning is sufficient evidence that they have “done their job.”

Students wanting more must seek it on their own. On the other hand, there are those teachers who carry a very strong sense of conventional standard into this arena, insisting on strict adherence to preconceived acceptable interpretations of text, relying only on imposed direction, and limiting with this approach who may have access.

By narrowing the possibilities of meaning to include only that which has already been determined, a particular appreciation of language is maintained, a habitualizing of experiences and associations that controls not only who gains, but what is gained. An obvious example of this is the teacher who insists on a “correct” reading of a poem or story, who is convinced one must learn to write within a prescribed manner in order to be taken seriously, who believes that a settled upon canon is the only literature of sustained merit. Teachers can be thrown into muddied waters by these beliefs, causing either panic, intense frustration, or eventual abandonment of their own values and insights. This approach to the discipline may be seen as most feasible and “realistic” because it has such obvious and convincing value; students are learning something measurable. But its danger lies in that creativity becomes viewed as something passive and set rather than something active and changeable; it stifles the very thing it represents as liberating.

A teacher and/or curriculum locked into a metered and measured way of looking at learning will not allow for the individual insights that spur students on creatively. Definition and prescription are the operating factors, not ambiguity and opportunity. Interpretation is restrained, not indefinite. What this takes away from the wholeness of the learning experience is a consideration of a break from the traditional to a newly evolved fusing of the unexpected to the known. In an ironic turn of events, this standardized approach to language extinguishes instead of fans the fires of student interest. The true irony is that those who believe in this means of learning complain about students not being creative, deep enough thinkers; yet, they force them down these narrow, bigoted streets of their own making and choosing. In fear of students not knowing, limits are imposed to what they can know. As Plato lashed out at the poets of his days in suspicion that the “wrong” good might be actualized, we hold our students, lest they challenge what we know, hostage to the mind “less” habits of traditional teaching and learning. And while they tumble helplessly through a space that provides little awareness of who they are and what possibilities exist in their world, we blame them for the fall and shamelessly walk away.

I told a group of people not too long ago that I had become an English teacher because I could not be a gypsy, and though my comment was in part jest, in retrospect I see some

underlying truths to it. I recognize that it is the sharing of language that has freed me to my creative self. It forces me to explore and actively consider possibilities. In regular exchange and engagement with students as well as in my aloneness with the muses of language, I learn about the fragilities and strengths of my own character. I learn that what others think and how I interact with their thinking brings great bearing on the community we build together. This understanding has become a touchstone of my personal as well as my professional life. My own teaching experience has always been an intense and affirming love affair between my students and me, one held together with the tremendous promise and possibility of words. And as is the case in all great loves, there is enormous risk in the trusting of the heart and the baring of the soul, yet through that risk are we able as both teacher and student to once again value and believe in the goodness of ourselves and our dreams.

In Rodin Rilke makes reference to something he calls “the grace of great things.” It is this “grace,” this silence within that speaks louder about the intensities and insurances of life than any words ever could, that Rodin, the youth of the story, seeks to discover, must learn to hear. I cannot help but believe it is this very same “grace” that also calls most of us to teach. Teachers who come to know themselves in the inspirations of education know too that teaching, when opened to the breadth and depth of its innate greatness, can be imagined by the same scope of qualities which are used to appreciate the poetic epiphanies that spring from the aesthetic heart. The tendency toward compression of meaning, the message inherent in each small word or movement, the joining of sound and sense and image to create a composition of feeling and thought that extends far beyond the minimal nature of form are all imperative devices of art which communicate something far greater than what a surface interpretation portends. These teachers also understand that in order to pose for their students, as well as for themselves, new ways of conceiving of the world and sundry ways of enriching it, they must appreciate the unique make-up of the individual and how the self is presented as much as they appreciate the sometimes unfamiliar ideas presented in a work of art. They must be able not only to consider different perspectives, but also to allow for what is germinated by them. Most importantly, they must be willing to plunge deep to unpack the multitude of meanings that can come to life only when touched with understanding.

As a teacher of language, I perceive that the links between my discipline and life experience are what liberate both my students and me from the tradition of habit and knowledge

fixed. Though the words we study and learn to use in creation of new meaning are indeed mindful icons of our lives, they are not the body and soul of it, rather are they the confluent supporters. “No one will get at my verses who insists on viewing them as literary performances,” said Whitman. And performances, we recognize, they are not. Instead they are the passions of a beating heart discovered not through the sterile existence of mere thought, but through the bodily experiencing of great joy and great sorrow, through the brightest and the darkest moments of a spirit that is never still. The language is a part of our everyday presence in the world. It is testimony to the profound substances of what it means to be alive. It is the construct which, if properly endorsed, encourages the best in us by nurturing the creation of new meaning instead of grooming the habits of dominant thought.

