Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 21
Issue 1 *Writing Matters*

Article 3

1-1-2005

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Recommended Citation
Vetne, Leah C. (2005) "The Text of Life," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1208

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The Text of Life

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Each time I write, in the instant before my fingers strike the keys, I wonder where the words will come from. I say "the" rather than "my" words because I often feel detached from them, as if they're not entirely mine, or as if I'm somehow borrowing them. It's as if I pluck them, one by one or in bunches, from some great, cavernous reserve into which I can never get a clear, definable view. Hindsight, though, is never 20/20, and I think that's a marvelous thing. It frees us to wonder what could, would, should result from our experiences and how they fit together to make us, us.

Teaching ourselves and our students to do this—to connect disjunctive experience, to read our own stories—is as important as textbooks, exercises, and exams. As teachers, it is of course important that we teach our students to read and read critically, but of equal or more importance is that we teach them to read themselves, discover and interpret experience, invent, connect, and mature. Learning to harness the power and freedom of interpretation is invaluable in enabling ourselves to find our own words, and in teaching our students to do the same. Our lives are rich texts with plentiful reserves, but in order to tap them we must first learn to read.

*

I don't remember my mother or father telling me stories when I was a child. I know they did, but those memories elude me now. My journey with words, as I remember it, began perched atop my grandfather's knees.

Short knees I used to call them. Grandpa was a heavy man, so his lap wasn't the most spacious place to sit. Still, it was my favorite seat in my grandparents' farmhouse. Planted squarely in his old, worn, and tattered La-Z-Boy recliner, Grandpa wasn't the portrait of cleanliness. I most often found him dressed in a thin, stained undershirt and old, loose workpants hanging from the clips of his suspenders far above his waist and over his enormously round belly; the dry, grayish skin of his ankles exposed beneath his hems and his feet jammed into a pair of shabby leather slippers. He smelled like an old man—that mustiness of hair and flesh that had not been washed for days. Most children would have wrinkled their noses at the sight and smell of him. But despite his appearance, and beyond his generally unpleasant disposition toward the rest of humanity, he was an angel to me. And I'm sure it didn't hurt that I was his undeniable favorite.

When I'd visit, I always found him in his La-Z-Boy. A TV table sat next to his chair by the front door; his weight deterred him from rising to greet visitors and making the short walk to the dinner table. When I'd swing open the front door, he greeted me with, *"It's Lee-hi-loo from Alamagoo!"* and a hearty laugh before I leapt into his ever-shrinking lap. But what he lacked in mobility, he made up for with orality. Grandpa could *talk*. Mostly nonsense—silly stories and gibberish—which eventually drove my grandmother crazy enough to abandon their marriage after 51 years. But, it made me giggle. And he wanted to make me giggle. As quick as he was to have a nasty word for my father, grandmother, or the mailman, he would have a kind one for me. For reasons I'll never understand, I was the exception to his condescension and scrutiny.

Snuggled between his protruding stomach and the nook of his arm, I would sit for hours, listening. Sometimes he'd read from a book or from the Bible, or at times, he'd just make up a tale. We occasionally played checkers while we talked. I was no match for him, as I never once won a game. He was fiercely competitive, even against a five-year-old. But I didn't mind that he never let me win; I found the speed and stealth with which he could beat me fascinating, and the look of glee and triumph on his face after he cleared the board in one fell swoop hilarious (but this clearly disgusted my parents and grandmother).

Sometimes we'd lumber out to the barnyard to feed the chickens; Grandpa with cane in hand, limping along on his arthritic joints, and me running in circles around him. I loved to burst into the barnyard and frighten the chickens, making them cluck and flap furiously around. All the while, he'd be talking, telling stories about the chickens, cows, or the little farm boy who disobeyed his parents. I don't remember him ever telling me a true story; even at five, I knew that most of what he said was fiction and nonsense. He never revealed much of himself or the life he led before I was born, even though I'm sure he had an abundance of things to talk about because he had been in the navy and lived all over Canada. I still don't understand why he had such an aversion to reality, and consequently, why I only knew the silly, made-up things about him. But at the time, that was okay. He told me stories, beat me at checkers, and teased me mercilessly. And I loved him with fierce abandon for it.

This is what I remember clearly. I don't remember the stories he told me with such clarity, only the pain of his death on my thirteenth birthday. When my father pushed open my bedroom door just before six that morning, he didn't have to say a word. I knew. I understood then that there would be no more tales for me to forget.

