“The Circle Made Whole Is a Story”: A Conversation with Bruce Weigl

Interview by Daniel J. Cleary

In an interview conducted at his office at Lorain County Community College, 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry finalist Bruce Weigl discusses writing pedagogy, veterans’ issues, and his experiences as a two-year college student and as a professor and poet.

Interviewer’s note: Bruce Weigl, one of three finalists for the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his book The Abundance of Nothing, is Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Lorain County Community College (LCCC). He has held professorships at the University of Arkansas, Old Dominion University, and Pennsylvania State University, where he directed the MFA program in creative writing and served a term as president of the Associated Writing Programs (AWP). In 2000, he decided that he wanted to go back home, so he returned to LCCC to teach for the college that gave him his start as a writer.

Weigl is a storyteller, perhaps best known as a chronicler in poetry of the American War in Vietnam. Stories hold a special meaning for Weigl. He tells us in his memoir, The Circle of Hanh, “Somehow, all of my people have been saved by stories, and we have been touched by the grace of stories, and we have all been saved by our stories in the face of hardship” (58). Of particular importance to Weigl are stories that resist the confines of linearity. “The story circles back on itself if you let it have its way, and if you care for the words as if they were living things whose care your own life depends upon, because it does” (7). For Weigl, a well-told story has the power to save and to make whole.

Weigl has published twelve books of poetry, three anthologies of critical essays, a memoir, and three books of poetry in translation. He has received fellowships from Bread Loaf Writer’s Conference, the Yaddo Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His awards include the Lannan Literary Award, the Patterson Poetry Prize, the Poet’s Prize from the American Academy of Poets, and two Pushcart Prizes. His forthcoming book is titled The Secret of Hoa Sen, a translation of poetry of Nguyen Pham Que Mai.

Daniel J. Cleary [DC] interviewed Bruce Weigl [BW] on November 11 and 12, 2013, in Weigl’s office at LCCC.

DC: After returning home from a tour of duty in the American War in Vietnam in the late ’60s, you enrolled in your local two-year school, Lorain County Com-
community College. What prompted this decision, and what did you think you would get out of a college education at the time?

**BW:** One of the reasons that I went into the army in the first place was that one day, during my senior year of high school, a recruiter came to speak to the whole school during an assembly. This was in the spring of 1967, so the war was already hot, and they were recruiting heavily, at first in colleges and then in high schools. I wasn’t really paying any attention to his spiel, but I heard him say something about “a day in the army equals a day in college under the GI Bill.” So, that got my attention because I wasn’t in a financial position to go to college, but I had begun to realize that college was probably something I should do.

My timing was bad. It wasn’t a good time to go into the war. It was the big Johnson–McNamara push. Troop strength reached 500,000, the largest during the war, and there were more losses in ’67–’68 on both sides than at any other time of the war. But I did get my GI Bill when I came home. Towards the end of my tour in the army, I started thinking about where I would go to school, and just before I was discharged, the shooting at Kent State happened. By that point—in my military career even—I had become a little radicalized because of some people I’d met who had some different opinions about the war and why we were fighting the war. Their ideas interested me. I wanted to go to Kent State because I wanted to be a part of the political atmosphere there. However, it was deflated by the shootings. Actually, a high school classmate of mine, Bill Schroeder, was killed in the Kent State shooting. He was one of the people who just happened to be walking by.

I also knew that Kent had a good reputation. So, I applied to Kent as an education major because I wanted to be a teacher. There’s an instinct shared in common among people just coming out of war, and that is to want to give something back. They become policemen and firemen, teachers. There’s a cloud of guilt hanging over each one of us. We want to give something back.

I was accepted at Kent, and I was all set to move there. I spent a day there looking for a place to live, and I got very frustrated with that. And the pollution in Kent was terrible at the time. Those were the days when the Akron rubber plants were going full strength, and the air was unbreathable, so I decided not to go there.