We sometimes come to things in our life through dramatic awakenings; at other times wisdom dawns slow but intensely clear. And then there are those moments when the things we have always sensed in the heart of us but have never quite been able to draw to the surface ascend simple and plain. Amazed at our own blindness, we wonder how we labored so long to unearth a gem that all the while lay dazzling at our feet. Such has been the case in the evolution to date of my life as an educator. Captured so often by the responsive duty of my calling, I have many times failed to be receptive to the magnitude of the underlying “grace” of it. This is especially true within the confines of my discipline. As an academic I have been taught mostly to come to an understanding of things by the meaning inherent in their intellectual worth. To articulate this meaning has always been the business of words and logic, discipline and study. In keeping with that, as a student of language, I frequently have asked my own students to give their attention to the beauty of words, to the form they take and the lessons they depict. I have asked them to talk more about those words than to listen to what they say. In doing so, I have allowed much less attention for the passions words can stir, for the inner space they can reach which is imperative to transforming the outer self, for the risk and courage it takes to know the wholeness of a thing and not just its parts, the wholenesses that bring about change and agency.

The irony in this is that as a person what I have truly felt about my classroom life has always existed far outside the hallowed vestibules of knowledge. My deepest regard for the vocation I have chosen has ripened always as does a tender bud, rare and splendid and bursting with no desire other than to share freely of the unexpected insistences of things. To merge this sense of private self with the public image of teacher has been one of my, and I suspect many

others, greatest challenges. But I have constantly forced myself to rise to that challenge for I know that to do any less is to invite the fragmentation in our lives that I am so strongly convinced undermines every chance of an honest and healthy and progressive larger community. To do any less is to cunningly deceive myself and others into believing that safety lies in being frozen in dispassionate experience rather than growing deeper through the unavoidable vulnerability of experiencing. To do any less is to sentence my students and myself to a life that may by design only occasionally have to struggle with the outmost reaches of that which is unpleasant and wrought with great pain, but which too then knows little about the unveiled joys found in the risk of possibility and the creative intimacy of imagination.

**floundering with grace**

\*

“If you are squeamish, don’t prod the beach rubble.”

- - - Sappho

We live in a society where fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce. Experts estimate that of the fifty percent of those marriages who stay together, another fifty percent are unhappy and are committed to staying for all the wrong reasons. That leaves only an approximate twenty five percent of our “traditional” family population living personal lives that actively engage them in the sometimes difficult give and take dynamics required in the unfolding of loving and supportive relationships. We know even less about the personal relations of the large number of “non-traditional” families, but have no reason to assume they are much different. I bring this seemingly irrelevant issue up because I believe it has direct bearing on the facts of our lives as teachers in a number of ways. Not only are the children we teach struggling with the ramifications of such situations, but so are their parents, and so are many teachers themselves who are also a part of this phenomenon. Such overwhelming testimony to our inability, for whatever reasons, to commit to, nurture, and grow with each other in enriching, meaningful ways should tell us much about the personal qualities of life to which we are or are not tending.

Schools cannot exempt themselves from the responsibility of opening up for students the road which helps lead to a life of inner awareness, relational harmony, and progressive community action. That life is not found in the outward objectification of “other” and fact but in the delicate connections that move forward and back from the heart to the world beyond. As teachers we cannot go about the business of schooling minds while ignoring the education of the fragile nature of human bodies and souls. To do so is to perpetuate a society of people who know much about process and product and little about acceptance and fulfillment, who recognize readily the failings of others while falling constantly short in their own potential, who live protected by conscience while understanding nothing about consciousness. To do so is to initiate students to all that exists outside of themselves with no regard for the opportunities which come only through a completeness circulated from within.

This is not to say that the sweep of a teacher’s life is one of false hope or perpetual joy; indeed, we know it is more full of shadow and sorrow than most dare reveal. A teacher’s moments come usually in quiet celebrations and playful deeds of spontaneity; rarely are they experienced as crashing waves of accomplishment or in huge doses of overwhelming delight. But more important to recognize is that the pleasure and worth in what a teacher does come not much at all from the actual imparting of fact and figure. It flourishes instead from the shared wealth of lives that connect and reverberate each to the other, that together call wisdom to the forefront

and, despite the tension, struggle with uncertainty, that listen to the voices within while thinking mind “fully” about the voices without, that find joy in the slightest progress of the individual and fresh hope in the discoveries of the group. The teacher, regardless of what the conventional mind-set would have us believe, does not live in a world composed merely of industry and project. The organic nature of the classroom does not allow for anything that fixed. To envision it as such is to relegate it to the doldrums of authoritative habit and the passive interpretative codes of historicized “truths.” Mind “full” teachers see beyond these tiresome endings. Like the legendary phoenix, they soar strong, high into the sky, sure of nothing but the boundless landscape and the sound of rushing air whispering infinite in hope, in new beginnings.