I can see now that it doesn't matter that I can't remember Grandpa's stories because he gave me my own stories to tell. He showed me that it's okay to make up my own stories—to play with reality and to see truth as relative. He wrote a book in my heart and mind by simply being. Now, when I need a story, I read Grandpa's memory because he helps me to make him—make anything—real.

Who's your great storyteller, and how does he or she shape your perspective?

*

My first story came to me from seemingly out of nowhere one day in grade two. An unexpected cold front slammed into Southern Ontario early that November. It rained overnight, and the cold, biting air blew in and froze the raindrops wherever they fell. My teacher, Mrs. Westhauser, bundled us up and marched us outside to inspect the icy landscape the storm had left behind.

A giant willow tree stood in the playground by the jungle gym. Its branches drooped under the weight of the ice that coated them; the bark of the trunk felt smooth under the sheet of frozen rain. A life and history far greater than mine slumbered inside the petrified tree. And I wanted to find it. The tiny sprigs where new leaves would grow in the spring were individually crystallized—suspended until the spring thaw would release them. It was the first time I remember feeling inspired.

I sat at my desk afterwards, pencil in hand, waiting for Mrs. Westhauser's cue to begin journal writing time. The majestic willow tree had captured me, like a good fairy tale. The enormous, sprawling branches that drooped and threatened to break under the weight of the ice, the trunk encased in cold glass, and the fossilized ridges, bumps, and grooves of the bark spoke to me, asking me to chisel an opening so its life could escape from its icy prison. I wanted to do that. I wanted to help it to live and breathe. I wanted to seize it before it was gone and lost to me. I couldn't wait to tell my journal its story.

I wrote furiously that morning, hunching over my desk until my forehead bumped on its surface. The words poured from my pencil in large, disproportionate letters. I carefully, meticulously, recorded in the annals of my second grade journal the story of the ice storm and the poor willow tree it had imprisoned.

At the next parent-teacher meeting, Mrs. Westhauser gushed about my willow tree story to my beaming parents. Mom and Dad still talk about it today; they keep it—a small blue notebook with large ruled pages where inspiration lived and lives still—on their bookshelf at home. On that bitterly cold Canadian winter day, I learned to read something other than books. And I thank Mrs. Westhauser for knowing—or hoping—that I'd figure out what it meant to see more than just the lines on the page.

What inspires you?

*

I used to love to write letters. Before the Internet, I did it all the time. Even now, I prefer to handwrite letters to my family and friends. I buy note-cards and special papers—sometimes the expensive handmade kind—to write them on. I despise email, although I am admittedly as dependent on it as the rest of the planet. Still, I can't help but mourn how much of our experiences, our stories, *ourselves*, are lost in the letters we no longer send and receive.

But, thankfully, I have some memorials. Soon to be added to my ever-mounting basement junkyard are boxes and bins housing my childhood and teenage memorabilia, which my parents are forcing me to collect now that I have my own storage space. *Dad wants his garage back,* my mother tells me on the phone, *so we're coming down to visit. And we're bringing a trailer.* After a recent visit home, I had the chance to dig through the boxes in question and peruse their contents. In one box, I found letters.

Lots and lots of letters, actually. There were two small plastic boxes—the "Le Kit" brand supply boxes that were the hippest back to school accessory for the early 90's middle-schooler—jammed full of origami-style folded-up letters, and a six-inch stack of envelopes cinched together with an elastic band.

In grade six, my best friend was a boy named Jamie. I secretly had a crush on him, but as an awkward 11-year-old, I happily settled for the "buddy" role. Jamie lived on the road where the municipalities (remember, I'm Canadian)—and consequently the area codes—divided, so we couldn't talk on the phone even though we only lived a few minutes apart. Instead, we wrote letters. Every evening I would write one to four pages to Jamie, fold the letter into itself in a kind of self-made envelope, and hand it to him when he stepped off Bus #37 in the morning. And every morning, he handed me a tightly folded letter as well. This ritual lasted the whole school year, so there's quite a collection in my Le Kit archives.