**DC:** Your decision to not attend Kent was based on the air pollution from the rubber plants?

**BW:** That was one of the reasons. The other one is this: I attended an orientation for incoming education majors, and I felt very alienated, like I had nothing in common with anyone else there. It just didn’t feel right. So I decided not to go. Until I could decide where I did want to go, I decided to go to the local community college. That way, I wouldn’t be wasting my time. I had always heard good things about LCCC. In general, the community supported the college. It was a college for us. So I came here for a year and a half.

**DC:** It sounds like you decided against attending Kent State because you were still dealing with the effects of the war.
BW: A common way that combat veterans will respond to enrolling in college is this: It takes a lot for them to just go to the room listed in the newspaper or on the school’s website in order to register. But once they get to that room, they’re told they have to go to this other room to do some other thing, so they just get in their car and go home. That’s a very common response. I think it’s part of PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]; “I can’t deal with it. It’s too much. I thought I had to come here, why are you now telling me to go there?” So, basically, schools need to centralize their services for veterans. Schools need a veterans’ services director, a serious position. Our school, for example, has over 650 veterans on campus. Those are the ones who didn’t drive home after being told to go to the other room to complete their registration. Schools need to start thinking about serving veterans as an economic opportunity. Forget, for a minute, that helping our veterans is the right thing to do—which it is. There are a lot of people getting out of the service, and there are going to be a lot more once the war winds down and as the military cuts back. There’s your new demographic right there. We’ve run out of eighteen-year-olds, but we’ve got these returning veterans. It behooves any college to do what it can to attract veterans.

DC: Who recommended LCCC as a good place for a veteran to get an education? Your parents or other family members?

BW: Not my parents. They weren’t college people. It was just in the air, that this was a place to go. And, like I said, I didn’t want to stay out of school while I decided where I wanted to go, so I came out here. The experience of being here, I’m convinced, changed my life forever because of the support and teaching and enabling that I received here as a very beginning, rough, raw writer.

DC: Did you enter the college thinking you were going to be a writer?

BW: No, not at all. My first real writing experience came in a composition class. We came into class one day and the professor, John Leeson is his name—I dedicated one of my books to him—came in and asked us to write about something that happened to us that was frightening. So, I chose a particular rocket attack that was pretty intense. And I described it, straight up, just as I remembered it. I turned it in, and in the next class period, he started talking about our work in the last exercise, and he singled out my piece, and he read it to the class.

DC: How did you feel about having your work read aloud?

BW: I was embarrassed. I didn’t think it was very good.

DC: Did you think he was picking on you for being a bad writer or something?

BW: I didn’t know what he was doing. He was a nice man, so I wasn’t worried about him picking on me so much, but I didn’t know why he was reading my piece out loud to the class. But then he told the class that my piece was an example of good writing, and he went through and explained why. After class he asked me to stay. He quizzed me about my background, about my goals, and he encouraged me...
to think about becoming a writer. At the same meeting, he took out an anthology—his office was completely full of books—and he read me a poem, a Robert Hayden poem called “Those Winter Sundays.” It’s one of Hayden’s most famous poems, maybe one of his best poems, magnificent for the lesson that it teaches: that love has many offices.

I’m not sure why he chose that poem, but it really hit home with me. It really made an impression on me. The way in which the silent love that the father has for his son is illustrated in the poem. It inspired me.

DC: When Professor Leeson pointed out that what you’d written was an example of good writing, and then he showed you the Robert Hayden poem, did you see that there was a similarity between what you’d written and what Hayden had written?

BW: I did see it! There’s an ordinariness to the language, particularly the diction, of the Hayden poem that I hadn’t seen that much in poetry. I’d been spending most of my time studying earlier poetry, so I made a connection based on the diction. So, when my teacher told me I should write some poems, I saw what he meant. Without that encouragement, I don’t know what would have happened with my life. John and my psychology professor, Richard McCarbery, introduced me to the rigor of study, and those two got me into Oberlin College. It was their idea. I didn’t have any money. They helped me figure out scholarships and everything.

This community college gave me two gifts: the first year and a half of my college education, and it gave me Oberlin, too.

DC: Speaking of Oberlin, it’s now a well-known story that you ended up becoming friends with poet James Wright’s son at Oberlin and sending some of your early poetry to Wright. When did you start reading Wright?