\* \* \*

**What if** I had anticipated from the first day of entering the classroom that good teaching is just as much about the search for wisdom as it is the search for knowledge? Would I have seen more of the promise that my students’ senses offered, imposed less my own take on life (and, consequently, the literature), and taken heart more in small moments of insight rather than constantly feeling the need to be proved by the magnitude of someone’s understanding? I visualize now what it would have meant to wait in patient silence for the ordinariness of things to reveal themselves. “Here,” I might say, “take this simple line from a quiet poem and make it your own. Give it wings. Now, climb upon its back and go graceful through your life with it.” (*Remember that you are this universe and this universe is you.* --- Joy Harjo) Would something have changed

**had I known** to give my students more license to a song that would amplify their own voice rather than will them pattern the one meant only to ventriloquate mine? The sounds of the deepest tunes of life rise steady from our own symphony of experience if allowed generous supplies of air and the practiced, prodded strength required to push them free. The strains may sound nothing like my own, but, if thoughtfully considered, a beauty is discovered not in notes transposed, but in pitch and tone transformed. To arrange and compose is not the living thing; it is in the peal of the music that the muse is whistled up and crooned to its birth.

*“You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books, You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.” WW*

**What if** I had been told, as a new teacher, to feel safe in setting aside my own fears of failure and being thought not good enough in order that I could attend more clearly to the threat my students are forced to feel of their own perceived inadequacies? With that knot loosened from around my neck, would I have been more generous with the weak, more gentle with the strong? Not so always worried that my own sun burn bright, I may have noticed more readily how I often managed to eclipse the faint shine of my more apprehensive students, how I bullied back the brawn of the most robust. I might have reached my hand more easily forward and bid the unsure come stand firm with me in the face of the wind, the hardy to rest peaceful in the softness of the spring grass, to “sit in reverie,” as begs Longfellow, “and watch the changing color of the waves that break upon the idle seashore of the mind.”

Would something have changed

**had I known** better how to nourish my students with the sweetened wine of hope rather than the bitter bread of fear? Revelations are made through faith in self, not in dread or worry of that which isn't always clear. Lives are illuminated by acts and words that encourage imaginative risk; they are rendered dull and stale by pedestrian models of vain ego groomed in the shadow of an imposed wariness and restraint. Had I looked less to students for their approval of my ideas and ideals and concerned myself more with fostering their independence of thought, we may have built a strength of community able to survive the tests of the world outside the classroom doors. The safety net of prescribed learning is illusory. When least expected, we slip through its holes to find ourselves reeling stunned and confused through empty space. Only with the then quickened beat of our heart do we begin to understand the dangerous allure of complacent truths and know the inevitability of unavoidable collisions with the existence of more uncertain things.

*“I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest is deathless with me, What I do and say the same waits for them, Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them.” WW*

**What if** I had come to the work of teaching knowing how to look for the lesson in the experience rather than thinking it my goal always to mold the experience to fit the lesson? Certainly I would have much more clearly understood the differences between student uneasiness and what I often perceived as their disinterest. I may have been less intent on claiming the discourse for my own and more open to the signifying meanings

of student culture and craft. I might have seen better the spark of their lives rather than what I often assumed to be the ruins of it. “When we get out of the glass bottles of our ego,” says Lawrence, “and when we escape like squirrels turning in the cages of our personality and get into the forests again, we shall shiver with cold and fright but things will happen to us so that we don’t know ourselves. Cool, unlying life will rush in, and passion will make our bodies taut with power, we shall stamp our feet with new power and old things will fall down, we shall laugh, and institutions will curl up like burnt paper.” My power was, I thought, in my ability to control.

Would something have changed

**had I known** that the real power lies in my ability to connect? To encourage students to listen to the wonder of their lives instead of the anxiety of it is how dreams and desires find a way to unfold. To meaningfully tie the study of a discipline to the thread of personal universe is how the caged doors of knowledge fall open leaving us free to soar as kindred adventurers into the world of vast sky. Had I urged students more in their need to dig deep from within instead of advocating so loudly for the things which seemed approachable only from without, I may have fostered a genuine awareness of the delicate balance of mind and body and spirit. I might have been more instrumental in helping them value the profound delights of their alone space, not in rejection of the virtues of community but as the true source of the enrichment of it. Like the quiet voice that rises soft from the great depth of a meaningful story or poem, so too might the sounds of my students lives have swelled up and been carried untried, yet sure as the fledgling taking wing.