The stack of letters—a much smaller collection—were written over a period of six years or so. They are from my oldest, dearest girlfriend, Brandon. (People would always tell her that she had a boy's name, but it didn't seem to bother her.). Brandon and I met at our babysitter's home when she was three and I was four. We clung to each other in attempt to wield the wrath of Rose, our sitter, who disciplined us with a wooden spoon. Just about anything would warrant a whacking. Brandon got it repeatedly because she liked to eat her toast upside down and let the jelly drip onto her plate. I got it several times for refusing to eat ham sandwiches because, as I would so indignantly inform her, *Mommy and Daddy told me Jesus doesn't want me to eat pigs* (which was one of our only religious beliefs that I could wrap my head around at the time). I was once punished for running past her—screaming and flailing because her 13-year-old son had sat on my face and farted—and knocking off her glasses while she slept on the sofa. (Frequent napping was just another display of her competency as a babysitter.) She wasn't our sitter for long. But, happily, Brandon and I stayed friends. In grade two, her parents split and she moved to a town 40 minutes away—which might as well be the other side of the earth for a six-year-old. When she left, we hugged, cried, and promised to write to each other. And we did.

What is actually written in my childhood letters is not all that interesting—stories about crushes, school plays, camping trips, birthdays, Christmas wish lists (and afterwards, loot lists), family vacations, spelling tests, geography projects, dances—just regular kid stuff. What amazes and intrigues me, however, is the sheer volume of these chronicles. The letters I wrote to others are missing from my collection, and I remember that they are out there somewhere; little pieces of me floating about in someone else's archives, or the garbage dump in some cases I'm sure. I know Brandon has kept hers because we still visit at least twice a year, and we spend much of the time reminiscing, pulling out old letters and pictures for laughs. I'm not sure what Jamie did with his. I've only seen him twice since I switched schools in grade seven—once at an amusement park when I was 13, and again, years later, when I served him a chicken souvlaki at the Greek diner I worked in the summer I turned 20. But

no matter. I didn't write those letters so I could keep them.

I wrote the letters because I wanted to communicate something about myself, to see my folds straightened out on the page. I wrote them because I knew from a young age that I expressed myself best with a pen (or was that a pencil?) and paper. I wrote them because I wanted visible ties to others, scrawled between the lines on the page. I wrote them because, somehow, on a piece of ruled notebook paper I was different. I wasn't afraid to tell off that snotty girl or the jerky mean boy who sat behind me in class or harassed me at recess. I could say things in a far grander fashion than if I had to think on the spot. I could say horrid, hateful things and wouldn't have to take them back. I could admit things without a wavering voice, teary eyes, or clumsy words. I could make things sound better, or worse, than they really were. I could be brutally honest or lie through my teeth. I could expose or conceal whatever I chose to. I could do—and be—whatever I wanted with pencil in hand.

And I still can. I can also look back at the girl I was and learn from her, teach my students about her, and try to understand my own children through her when the time comes. But mostly, through my letters, I got to practice her. Figure her out by seeing what she looked like scrawled on the page. And the parts of her I didn't like, and even those I did, I could pack away in a box, put it in storage, and go back to read her whenever I want.

I want to encourage my students to do this—to practice themselves through writing. As we get older, we become increasingly relativistic; we become less self-centered and begin to see how our stories fit in the master story. By encouraging students to practice themselves by exploring their beliefs through the strokes of their keys or pens, I want them to find their voices and reveal their foundations. At the end of each semester, I ask them to evaluate their progression as writers, and consequently, as people. I, and they, are often amazed at the transformation. I love to see their creases begin to unwrinkle. And even if they still don't write "well" by the academy's standards, perhaps they learn a greater lesson.

Have you read yourself lately? What do you say?

*

Natalie Goldberg said, "I write because to form a word with your lips and tongue or to think a thing and dare to write it down so you can never take it back is the most powerful thing I know" (115). Looking into my not-so distant teenage years, which are not so different from my student's present lives, I sometimes wish I could take my words back—that I could take myself back. Even if I had a second go at it, I don't have much faith that I wouldn't just relive the same absurdities. But I relive them each day through my students.

Like many teenagers, I was bashful about my thoughts—my words. Even more so now that I see just how poignantly ridiculous and difficult life is as an in-betweener. My collection of poems, which I aptly named *Scraps*, hides inside a Doc Martin's box labeled *Leah's Box: STAY OUT* in bold, black capital letters in my parents' garage. Amazingly, my mother obeyed this warning. While helping my parents move a 30-foot U-haul's worth of belongings from storage to their new home, I found them, my boxes—about a half a dozen random cardboard containers—still sealed with the packing tape I reinforced them with before I moved away for college. There was no evidence that the seals had been tampered with while these boxes were void of my surveillance. And after opening them for the first time in six years, I could not be more thankful for my mother's discretion.