BW: My teachers at Oberlin turned me on to James Wright’s work before I became friends with his son, Franz. I had mixed feelings about some of it because the early work was very much given to the accentual-syllabic tradition. His first books were very formal, and I, for some reason at the time, thought I had to rebel against that. But, the diction, just like that of the Hayden poem, that was captivating to me. He could talk about these enormous ideas with very direct language, and I loved how that direct language could resonate. Luckily his son and I hit it off, and we became friends at Oberlin and later at the University of New Hampshire.

DC: You went to New Hampshire for your master’s to study with Charles Simic, after which you came back to LCCC, only this time you were on the other side of the desk. What was it like to come back and teach at the two-year college that gave you your start?

BW: It was really exciting to come back. I thought that I was going to do just a little bit, but the English Department was desperate to fill some courses, composition courses mostly. I left campus after meeting with the division director, who gave me three comp courses. By the time I got home, the phone was ringing, and I was
asked to teach two more comp courses. I agreed to do that. When I went into his office the next day, he asked me if I would also teach the creative writing course. So, my first semester here as a teacher, I taught five comp classes and a creative writing class! I would literally have to stay up all night just to keep up with the papers.

DC: Coming out of a master's program in creative writing, did you approach the teaching of composition differently than other teachers may have approached it?

BW: My master's was in English with a creative writing emphasis. I also learned about rhetoric and studied world literature. We had a wonderful professor, Donald Murray, who taught the Teaching Composition course. I can't imagine learning more about the teaching of composition from anyone. His ideas are not fixed in any one pedagogy, so they can work for different types of writing. On the first day of class, he asked us to design a writing exercise that would take students twenty minutes to do. In the next class session, we each brought what we'd planned, our wonderfully complex exercises, and he gave us twenty minutes in class to do that exercise. I think one person finished! He said, “That's the first lesson: be conscious of how much work you're asking them to do.” That was such a great lesson for a beginning teacher.

With Murray, there was no insistence upon any uniform pedagogy. There was no template, not even a requirement about the number of essays we had to assign. He let us see model syllabi from more experienced faculty, and Don let us look at his own, but we were free to do whatever we wanted to do. We just had to agree on the final product: that students will be able to write clear essays with a purpose. How you got there was up to you. It was a very exciting comp program. Don was very involved as a mentor to all of the teaching assistants, so I had a great start in terms of understanding how to teach composition.

DC: Was Murray already advocating one-to-one conferencing with all students at that time?

BW: Yes, this was 1974 and '75.

DC: It would probably have been impossible to meet one-to-one with all of your students at LCCC with five comp courses and one creative writing course.

BW: Don was a big one-to-one advocate, but he was also a student advocate. Don knew you could teach even if you couldn’t do one-to-one. His teaching was almost Zen-like. He taught us that there are certain things we have to help students learn, but he told us to make sure they learned them, not by telling them what they did wrong, but by telling them what they’re doing right. As I got more and more into teaching, I realized how profoundly right he was about that. He knew a lot about teaching, and a lot about writing.

DC: He was a writer, himself.

BW: That's right. His best-known book is called *A Writer Teaches Writing*, and he wrote all the time. He wrote a lot of different things. He was an award-winning
A Conversation with Bruce Weigl

153

journalist, an accomplished poet, and a wonderful essayist, among other things. I learned a great deal from him that sticks with me to this day. When I started teaching here at Lorain, I drew from what Don Murray had taught me.

DC: When you left teaching at LCCC to get your PhD at the University of Utah, you left the two-year college system for two and a half decades. You joined the professoriate at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, moved on to Old Dominion University, and eventually spent twelve years at Penn State University. You came back to LCCC in 2000. Before we discuss your return to the community college, do you want to talk a bit about your experience outside the two-year system?

BW: I didn’t leave the two-year system because I had a bad experience. It was more that the four-year university was more likely to allow me time to write. In general, community colleges aren’t set up that way. It would have been hard to teach a community college schedule and have a writer’s life at the same time.

