CONFESSIONS OF AN EX-COLLEGE FRESHMAN

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I flunked my first theme in college. My composition instructor had said to write on “your home town.” OK, fine, I could choose one of three — where I grew up till adolescence, where I went to high school, or where my parents currently resided, which I knew only in summertime. Today I naturally see in my lethal choice of number three a fine example of how composition begins with decisions about which raw material to use. But those were pre-prewriting days.

Below the grade of flat E the instructor declared, with terrible justice, “A mass of tourist-guide-propaganda cliches, FW [fine writing], and J [jargon]. Moreover, you really have no exact subject — your title gives you away [“My Home Town”]. Quite below college demands.” Here was I, not only an untested freshman fearful of losing a full scholarship by not attaining a B average, but I was half convinced anyway that I didn’t really belong at Harvard and had only got in by way of some back door carelessly left open. Furthermore, I figured to major in English!

Brittle grad school bachelor that he was, toiling away in one of the 20-odd sections of English A, my teacher really acted charitably. He knew I was on a trolley headed utterly the wrong way, toward endless suffering, and that only a powerful jolt right at the start would derail me so that I could make it in that course and even perhaps in college generally.

My first paragraph read:

Los Angeles, while not exactly the city of angels as its Spanish name proclaims, has within its environs a multitude of entertainments to please natives and tourists alike. Regardless of what his individual tastes may be, deep-sea fishing or listening to a fugue by Handel, there is probably always something which will satisfy his whim.

Over this you can see already a New Yorker type of rubric, Themes I Never Finished Reading. But it was a perfect thesis paragraph, for it stated exactly what kind of bullshit the reader was expected to wallow through afterwards. We toured the beaches of Santa Monica, the Hollywood Bowl, where “an open sky of stars lends enchantment to the symphonic works,” the nearby desert, where “the moonlight accentuates the unique charm of the quiet expanses,” and the downtown L.A. theater district. One topic-sentenced paragraph was on sports, one on food, one on night-clubbing, and so on. No chance of the reader getting lost here. No problems of transition or organization or coherence. The signposts were all there, and the sentences scanned grammatically. But it was atrocious writing. In fact, it wasn’t really writing; it was a paste-and-scissors job, only collaged inside my head instead of with physical clippings and splicings. My teacher rejected it out of hand because it was so borrowed and so unreal that he had no way of assessing it as composition, nothing to come to grips with. It was ghost writing of an unconscious sort, very much like the great majority of papers English teachers waste time marking up.

I wrote that theme as I had written stuff all through school. An all-A student in all subjects through high school, I always did what teachers wanted. The teaching of writing, and of English generally, remains now about the same as then, in the ‘40s, some exceptions having occurred by dint of strenuous innovation and many of those having been wiped out by the regressive movement that has prompted publishers to dust off and re-issue the English textbooks of that time. Mostly, my classmates and I were asked to write about what we had read to make sure we had done the reading and to see if we had got the point. The teaching of writing in this country has for so long been harnessed to the testing of reading that few teachers I meet even today can grasp the enormity of this bias and the consequent mischief and fraudulence.

Whenever I was asked to write about something outside of books, the subject was so remote from me, such as national affairs, that I could know it mostly only second-hand and hence could hardly do anything but paraphrase the information and arguments that I got from newspapers, radio, and grown-up talk. But that’s the point. My teachers really just wanted familiar, adult-sounding prose. This they equated with mature writing. They wanted phrasing they recognized, views they had heard aired around them, because this meant their students were joining the adult world. Isn’t that the whole point of school? They loved and encouraged my five-dollar words, straight out of Readers Digest vocabulary quizzes, because big words show learning and correlate with intelligence. They were nice people who didn’t know much about composition as such at all. They too had never written anything besides the usual school and college testing stuff — book reports, term papers, and essay exams — and so they had never learned how to shape material not pre-digested for them by others. Anyway, a glittering travelog on a glossy town seemed OK to me.