Inside, I found letters, cards, pictures, postcards, newspaper and magazine clippings, old toys and figurines, gaudy jewelry, random and obscure gifts from friends, and countless other mementos. There were heartfelt notes from girlfriends expressing appreciation for my friendship through some [insert dramatic emotional experience here] time; notes revealing embarrassing nicknames like Bubbles, Leakey (a play on my first and last names, Leah and Keys), and worse yet, Drool; letters from my alcoholic friend who one night called to tell

me he loved me before spending the night leaping in front of vehicles trying to kill himself. There were laughable, yet sincere poems written for me by my Quebecois boyfriend in broken, disjointed, and sexually explicit English, as well as mementos from my trip to Newfoundland (for which I suffered a 30-hour drive in a Jetta with five people, luggage for two weeks, and no hotel stopovers). There were copies of my academy newspaper in which I published poems (the ones I let people see); and, of course, my book of *Scraps*, a Duo-Tang folder housing a collection of inarticulate and sometimes cliché poems and song lyrics from bands like The Tea Party, Nine Inch Nails, Blind Melon and Nirvana.

Embarrassment aside, I cling to these possessions. On my last visit home (my parents' house just outside Toronto—it's funny how I just can't seem to tear myself away from this place even though I haven' t lived their for almost seven years), my mother asked me to do something about the plethora of *STAY OUT* boxes crowding her storage space. I obediently did so, with intentions to get rid of some of the junk and slim the collection. But, much to my mother's dismay, I couldn't part with a single item. And, although my husband would probably like to burn much of it (particularly the "love letters" from old boyfriends), these treasures are a part of me. To throw them out would be like burning a manuscript, shredding a family photo album, or throwing a diary in the trash. Although I may not be particularly proud of the contents of my past, it is still my past. These boxes contain my memoirs of self—silly, passionate, self-indulgent as they may be, these documents make up an inerasable part of me who doesn't want to be forgotten. Someday, somewhere, I secretly hope that someone—a future and distant relative perhaps—will find my *STAY OUT* boxes in a musty attic and be glad that I dared to write it down, to keep it, and never take it back. Maybe they'll be glad, as I am—as we all should be—to be able to read the past, use our experience, and learn something about life, about living, from our most primary source: ourselves.

We all have our little stashes of selves past. It is from these stories that we are able to form a whole. I have my students write a paper in which they select a few objects from their pasts and, through writing, fuse them into some whole. I ask them to make some interpretive claim about how these objects—these texts—represent some unified idea or characteristic about them. The assignment is unfailingly the most enjoyable and meaningful paper they write (for them and for me). What I love about this assignment is that it teaches them about reflection and how experience intertwines. It also reminds me what I thought and felt at their age. And that is something I can't ever forget—as much as I'd sometimes like to—if I expect to help them learn from what they've written and never take it back.

What did you put down at their age?

*

During my first two years of university, I kept a journal. I call it my *Anorexia Verbosa* book because it is desperately malnourished. For months at a time, I cut off the words. This was not intentional abandonment, but rather a disinterest that grew into neglect, then guilt, then neglect again. But perhaps by starving my journal, I was protecting myself from over-exposure. Maybe I didn't strip down my most intricate layers because I didn't understand them or like them at the time. (Or, as my dad used to say, maybe if I'd had more blood flowing through my alcohol veins I might have had something interesting to write about.)

Whatever the reasons, I look fondly on the journal I started and didn't finish. I remember purchasing it. I wandered Barnes & Noble for probably an hour looking for the right volume for my records. I hated lines on the pages because they were too constricting. I hated tightly bound books because I couldn't open them wide and flat. I hated pictures of any kind on the covers because I wanted to decorate them. I settled on a spiral bound journal with a dark brown corkboard cover and blank, white pages.

The cork has now worn away in places, exposing its black cardboard insides. There is a large red and white sticker reading *Canada Kicks*

Ass! (I am an insanely patriotic Canuck if you haven't noticed yet) pasted on the front, along with my name in colorful graffiti-style letters. Along the top, blue sticker letters read, "this is my book," as if my name were not enough indication, and as if I had to remind myself that I had things to say. A sticker-picture is tacked in the lower left corner. My husband (then fiancé) and I grin goofily at the camera; our heads mounted on a bride and groom's cartoon bodies and the words, *Just Do It!* stretch across the bottom. At the time, I thought that these decorations served to define me in some way. Inside, however, I see the raw under-flesh of my bewildered and gnashing identity.