DC: It would be hard to teach four or five composition courses and maybe even a literature course and still have time to write as much as you have in the past thirty years.

BW: Not even just the writing, but the whole public part of being a writer: the readings, the travel, all that. There was no way I could do it. That’s one reason I went to a four-year school after I got my PhD. When I went to Arkansas, I knew I wasn’t going to stay there, but I liked the people I’d met when I interviewed. They wanted an undergraduate creative writing program, so I created one for them. Then I had an opportunity to teach at Old Dominion, who wanted to establish a graduate creative writing program. Also, at the time, Old Dominion was the headquarters for the Associated Writing Programs, so it was an exciting job. After being there a while, I wanted to get closer to where I grew up, closer to Lorain. A job came up at Penn State, which is only four hours from my parents’ home, so I took it. I was hired to direct the enormous undergraduate writing program at Penn State.

I thought it would be a great place to work because there were so many brilliant writers and scholars there, but it turned out not to be such a great experience for me, overall. I wanted to get out of there, and when my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, I wanted to go back home. I decided to come back here to teach part-time at the community college and help my father take care of my mother. Twenty-five years after I left LCCC as an adjunct, I came back as an adjunct! I thought I’d teach here temporarily while I figured out what else to do. I had had some people express an interest in hiring me, so I didn’t think it would be too long before something came up. I also taught a couple of courses at Case Western Reserve University, and I thought there might be an opportunity there. I taught here as an adjunct for a year, teaching only composition because one of the full-timers taught the only creative writing class on the books back then. Immediately, I got into trouble with my book orders for my comp classes. I chose books the way I’d always done, but the secretary told me that all composition instructors
had to use the same books. I spoke with the dean, and he let me choose my own books.

I taught composition at Lorain again, twenty-five years after the first time I’d taught composition here, and I had a great experience. I had wonderful students. I taught comp the way Don Murray taught us to teach it—like a workshop. I fell for the students here immediately. I admired their commitment. Most of them were working, some of them supporting families, and here they were trying to better themselves. One thing led to another, and I decided I’d like to stay here for a while, but I wanted to do better than the adjunct salary. At first I said, “I’ll just stay here till something else comes up,” but after a while I started talking to some of the people here about staying. At the same time, I was beginning to get offers from some other schools. When Roy Church, the college president, found out that I wanted to stay but needed something better than an adjunct position, he created a job called Visiting Distinguished Professor of Humanities for me, which has now dropped the “Visiting” part. One of the things I’ve always admired about President Church is that he built a curriculum to retrain an entire workforce, but at the same time, he never turned his back on the humanities. He’s always thought that the humanities were an important part of any education, even a technical education.

So, Roy created this position for me. It allows me time to write, gives me a Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday schedule so I have time to travel and do readings and master classes. I was also invited to build a creative writing curriculum, so instead of the one Introduction to Creative Writing course that we offered when I got here, we now have a writing poetry course, a fiction course, and a nonfiction course, too. They were all successful immediately, which shows that there’s an interest at this school in creative writing. I can also say, without hesitation, that my best writers here are as good as the best writers anywhere I’ve taught.

DC: As good as the best MFA creative writers you’ve taught?

BW: Absolutely. Yes. I have a student writing now in one of my classes whose poems would be among the strongest poems in an MFA workshop. She doesn’t know that yet—I haven’t told her. I’m waiting until the time is right. But I’ve had dozens of students from this college gain acceptance into some really fine writing programs—including the University of Chicago, Northwestern, the University of Iowa—and go on to writing careers from here. So, there really is a place for creative writing in two-year schools.

DC: Do you think you taught writing any differently at four-year schools as opposed to two-year schools?

BW: No difference at all. I don’t teach these students any differently than I’ve taught graduate or undergraduate students at any other place I’ve taught. I don’t find a need to do anything dramatically different. What you have to do at a school like this, though, is be willing to accept the fact that, even though these students are dedicated and devoted, their lives sometimes come first. If you can’t accept that, I don’t think you belong in a community college.
I try to create an atmosphere in which there’s no problem that can’t be solved as long as we communicate about it. If your boss suddenly puts you on a different schedule, we can always work around that as long as we communicate. You don’t have to do that at Yale, but you have to do that here. Somebody’s livelihood depends upon that job; somebody’s kids are being fed by that job. Why punish that person?