After that first failure I got the point quickly. (No doubt I was relieved too to know that the institution I was going to spend the next four years at wasn’t going to deal in that kind of bullshit.) My instructor advised me to do the assignment over — and knock it off this time. I did and got an A. Great, a happy ending, but what was the difference? Well, it was all the difference in the world, and yet I was pretty much the same person I had been the week before. I didn’t know any more about organization or
sentence structure, I didn’t have a better vocabulary, and I hadn’t acquired any new “writing skills.” Nor was I a more logical thinker.

For my second chance I chose to tell about “My Boyhood in Jackson,” a significant decision because that town really meant something to me. I told how my friends and I played out our adventure fantasies against the Mississippi background as Twain’s characters had done in Missouri. In the dense foliage along the Pearl River we pretended to be buccaneers, explorers, and Stanley looking for Livingston. Or:

I was a scientist — the sole survivor of an expedition sent up the Amazon on an important quest. After I staggered from the jungle into the clearing, my feverish body fell lifeless before those waiting for me. In my outstretched hand lay a small vial containing the juice of a rare plant — the cure for cancer. I told how we dug niches for thrones in the steep white clay banks of the railroad cut, using tie spikes for tools, and lit discarded flares to stake out our thrones with. Then the train roared through the cut.

The surging power of the locomotive was mine, for I felt it pass through me as the earth rumbled under the passing train. Besides, the engineer gave it to me by the friendly waving of his hand.

I concluded unpretentiously that although I might well have play-acted some of the same things had I lived somewhere else, the fact is that “I played and grew in Jackson, and that is what endears it to me.”

In a way I was being myself in the first theme too: the glamor of Los Angeles and the emptiness masquerading as impersonality were true for me to the degree that I was attracted to the one and had learned to put on the other. So the difference between the themes was really in the level of the self. I just suddenly changed my whole orientation toward writing. My teacher had said, in effect, “No one wants to read what he knows already or could come out with himself. We read for something new. Write what only you know, or what you have put together for yourself. Make something, don’t just take something.” I had no problem with that. We all live on all planes of shallowness and depth all the time and so can shift planes at any moment if someone or somethings sets us straight. I thought, “Oh, I see. That’s how it is. Writing isn’t what I’ve been led to believe. It’s saying what you really think and feel or what you really want to put over.” But of course I had known that before from reading great writers and from trying to write extracurricular stories. It was curricular writing I had a false notion of. And this dissociation of writing from reality afflicts most students in this country.

The main reasons for this are two. Traditional schooling has shown no respect for writing, exploiting composition instruction as a way to service its testing system and as a way to spawn the pencil-pushers required to stock all those clerical jobs in industry and government, where you do not want thinkers. You just want people who have passed minimal standards — can read just well enough to follow directions and write just well enough to take dictation. But I’m not talking about some conspiracy by them. All of us share through our culture and bear within us a deader, less evolved aspect of being that calcifies because it is still mineral or vegetates because it is still plant-like or preys because it is still animal, all while the human aspect of the self works toward its partly divined divinity. This sludgier element of individuals settles out in society as sedimentary attitudes and institutions that mire down efforts to better ourselves.

The other reason for the shallow tradition that has neutered the teaching of writing is that teachers themselves have practiced writing so little that they fall back on hopelessly irrelevant procedures. Many simply don’t know how real writing takes place. It is patent to anyone who has worked much with teachers that the less practice they have had, the more they rationalize book reports, formal grammatical analysis, paragraph formulas, sentence exercises, vocabulary quizzes, and a prescriptive/prospective methodology. “You have to teach them,” they say, never having learned how themselves. Compelled once to coach a sport I had never played, lacrosse, I too gravitated toward a simplistic rules-results approach that was an effort to distill experience I had never had.

The National Writing Project has succeeded and gained support precisely because it makes teachers practitioners instead of mere preachers. When I am teaching teachers to write in summer institutes, I see the same thing happen to them that happened to me with that first freshman theme. They discover that if they write from the heart they not only have something to say, something that interests others, but that they can better order their thoughts and can actualize their latent talent. It is more than ordinarily moving to see teachers discover how writing really occurs, often after many years of frustrating themselves and their students. Maybe I identify with late bloomers, but I’m especially touched by the delicate transition from recalcitrance to confidence that takes place as they find out just how well they and their partners can, after all, write.

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