Please remember me! it seems to scream when I part the covers. A giant sticker of South Park's "Cartman" furnishes the inside cover, along with small taped-in flyer for "Toronto's first Cannabis Culture Shop" and a small visual homage to my favorite hard-rock band at the time (and of all time), Tool. Apparently, I felt it necessary to loudly pronounce my partialities, as if liking a cartoon or band could somehow help to define me. On the first page is, once again, my name, drawn in large letters behind an intricate web of vines. This is characteristic of the compilation—me, hiding. "*Just a face amidst the crowd,*" the first entry reads, "*that's me. But this. This is what will set me apart from the rest. This simple book and nothing else...this makes me real.*"

And I suppose it does.

Flipping through the pages, I find poems with titles like *Void* and *Alone*, quotes from Thoreau lamenting solitude, a watercolor painting gloomy sun with the words "*on my world shines a dark sun...I come undone...the darkness shines over me*" (oh the melancholy!) inscribed in the center. Then (curiously corresponding with my meeting my future husband), my entries take a dramatic turn. Suddenly, there are poems about passionate, inescapable love and stickers of Disney princesses tacked all over. Handwritten notes from my beloved are glued in and bordered in inked hearts. Then my entries get even more scattered—a psychedelic painting of a thousand watching eyes, a postcard reading "*My Body is an Amusement Park,*" mementos from WWF New York (yes, I know, my obsession with wrestling is an embarrassing one), and very minimal writing—decorate the final pages. I seemed to have less and less to say, and it seems as if I was trying to present myself through random pictures and objects. These final pages make me consider that no one prays until they're in trouble. In my case, I never wrote until I was in trouble. Instead of rejoicing in the good things that happen to us as they happen, we glide through life unobservant until we no longer can.

What I remember—distinctly—is what I was trying to ignore in my life at the time. In the blank, white pages at the end of my journal there is no account of my dissolving relationships—my best friend retreating, of my father leaving my mother—of my buckling under the strain of excruciating familial stress and descending into a temporary madness which I released by breaking dishes, punching holes in walls, behaving recklessly and dangerously, and scratching layers of skin from my body so I could watch myself bleed. Those words—those thoughts—may have been too painful to put down at the time. I didn't want to remember them, much less revisit them later on.

So parts of me are not spilled on those pages. Instead, I retrieve and log them now. Now that my skin has thickened, I can look back at that girl who seems so obscure to me now and process her pain, her questions, her desires. I now understand her well enough to peek beneath her façade, tell her stories, expose her layers and *want* to remember. Because now she makes sense and I can use her to tell new stories and discover new insight.

This makes me think about how, traditionally, we usher students from personal, concrete experience to abstract thought and analysis. We ask them to master themselves before examining other, outside ideas. Because without this foundation—of teaching our students to find deeper meanings in their past lives—we can't expect them to understand and master new concepts and ideas that exist outside of themselves. They must internalize their own experience before forming

external opinions. There must be solid foundation before there's a structure.

What's yours?

*

I love to scrapbook. I became a full-fledged sucker for this trendy pastime about three years ago. On my wedding day, my sister-in-law handed me a tote bag filled with supplies—an album, refill pages and plastic protectors, stickers, die cuts, borders, stencils, pens and markers. She wrote a note; something about the importance of preserving memories, blah, blah, blah. I sneered at the grand cheesiness of it and mentally reserved a place for the tote in our apartment's storage closet (along with the other useless wedding gifts that would await our first yard sale). A five-drawer Rubbermaid tower now stands in my office housing my neatly organized scrapbooking supplies. My favorite store—where I both work part-time (just for the discount) and shop—is The Sticker Lady scrapbook supply. I have passed hundreds of hours carefully, creatively, and categorically cataloguing my life in the now numerous albums lining my living room bookshelf.

My pictorial history is rigidly organized. There are the "public" albums and the "secret" albums. I labor extensively over the public albums: each picture is carefully selected and cropped, each section has a color and decor theme, each caption is thoughtfully and precisely worded. Family vacations, Christmases, Thanksgivings, birthdays, and weddings dominate the pages. The secret albums, on the other hand, are not so scrupulous. The secret albums portray my life unrevised. While still roughly chronological, these photographs depict my erratic life—drunken college escapades, random pictures that don't fit into formal categories, and things I'd never want my parents to see. These pictures are indiscriminately stuck to the pages and are often tagged with stupidly inarticulate captions. These are for private viewing only.

