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Bailing the Penman's Ship

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When Mrs. Raymer said, "It's time for penmanship," we put away our books. Or as I thought of it, we cleared our desks so the Penman could maneuver his ship across it. I imagined him dressed like one of the Three Musketeers guiding his inky vessel over the rough paper ocean flecked with bits of bark that frequently ruined words which hit them. The Palmer Method floated above the blackboard, capital G a gust of wind into a sail, capital Q a strangulated Z. My hand rose and fell, crossing the light blue meridians but learning to stay within their bounds. Later the laborious neatness of Palmer would irritate my hand as my mind raced ahead of it. Chicken scratching more matched the way my brain worked, and then there came a time when I didn't want anyone to be able to read my handwriting. Idiosyncratic penmanship was my commentary back to the educational system on how good a job I thought it had done. And I was lucky; I was right handed.

My son, Nick, is left handed, but his parents are not. We were stymied as to how to teach him to cut, to write, to use a knife. (To this day, when he cuts meat, his method is so unique, I turn away in fear!) His printing was fine, but in second grade the switch toward cursive did not happen smoothly. His teacher did not understand simple facts like a left handed writer's hand covers up the words that have just been written, not only smearing them but also making continuity within a sentence more difficult because the last words have just been obscured. With the left handed writer, there is much stopping and starting within each sentence. Frequently this results in penmanship which appears headed in different directions every few words, as it the Penman can't quite decide the course of his ship.

Nick had the same teacher for second and third, and all he heard during those years was that his writing was terrible. His report cards said, "Fine motor skills lacking. No improvement again this quarter." Instead of comments on his writing's content, Nick only received feedback like "Watch your margins" and "This is smudgy." Thus, Nick believed he was a terrible writer, a student who couldn't write.

Nick, his teacher, and many others have confused writing with penmanship. Penmanship is an act of the hand, a motor skill; writing is an act of the mind, a mental activity. True, the activity is manifested through the hand, but the activity itself is not generated there. To equate what the hand does with what the mind does is to do a disservice to the mind. I wrote the first two paragraphs of this essay lying on my bed, huddled beneath a sweater, too lazy to get up and type. Instead, I visualized a keyboard. The words poured themselves onto the screen. I sounded sentences together in my inner ear. I planned how I will argue my case. To the world, I looked like a sleeping woman, but I was a deeply involved, writing woman. At this moment, if you saw me, you would say I was writing. I would say I was typing because of the "writing" I had done within me prior to sitting down.

A conference with a student yesterday made me understand this difference. I was trying to talk her into taking a Creative Writing class because what I see in her writing is a unique and quirky view of the world, a natural gift with putting words together, and an innate sense of order. When I made my pitch for the class (after asking her to submit a recent exercise to the student literary magazine), she said, "I hate writing. I'm not good at it."

I blurted out, "No. You are good at it."

She said, "Well, I'm liking what we do in class. It's really fun, but I have terrible handwriting."

"You're left-handed, aren't you?" As I began telling her about Nick's handwriting nightmare, I realized that she was equating penmanship with writing. I assured her that penmanship and writing were two different things, and while her writing was, indeed, sloppy, that had nothing at all to do with the way her mind worked.

She will be taking Creative Writing in the fall. And my son, who “couldn’t write” and was “no good” at English is an English major at a four year institution on a full academic scholarship. He is a confident writer now; but if you were to try and read his cursive, you would know his Penman’s ship is a fifteenth-century French schooner replete with strange riggings and useless flourishes.

In the age of computers, a lack of motor control and fine letter making skills need not hold back writers of any age. For left handed students struggling with penmanship under the well-meaning but useless tutelage of right-handed teachers, keyboarding might be the best solution. Few right-handers realize the amount of times left-handed writers must stop, lift their hands to see what had been written, then cover their writing up and write on. A certain loss of continuity within sentences frequently results. Had my son been keyboarding earlier, his self-esteem would have been much higher throughout his elementary years.

If we teachers are really interested in students ‘writing, that is, the mental activity of creation, expansion, revision, then we must be willing to tolerate questionable penmanship and find solutions which are within our powers to maximize our ability to value the content over the pretty container. I would rather read a powerfully scratched out diatribe by a vital mind than a lovely, perfectly formed, flowery tribute to fluffy clouds, i’s dotted by hearts, flower, or smiley faces. The Penman’s ship has sprung leaks; haven’t we the technology to help him?

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