*“These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, If they are not yours as much as mine, they are nothing, or next to nothing, If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing, If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.” WW*

**What if** I had pushed my students to explore more the possibilities than to seek just after the truths? Would they have then been better able to hear not only their own stories but the stories of others as revealed in the bigger stories of our literature? Did I, in my desire to expand my students’ worlds, actually force them smaller by indicating that there were certain verities to which they should aim to ascribe? By narrowing sometimes the potential for things, I closed off too the paradoxes inherent in them. Without the

paradox, things remain small and contained, smug and indifferent. (*"We are like butterflies who flutter for a day and think it is forever."* ---Carl Sagan) The only way to maintain a full awareness of self and the world is to believe in the always shifting nature of it. A thing thought bound today is tomorrow unleashed; that which is silent, makes the most noise; great joy is felt only through great sorrow. Would something have changed

**had I known** enough to believe in my students as much as I believed in what I thought I had learned in school? Had I thought less about saying something useful and more about saying something probing, my students may well have taken up the challenge in fresh and consequential ways. Had I allowed more readily for the imagination necessary for thoughtful action, I may have witnessed a stretch in student comprehension that far exceeded the limiting forces of my expectations. I might have seen students move from the tired safety of what is to a compassionate belief in what could be. By inviting students into the open space of the ever emerging, their education with me may have been more of a momentous adventure and less of a monotonous task.

*"Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams, Now I wash the gum from your eyes, You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life. Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore, Now I will you to be a bold swimmer, To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair."* WW

**What if I had known?**

**Would a student's life be different?**

**Would my own?**

**going forth daily**

\*

“I am going to seek a great Perhaps.”

- - - Rabelais

**Journal Entry: Every day that a story of sorrow unfolds for a teacher, so too does joy advance in some small way, a little piece of joy that looms larger for teachers than most can begin to imagine. That must be how the kindergarten teacher (Mrs. Lowe) of my five year old niece, Ausha, felt very recently. Ausha called me on the phone last night full of giggling laughter and wondrous awe. She has learned how to read. Oblivious to everything but the words dancing in story on a page, she was quick to inform me that the book she was about to share had very few pictures, and the ones it did have could not tell the story she was about to impart. For at least ten pages Ausha read aloud about Kevin and his discovery of a red wagon that promised great adventure, about the inquisitive Amy who would lead Kevin to some very merry events. When she finished, she wanted to make certain I had understood the story. Self-assured and careful in a voice that could not contain the excitement she felt, Ausha proudly told me that the next thing on her agenda was to learn to write so that she could answer my letters which she would now be able to read. When she finished explaining herself to me, we were both laughing with glee about her feat. She didn't know it, but I was so excited for her, I cried. It was a moment for which teachers are willing to give their all. Ms. Lowe was, I am certain, as excited as I for Ausha's accomplishment.**

*"The boy I love, the same becomes a man not  
through derived power, but in his own right." - - - WW*

I've been looking back over some letters I wrote during a course I took in adolescent literature, a course requiring weekly correspondence with two local high school students through a literature study of their own about reading and writing. Our communications are as fellow students; they don't know that I have been an English teacher. Something in me doesn't offer that information and neither one of my new found friends ever asks. I end up liking it that way. Our exploration of the texts seems so much more natural, integrated with our lives. Their insights are not blurred by my professional lens, and my understanding of how they appreciate literature is intuitively deepened by a non-evaluative acceptance of what they offer up to me. For months we write back and forth about many things, and I relish again the intrigue and greatness of how students unfold as individuals through the medium of language, the consideration of community, and a greater understanding of self.

September 17, 1996

Dear Joshua,

I've been reading some pretty good stuff here lately. Have you ever heard of The Giver? First of all I love the IDEA of the story. It really pulled me right in. Secondly, the writing itself is so good; you know, lines like "He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love." That kind of writing really makes me THINK about what the character is feeling. I kind of become the character for the moment. I have empathy for him. I mean, I can IMAGINE the emptiness of a life devoid of strong feelings, beauty and pleasantries, and love. I think that writing that can do this to a reader is one quality that for me really separates the good writers from the bad. What about you Joshua? How do you decide if a writer is good or just mediocre? What does s/he have to do to you to make you declare that something is a good story? I know that this is something different for everyone, but I'm curious as to what it is for you.

Your friend,

Elaine

P.S. Did I tell you that when I have time I paint with acrylics?

September 19, 1996

Dear Elaine,

I got your letter today. I read that you paint with acrylics. My uncle paints with acrylics too. My favorite thing is drawing with pencil. I am very good at it. Tell me about your school. I would like to hear from you how you like it. I'm thinking about attending there. By the way, good writing makes me want to do something great.

Sincerely,

Joshua Marks

**"Good writing makes me want to do something great."**

September 23, 1996

Dear Joshua,  
I wish I had said that.  
Elaine

September 27, 1996

Dear Elaine,  
Well, don't feel too bad, I think that the way you write is good like it is.  
Sincerely,  
Joshua

P.S. About The Giver, no offense, but I like to read books that tell you things flat out, just like that.