DC: How do you answer critics who say that if you’re bending over backward to help your students, you aren’t upholding standards and rigor and things like that?

BW: I’ve always had the same answer to those types of questions: I would compare the work of my students here to the work of any students, anywhere, at any time. Look at my students’ work. Look at what they’ve done, then show me what your students have done, then we’ll decide what approach is more effective.

DC: What I find most interesting about your story is its cyclical nature. You got your first non-TA teaching job at a two-year school, ventured out into the world of teaching in universities, and now you’re back teaching at the same community college where you got your start as both a college student and instructor. You’ve got two books with the word circle in the title, your poetry collection _The Archeology of the Circle_ and your memoir _The Circle of Hanh_, which, itself, has a circular narrative structure. Can you talk about the significance of the circle for you?

BW: _The Circle of Hanh_ is a title I had for a long time when I was thinking about writing a memoir about my daughter, Hanh, whom I adopted from Vietnam, and about my growing up in Lorain. That title was an obvious metaphor or an obvious description of that particular narrative because that story starts and ends many times, and there are many circles in that story, if you care to look for them.

DC: It’s actually hard not to notice them.

BW: You’re right. But it’s not like I consciously did that. Those sections were written as individual pieces, and that’s just how it came out, for some reason. But I noticed it, and I started thinking about the circle more, and about what the circle meant—the circle of enclosed hands, the circle of prayer, the circle of the workshop, not just my workshop at school but workshops 3,500 years ago at the base of some holy mountain where hands were joined, and the poets, the singers of songs, waited to get the words from the gods above and then sing them to the people. So, that circle too.

The title of the other book, _The Archeology of the Circle_, came when I was putting the selected works together and working with the editor to choose the poems that would go in. I realized that one way I could think about that volume of selected works as a whole book, and not just say, “Here are my selected poems,” was to go back to that idea of the circle. In _The Circle of Hanh_, the circle is very much a part of the material world. In _The Archeology of the Circle_, I like to think of it as doing some archeology in the nonmaterial world, digging a little deeper than just the surface narrative and finding out what’s there. I had the idea that if you
looked at these poems over the course of twenty-five or thirty years, you could see that happening.

DC: Is it a coincidence, then, that the narrative of your career also took a circular path?

BW: I always intended to return here, one way or another, when I left originally. I love being here. I love the rhythm of the way people talk, and the diction, and the tilt of the head and the attitude. It’s comforting to me, makes me feel free. So I knew I would come back. But the further away I got, the more difficult it became to do so because when I started trying to come back I was already a full professor at a major state university, had already published several books, and there just weren’t a lot of jobs for people like me around here.

I love teaching here, and not just creative writing. If they told me tomorrow that the only class I could teach was composition, I would bring the same enthusiasm I bring to my creative writing classes to my composition classes. I love teaching writing. Maybe some of my colleagues envy my opportunity to teach so much creative writing, but I want to reinforce the argument that it’s not easier to teach creative writing. In many ways, it can be more difficult to teach a person how to write a poem versus how to write an essay. It might even be easier to teach someone to write academic essays in one semester than to teach someone to write poetry in one semester. If you’re lucky either way, the students know something already, and you can help them make their writing better.

DC: In addition to teaching, you also edit the school’s online literary magazine, the North Coast Review. You’ve been involved in publishing before, editing journals like Quarterly West, for example. Why did you start NCR, and what has it been like to run the magazine so far?

BW: I want my students to have the experience of submitting work to magazines and journals. They need to learn to do it at some point, so why not encourage them to do so? On the other hand, I also know how frustrating it can be for young writers to send out work and never receive any sort of reply, not even a standard reply. That can charge up some writers, but it can also completely defeat other writers. So I started this journal specifically for the students, faculty, and staff of the college—the community of the community college.