But still, they exist—those moments, those people, those experiences. They are as important to me as the others. However, my secret albums are guarded. As are my words.

My writing also falls into two categories: public and secret. Of course, this is true of most writers, but I am not talking about first drafts and final drafts. My secret writing doesn't exist on paper or in any computer's hard drive. It exists only in my mind because what would happen if I let it out? After all, my husband—*my God, my parents*—could read it. No way. Uh-uh. Too risky. Too embarrassing. And sometimes downright disloyal.

Even now, I hesitate. Anne Lamott's words about writing first drafts in *Bird By Bird resonate within me and begin to meld with my own thoughts..* The first thing I have to do is "quiet the voices in my head"—the ones that tell me I don't *really* have anything good to say, my husband who says, "I didn't know *that*," and my parents—oh God, especially my parents—"who I don't want to expose or hurt or shock" (26). I hesitate, but its coming. Slowly. My obsessive habit of scrutinizing what might be the teensiest bit inappropriate, surprising, or offensive is exhausting and stifling. I am trying to make fewer considerations; to be more honest and open, and take more chances, as selfish as that sometimes seems to me. My writing is gradually becoming less edited. I suppose I'm becoming less edited.

So as I grow, more and more of me appears on the page. The person I see there becomes increasingly familiar and multi-dimensional. I like her better. Her stories—her dimensions—are more real. Her inscription is now recognizable. I can run my eyes and mind over her words and think: *Yes, I know you.* I take her hand and walk with her, although I'm still not always sure where we're going.

And that's okay. In conference I often ask my students "where are you going with this?" or "what do you want to say, really?" Sometimes they have an answer, but more often than not, they say, "That's my problem—I don't know." But they're still figuring it out—what's public and what's private—and that's okay too. I once had a student who was trying to write about male bonding. His narrative was about a weekend he spent with his friends in Port Huron, which included a trip to the

Vu (a strip club). I could tell he was embarrassed about it by the vagueness of his writing. In conference, I encouraged him to be detailed—that I wouldn't be offended. When I said this, he turned painfully red, couldn't look me in the eyes or stop smiling through the rest of our meeting. When he turned in the final draft he'd cut the part out entirely. And the paper turned out better this way; it felt less vague and forced. Some texts just aren't ready to be read yet, I guess.

What's your comfort level?

*

I'm a teacher. The word still feels awkward on my tongue and at my fingertips: *T e a c h e r.* A few months ago a friend from college, who also teaches, wrote me an email in which she jokingly asked, *I just don't feel old enough or smart enough to be a teacher, do you?* Funny how little things like that stick in your brain. I remember this question just about every time I walk into my Freshman composition classroom. I fear that I'll be found out. That they'll discover I'm not really that smart, or old. That I'm no expert. That I'm still trying to figure myself out just as they are. And that, really, I just like to write.

But writing—and teaching it—is so much more than simple enjoyment and expression. It's about self-discovery. Even if we're writing about plot development or audience awareness or the representation of gender theory in characters, we still need perspective. To achieve perspective, we have to figure out where our point of view stems from. And I have to help my students figure this out.

I get frustrated sometimes, though. I ask for their stories, and try to help shape the telling. I say "write about this," and then critique how they do it. I suggest. I nudge. I question. And sometimes (okay, *often*), when I'm really cornered, I direct. I say, "do this" and "do that" and then torture myself about it. Sometimes I feel like Queen Storyteller. I command it, and it becomes so. I am pleased at first. I feel like I've accomplished something. But then I remember it isn't mine to accomplish.

So I'm still learning that "teacher" doesn't mean "director" or "conqueror." It means I have to figure out how to free my students to view, interpret, and share their experiences and find their voices. I am realizing that their texts—their stories—are not mine to control. Instead, I do what I like best: I write. I write it down when I understand their experiences, hear their voices, and really *hear* their stories. I scribble my thoughts and suggestions. I tell them when I don't get it and don't think they do either. I ask them to make choices; to expose what they're comfortable with, to conceal what they're not, and to save it for later when it fits and feels right.

The more I do this the better their writing seems to get. The less I restrict and direct them, the more they seem to grow. And we're all a lot happier now that I'm not trying to teach them to write. Instead, I'm trying to teach them to read.

What do you teach?

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