I learn so much about Joshua in our correspondence. He is introspective and sociable, polite and complimentary. Blessed with a healthy sense of self that shines through his writing, he draws, plays piano as well as basketball, likes heavy metal Christian music, and is as open to the possibilities that exist in the world as he is to those which exist within himself. He is a thinker. He believes we are all here to “accomplish our purpose,” and has a strong sense of principle, ethics, and values:

Dear Elaine,

I just got done with a great story called “The Gospel According to Krenzwinkle.” It was about tennis and how two people can be friends even with different religions. I really liked the story, because it touched on more than just one aspect of life. I myself am a Christian, and the Bible makes a lot of sense to me. I really liked Andrew and Jennifer because Andrew loved Jennifer no matter what, and Jenny loved Andrew no matter what. I think I am like Andrew. We are both open to hear what others say, even though we believe something else. Even though I fear that Jenny's religion might lead her to something more bizarre or dangerous, I'd like to know what makes her and her family believe this. The writer did a great job on this story.

Sincerely,  
Joshua

Family is important to Joshua. Over and over in the stories of others, he sees his father, his mother, his brother. Most importantly, he sees himself. Insightful in an exceedingly mature and expressive way, Joshua believes in fairness and empathy, understands loss and friendship, and knows it is important to question fearlessly and often. He is not afraid to make judgments, but is not too harsh in his calling. He likes writing that is clear and concrete, stories that are active and “about life.” He knows that writers have their own styles (why does Paulsen write so many “one word sentences?”) and likes a plot that, as we’ve established, just “tells you things flat out, just like that.” Joshua is the son of a preacher. He has lived in Florida and England. He didn’t make his high-school’s basketball team, but in the end decided that the groups at the recreation center could be just as good and probably more fun. He likes to read and write and share and communicate. He gets angry at what he perceives as injustices, but is never self-righteous in his estimations. Joshua is someone’s wonderful son from whom I have learned much. He has refreshed me in my faith in and knowledge of young people, and has reminded me of how special adolescents indeed are. I carry him with me.

Which brings me to Jess. Jess, whose picture on my refrigerator is a reminder of the wonderful edge there is in innocence. Unabashed, unashamed, and unpretentious, Jess likes movies, but not necessarily better than books. In his opinion, “Home Alone” was preferable in print form. Jess is taken with the beaches of South Carolina every bit as much as he is with personalized license plates. He likes to fix things (*Dear Elaine, Sorry to hear about your lawn mower. YES, you can flood it if the spark plug is bad. You might need to check it. If it is bad, you might need to go to Wal-Mart and buy one. If it is not the spark plug, did you leave the lawn mower on choke to long? Or could water have gotten in the gas? Sincerely, Jess*), collect things, and be a part of things. A biker, a school team wrestler (weight class 152), a weight lifter, a runner, and a swimmer, Jess is an active and creative young man. He draws (*Dear Elaine, No, I have never thought about drawing pictures about books, but that is a good ideal. Here is the “Taz” picture I forgot to send you. And here is a picture I just drue. I don’t know what to call it, so I’ll let you pick a name for it. Sincerely, Jess*), makes model cars, and likes the sound of words. He finds the character names of Sparrow Hawk, Sparkweed, and Jaspar “cool” and the idea of wizards and potions “great.” Jess is concerned, highly complimentary, and interested in life. He likes to read and he likes to talk about what he reads. He is open to suggestions, can place

himself in someone else's shoes, and is generous beyond words. He is also a Romeo (*P.S. Hey, did I tell you Elaine is a lovely name?*) and most likely a romantic (*Hey, I was just thinking of you and asking myself, hum, does Elaine have a boyfriend? Nothing personal. I just hope you have someone to help you out on stuff.*). He's offered to send his picture to anyone who wants it. He has a wonderful sense of humor and prides himself on not being a braggart. He is helpful and friendly and trusting, and I am the only person to whom he has confided his middle name (*Do you know that you are the only person that I told my middle name [Christopher] to?*). He agrees with me when I remark that "people sure are funny," and he wants me to know that he is ready to be my friend forever. Jess can't spell, his sentence structure is often a mess, he prints his letters, and he never can quite get the punctuation right. But he has a voice of possibility that stands every bit as strong as my own. He values communication and understands the importance of dialogue. He is a kindred spirit in this world with as much to give as anyone. He is special, and when I glance at his picture, I know exactly why I miss him. Like Joshua, he has given me, through the medium of simple language, the gift of his friendship, no holds barred. I am thankful I have learned how to hear the offer. If there is any more meaningful lesson of education, I don't know it.

In our exchanges with others, we often get from the experience what we put into it. Sometimes. And then sometimes the returns are a thousand fold. I got lucky. What went out as a few dark words on a page came back as a personal challenge to rethink, reexamine, and rediscover the true joy of teaching, two ninth grade boys whose names I may someday forget, but whose lessons will remain with me a lifetime. Everyone should be so lucky.

From these two students and others like them I have learned that writing that elicits meaning only in the minds of those who are educated in the ways of language, that is technical without being personal, belies its own purpose of communication. It denies the transformative nature of what it means to be literate. Good writing should be accessible to the heart and mind of every person who has ever grieved or hoped or pondered, who has ever wondered or imagined or believed. It should accomplish its goal with clarity of vision and strength of feeling and thought. First and foremost, it should ring true, not to the prescriptive rulings of some scholarly book, but to the lives of those it touches.