When I first started NCR, I thought the most difficult part would be the Web aspects, since it’s an online journal. But that part was easy. Surprisingly, the biggest problem I’ve run into is not having enough submissions. I was thinking, “Of course, students want to be published,” but it hasn’t gone that way. So, what I’ve started doing is, along the course of the semester, I’ll mark “NCR” on students’ writings, which is their cue to revise the piece and submit it to the North Coast Review. That has increased student submissions by about 3 percent! Maybe my thinking is a bit dated. Maybe students don’t want to be published nowadays as much as they used to in my college days.
What do you want students to take away from your courses, whether you’re teaching composition, literature, or creative writing?

I want students to develop an open-mindedness to other peoples’ ideas in order to create new ideas. We are diverse enough a college that we can have a multiplicity of ideas about very important issues in life. I also want students to learn the value of a story well told, a story in which the writer cared very much about getting the words right, and that when you look closely at the text, you can see this care and nurturing of the words in order to make the words tell a story well.

Many of the people who grow up around here are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. So there’s this sense of otherness. My grandmother talked about the Old Country, which was this otherworldly, magnificent place that I was somehow attached to—the Old Country. We’re connected to it through the stories.

From my creative writing classes, I want students to learn discipline, number one. I’ve learned from over thirty years of writing that being a writer takes a lot of discipline, that kind of stubborn willingness to go back to a text again and again, and not only find pleasure in that process, but to be productive in that process.

Do you find that the most stubborn and persistent writers are oftentimes the most successful writers?

Yes, I do. That’s been the case from my teaching experience. The best two or three writers I’ve ever had started out at the bottom of the class, but they wouldn’t give up. So you have to be very careful with young writers because you never know when you’ve got Emily Dickinson in your class, writing her first few poems! A lot of nurturing goes on in creative writing courses, as it should. So, I want students to learn discipline, and I want them to learn about their own language. Poetry widens the range of diction that you use because poets are always looking for more surprising and more appropriate ways to present their experiences.

This will be my last question: What do you think are the benefits of creative writing courses for two-year college students, and in what ways can a two-year college benefit from having a strong creative writing program?

I think the humanities, in general, are important to the two-year college. It would be pretty easy for this place to turn into a—pretty high-level—technical school, which it is in many ways. We do things no other school can do, like our wind turbine program. I think only one or two other schools do what we do in teaching people to service and maintain wind turbines, so we have that. But stories sustain our lives. I don’t care whether you’re studying mechanical engineering or biology, a thing said beautifully, observed and rendered with great care for someone else to understand, is a valuable part of anyone’s education.

What two-year schools stand to gain from a strong creative writing program is an additional opportunity for students to learn. Even if a school doesn’t offer creative writing courses, there are writers on campus. There are writers on every two-year college campus. Maybe they’re even having regular or semi-regular meetings...
and passing around their manuscripts. Why not give them a context, a place to do that? Let them write alongside whatever else they’re doing, and they’ll be happier doing that other thing, too. And they’ll learn skills—that discipline, that attention to detail I was talking about earlier—that is very difficult to learn anywhere else. So it seems to me that creative writing courses are especially important to the community college.

Note

The title of this piece (“The Circle Made Whole Is a Story”) comes from Weigl’s The Circle of Hanh, page 41.

Work Cited


Daniel J. Cleary holds a PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and is currently associate professor of English at Lorain County Community College, where he directs the writing program.

TYCA Fame Award Nominations

The Two-Year College English Association is accepting nominations for the 2015 TYCA Fame Award. Nominations should be representations of two-year students and faculty that reflect truthfully on the community college at its best. The mentions or portrayals of two-year colleges must have been made publicly between March 2014 and March 2015 and in verifiable form—a news story, magazine reference, movie scene, or TV remark. The winner for the 2015 award will be decided during the 2015 CCCC Convention, to be held in March in Tampa. Submit nominations online by March 11, 2015, at http://www.ncte.org/tyca/awards/fame, or by mail to Sterling Warner, TYCA Fame Award, Evergreen Valley College, 3095 Yerba Buena Road, San Jose, CA 95135.