Just as an artist must detect a particular sensitivity in the world, the soft flush of an ocean seashell, the deep rouge of a now late sky, so too must teachers of language recognize and

rejoice in the substance and sensation of their medium. They must know that words are the paint of a person's life splashed unprotected across the stretched canvas pages of a book, a notebook, a journal. Dialogue and text are but the brush strokes through which impression, interpretation, and integration are made visible. Like the most wistful watercolor or boldest oil, there is incredible muscle in the anatomy of language. A subtle stance, an effortless flex and the whole tension of an underlying strength is proclaimed. With ready movement, a world is revealed. Always alert, the mind "full" teacher heeds the contoured shapes of potential and acknowledges the broad spaces of possibility. With wakeful eye, she sees in the unfolding of a simple sentence the promise of that which might be and the telling passion of that which is.

**JOURNAL ENTRY: I heard today that Jack is retiring from teaching. He has given his whole life to it. Though he jokingly talked about days on the golf course, he also said he doesn't know what to think about a day without students. They are his lifeblood. I tried to be jovial with him, suggesting that he won't miss them for long, that looking at all of that bad writing will certainly not be missed, and that, finally, he may have some time for his own dust-covered projects. It didn't help much; I could tell a piece of him will always stay behind. Jack's passion has always been his students. It is not his own work that drives him, though his acclaim is international in his field; it is not the stimulation of his colleagues and environment that gets him out of bed everyday, though he is well-respected and looked up to; it is not even his love of language and literature that he attempts to impart to his students which motivates him. No, what moves Jack in his work is the meaning he shares and creates with his students; cursing them aloud, crying with them aloud, laughing with them aloud have been his life. Reading a passage of poetry over and over again until the raw emotion of it is new life breathed into everyone is Jack's labor of love. Pushing for ideas and ideals and recognizing the worst right up next to the best has been his pursuit. Jack has given his students what no book, or theory, or philosophy, or school of thought, or rule, or principle, or standard could have ever provided. He has opened his heart and given freely and generously of everything that therein lies. He has made the private public. He has taken risks and covered dangerous ground. He has cared and dreamed and expected as much for his students as he has for himself. If a camera could capture the picture, the lines where Jack ends and his students begin would be indistinguishable. For he has learned well the lesson that Whitman acclaims: "I and mine**

**do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes. We convince by our presence.” In his honor, I wrote this poem.**

“The Gathering”  
(for Jack)

And the teacher,  
mind “full” for a moment  
of the past,  
beheld the years  
as though  
a munificent garden.  
Fertile fields  
they were,  
irrigated by the fires  
of introspection;  
fruitful forests  
watered by the flames  
of wisdom.  
Gingerly, prudently  
had he  
tended the confetti of  
seeds scattered  
dryly  
at his door.  
Weeding ignorance  
from the  
clay of knowledge,  
mulching heart into  
the dust of fear,  
he tilled and raked  
and dressed  
the waiting soil  
until  
sweat sparkled  
on his brow  
until  
charmed songs  
hummed from his lips,  
until  
his vision of wild splendor  
swelled into  
a steady, spirited rain  
showering  
into bloom  
poets, savants,  
diviners.

The butterfly, the ladybug,  
the warbler  
wing close,  
cheered by a spark  
of expectation  
kindled in the sun,  
beckoned by an essence  
of faith  
fragrant in the wind.  
And as he lifts  
his humble head  
and breathes deeply  
of the sweet-scented air  
(ripened seeds  
now heady,  
evergreen bouquets  
in beds  
overflowing),  
the teacher  
rejoices  
in the abundance of  
his harvest,  
revels  
in the reward of his labor,  
this bounty  
of a good  
and  
noble  
life.  
\*

*Only with wakeful eye are we able to see the promise of that which might be and the telling passion of that which is. In quiet recognition of all there is yet to come, I move boldly, indivisibly forward. With each step is the whole of the world revealed.*

Every day must I again learn to listen.  
Every day must I think about what I do.

\*

**“There was a child went forth every day, And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became, And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day, Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.” - - - WW**

*Notes*

*Part I*  
*taking risks*

Page

- 4 Friedrich Nietzsche talks extensively about the notion of risk and intensity in the context of self in society. Though I have taken a different approach in my own discussion of the importance of these concepts, I know I have been influenced by Nietzsche's call to have readers think about the role of these two ideas as regards the individual's responsibility in the creation of a "greater good." See especially his work "Twilight of the Idols," in The Portable Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954).
- 4 Maxine Greene devotes an entire chapter to discussion of "wide-awakeness" in her book Landscapes of Learning (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), pp.42-52. She is especially interested in how Thoreau's thoughts on this idea are carried into contemporary society.
- 5 Unless otherwise noted, all of the Whitman quotes which follow in the text of this discussion are from: Whitman, Walt. (1959). Complete poetry and selected prose, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- 6 Please see Michelle Fine's excellent discussion of the evolving nature of self-reflexivity in Disruptive voices: The possibilities of feminist research (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 225. It is important that I add at this point how much I have been influenced in my work by the feminist perspectives of research and analysis. Aside from Michelle Fine, I also attribute much of how I interpret the discourses of my work with students to feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway (see especially: Haraway, D. (1991). Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature. New York: Routledge.) and Gloria Anzaldua. Anzaldua's Borderlands (San Francisco: aunt lute books, 1987) has been influential in my experimenting with formatting and structure of design of this study.

*Part 2*  
*starting from silence*

Page

- 9 All of the “first-year teacher” quotes are from a research project designed for an ethnography course I took while pursuing my doctorate degree. I have changed the names of the participants, but the words are their responses to questions I asked about their impressions of teaching in general and the teaching of English in particular. I think it is important to note that were I to go back and ask the same questions of these now assumedly more “experienced” teachers, their answers might, in retrospect and action, be changed considerably.
- 10 I want to inform the reader that my personal life has been somewhat influenced by the Eastern traditions of Taoism. I believe this becomes especially clear in my thinking about the organic nature of teaching and the inherent wholenesses of it. For anyone wishing to further understand the poetic ideas of Taoism, I encourage them to read Chuang Tsu’s Inner Chapters, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Random House, 1974).
- 11 Unless otherwise noted, all of the Emerson quotes which follow in the text of this discussion are from: Emerson, Ralph. (1957). Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Stephen Whicher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- 14 For an extensive discussion of the learning concept of “received knowers and experts,” please see the very fine book by Blenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N. & Tarule, J. entitled Women’s ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind (New York: Basic Books, 1986). The writers’ ideas of how much of our established methods of teaching have been set up to discount a more feminist approach to learning are discussed at great length. Again, I have been greatly influenced by this work in my own ways of thinking about how students come to understandings about that which they study.
- 14 I am especially indebted in my work to John Dewey and his philosophic writings about teaching and learning. This particular quote comes from Human nature and conduct

(Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922/1988), p.47. Though I do not make specific mention in this paper of Dewey's popular theory of "the unified self and its acts" and his concept of "reflective deliberation," both have been instrumental in my thinking about a more mind "full" approach to education. I am certain other ideas of his subtly underpin various aspects of my thought.

- 15 Maxine Greene talks about the impact of "seeing schooling small" in her book Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995). She refers specifically to the fact that this kind of vision "is preoccupied with test scores, 'time on task,' management procedures, ethnic and racial percentages, and accountability measures, while it screens out the faces and gestures of individuals, of actual living persons" (11).
- 16 I should mention that all of the quotes and stories in this paper representing students come either from actual writings and/or dialogues of students I have had in the classroom. I have changed the names of all students in order to protect their privacy.
- 18 Kincaid, J. Annie John (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 4.
- 19 This discussion of the Dylan Thomas quote is a perfect example of how our discourses with others are evolutionary in our own thinking about the meaning of certain ideas, of how non-linear and blurred the lines are of where another's thoughts end and our own begin. It grew out of a conversation about students I had with Penny, one of my "first-year" teacher research participants. She had been discussing this line from Thomas with her students for some of the very reasons that I include it in this paper. Had it not been for my exchange with her, I would not have included it here at all, as I found this thinking of our conversation in the journal notes I was keeping while interviewing her for my ethnographic research project.
- 21 I think it important to note two things as concerns the "One Dozen Moments to No Strings Teaching." (1) I see, again, the influences of Taoism evident in some of what I am suggesting important for teachers to consider in the context of their classrooms. (2) "The fool" has a long history that certainly does not begin with me. Though I have not read it, I know that an excellent book exists by Enid Welsford entitled The Fool, His Social and

Literary History. Many readers will also note that the fool is the first card in the traditional deck of the Tarot cards and occupies a “Zero” rather than a numbered space, indicating a new beginning as opposed to an experienced state of things.

*Part 3*  
*opening movements*

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- 28 Included in the long line of educational psychologists, philosophers, and researchers who have recognized the holistic nature of teaching and what defines “literate” students would be Jerome Bruner, Robert Sternberg, Nell Noddings, Maxine Greene, Daniel Goleman, Eliot Eisner, Howard Gardner, and Paulo Freire. This list is by no means fully inclusive or very extensive. It is meant only to be representative.
- 34 Two books that have prompted me to think deeply about the important connections of the private and the public as they relate to teaching and learning have been Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), and Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger for Memory (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).
- 35 Kincaid, J. Annie John (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 85.
- 38 Though Dewey talks extensively about the relationship between learning and lived experience in much of his work, I believe that one of his most succinct and compelling arguments can be found in his Experience & education (New York: The Free Press, 1938/1997).
- 39 As cited within the text of this paper, these student quotes came from a research project I undertook with a fellow graduate student. Our discoveries about the way high school students perceive the “care” factor of their schools became the basis of a presentation we made for the Association of Moral Education.
- 39 Nehring is one of the few educational researchers to talk about the lack of student voice in educational reform. It is a critical point of consideration that students are rarely consulted in the overhaul of reform policies. For me, this speaks of the silencing of student voice on a very large scale. Please see Nehring, J. The schools we have, the schools we want (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), p. 129 for more on this important

topic.

- 40 In his book Successful intelligence (New York: Plume, 1997), p. 12, Robert Sternberg has a wonderful discussion about the narrowly defined ways of “schooled” intelligence. Those looking for more on emotional intellect will do well to stick to Daniel Goleman’s work; however, Sternberg makes a number of important points about the outreaches of “intellect” as prescribed in American school traditions.
- 41 Few books written by English teachers have impacted me as much as has Jane Tompkins’ A life in school: What the teacher learned (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), p. xvi. Tompkins’ honesty, sincerity, and evolved sense of self as teacher and not simply teacher of language has prompted me to make numerous considerations about the activity of teaching that I otherwise may not have made.

#### *Part 4*

#### *bonding body, mind and soul*

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- 46 For me, the main issue for educators of understanding the experiences of our bodies in the world is that even though objective thought can conceive of experiences other than our own, it cannot live through them and, therefore, cannot make ready judgments about the effect they have on others. I would recommend the following readings on this subject, as all three writers take a slightly different approach to somewhat the same end: Grumet, M. (1988). Bitter milk: Women and teaching. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press; Johnson, M. (1993). Moral Imagination: Implications of cognitive science for ethics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). Phenomenology of perception. Trans. C. Wilson. New York: Humanities Press.
- 47 Again, Mark Johnson in Moral Imagination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) has been very influential in my thinking about the metaphor of body and the importance of it in the course of our teaching lives.
- 49 Tompkins, J. A life in school: What the teacher learned. (Reading, MA:

- Addison-Wesley, 1996), p. xvi.
- 49 Shore, Ira. Empowering Education. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), p. 68.
- 52 Johnson, M. Moral Imagination: Implications of cognitive science for ethics. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 19.
- 52 I want to alert the reader to the fact that over the course of the years I feel certain I have read the discussions of many literary critics as concerns Huck’s struggle for his “soul.” Although I cannot call specifically to mind who these critics are and where I might have read them, I did not want my reader to think that I am the only one who has thought about the moral meaning of this particular passage. As much as has been written about Huck Finn, there is no doubt in my mind that this base has been covered a good number of times.
- 56 Coles, R. (1989). The call of stories: Teaching and the moral imagination. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- 59 Jackson, P. On the place of narrative in teaching. In H. McEwan & K. Egan (Eds.), Narrative in teaching, learning, and research. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), p. 9.
- 59 Nussbaum, M. (1986). The fragility of goodness. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Part 5*

*waltzing with the muses*

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- 63 Apple, M. Teachers and texts. (New York: Routledge, 1986), p. 47.
- 64 Noddings, N. The challenge to care in schools. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), p. 110.
- 65 Dewey, J. Experience & education. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1938/1997), p. 22.
- 71 Berlin, James. (1996). Rhetorics, poetics, and cultures. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.

- 72 Please see the excellent introduction by James Miller, Jr. to the already noted Whitman's Complete Poetry and Selected Prose. Quoting Whitman's own words, Miller indicates that the poet understood beyond a doubt that poetry could only live through the active engagement of experience and the senses (xi).
- 74 I call the reader's attention to the works of Jerome Bruner for detailed discussions about self, language, and community. Especially, see Bruner, J. (1990). Acts of meaning. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 75 Booth, W. (1988). The company we keep: An ethics of fiction. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 75 Greene, M. Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), p. 16.
- 77 Rilke, R. (1979). Rodin. Trans. R. Firmage. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith.

*Part 6*

*floundering with grace*

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- 86 My sister, Maureen, is actually the person who one day told me the startling fact that 50% of all marriages end in divorce. I asked her where she had heard that and she told me she had read it. I asked for the source and she handed me a book by John Gray which I recognized as being on the best seller list. Sure enough, she went right to the page where we also read that 50% of the marriages that stay together are unfulfilled. I truly had no idea the divorce rate was so high in our country. For more on this topic, see: Gray, J. Men are from mars, women are from venus. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), p. 14. The book is not as frivolous as the title might indicate.

*Part 7*  
*going forth daily*

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88 Though there were many more letters exchanged during the course of my relationship with Joshua and Jess, I picked only a few pieces that I hope have given the reader some insight to the meaning “full” ness that can be created between teacher and student in conversations about language. It is especially important to me that the two students I corresponded with came to their own understandings and importances of the literature through self-discovery and not through my “teacher” lens.

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