It is 1965, career day at Woodrow Wilson Junior High. Girls assemble in the home economics room to learn about becoming nurses, homemakers, or teachers; boys assemble down the hallway in the woodworking room to learn about careers as doctors, lawyers, or engineers. My friends and I aren’t surprised to be sitting in a room of stoves and sewing machines, where we’ve learned to bake biscuits and wind bobbins, cook Welsh rarebit and sew aprons. What surprises me now is that we never thought of storming the wood shop to demand a seat at the workbench. But feminism hadn’t found its voice in our corner of Indiana; we were content then with the choices given.

At the end of career day, we are asked to choose one profession. Rather randomly, and without any particular passion for teachers or teaching, I announce that I will become a teacher, an idea that sticks in my head throughout college and graduate school, more as default than commitment. But teaching, especially teaching writing, wasn’t an inevitable choice. In my family, reading was fine, in moderation, but too much reading could be dangerous. Various aunts who wore thick glasses or needed cataract surgery, for instance, were held up as object lessons from the Merck Manual of maladies, proof of the dangers of excessive reading under bed covers with a flashlight. And writing—even more fraught, warned my parents, nervous immigrants: if you write down what you believe, people will know your thoughts.

Despite all these warnings, I loved to read and write, studied American literature in college, and imagined teaching to be nothing more than bringing my love of Walt Whitman to my first classroom, eighth graders in Chicago. I imagined my students would love Whitman, too, if they could read poetry outdoors, luxuriating in the leaves of grass, marveling at the conjugation of the color green. I’m not sure whether my students learned to become better readers and writers that year, but I do know that I couldn’t control them, either inside or outside the...
classroom. They laughed and hooted when I announced, meekly, at the start of class: “Let’s be quiet now.” They had no desire to be quiet or to celebrate leaves of grass, though they had plenty to say, their bodies electric, brimming with the rhythms of Chicago’s South Side.

Looking back on the naïveté and youthful arrogance of that first year of teaching, I see that it’s clear how much that year was a song of myself, more soliloquy than exchange of voices, more my performance than the students’. It would take a decade or more for me to understand that teaching requires both humility and leaps of faith, and most importantly, a willingness to listen to, and learn from, students.

Narratives often unfold in surprising ways and as improbable as it seems from that first unsuccessful performance, I became a teacher and have stayed a teacher for thirty-five years. After all these years, I have started to wonder what sustains a life of teaching writing over a long career. Semester after semester, how do I find those corners in myself that rhyme with my students—and subject matter—to keep it fresh and new? When mentoring new teachers, their passions palpable, enthusiasm unbridled, I ask them to reflect on what brought them to education and find myself asking, after all these years of teaching, what has kept me here?

It is easy to answer such questions with a simple—well, of course, the students! Teaching, as Theodore Roethke remarked, “is one of the few professions that permits love.” And I love my students in all their particularity—the infinite variety of subjects they choose to write about, their compelling cultural backstories, present on every page, and their specific questions that unhinge long-held assumptions about writing. I can’t imagine more intimate and more important work than helping students develop as thinkers and writers. After class, I walk around, absorbed, as if in a trance, their questions and stories lodged in my brain.

Teaching writing is like that, absorbing and exhausting, in equal measures, and occupationally strange; we spend more time with students’ papers than with the students themselves—devoting nights and weekends to their words, careful not to leave traces of mustard or spill coffee on their pages, and puzzling, in their absence, about how to respond to their ambitious, sweeping introductions—“Since the dawn of humankind.”

I do not believe that I would return to the classroom, year after year, with the same passion for students or for teaching writing if I hadn’t joined my students on the page, not simply as the critic in the margins of their drafts, but as a fellow writer. When I began college teaching, I wouldn’t have dared to consider myself a writer, let alone someone who would pen anything other than required graduate seminar papers and a dissertation. It was my students, though, who in their struggles to become college writers gave me a subject to write about: it started with revision, and a passionate curiosity to understand why students’ revised drafts were often weaker than their initial attempts. What was going on, I wondered—why do some students prosper as college writers, while others lag, and what does revising have to do with these differences? In my students’ struggles to revise and in my difficulties responding to their drafts, I found subjects I loved writing about.
If my students gave me permission to write about them, and teaching gave me a subject, then CCCC gave me an audience. Most of my published essays were first delivered as talks in convention centers, or in Hyatt and Hilton hotels, where writing teachers mingle each year with other professional associations—Kiwani and Elk, African violet growers and Bovine practitioners—also gathered for their national conventions. In my gathering, I found a generous audience of fellow teachers, a willing group of listeners who might, if I could make the research interesting, listen to my observations about students and their writing. What I learned from my fellow teachers is the power of an audience to shape ideas and be shaped by them.

My students often ask me, “How do you write?” as if I might, magically, pull back a swirling curtain and offer passage through writing’s secret door. They want writing to become easier, more predictable, and seek a pass code to manage their unruly writing process. In answering, I like to defer to Saul Bellow, who when asked that question responded: “I wake up in the morning and check the alphabet to see if all the letters are still there. Then it is simply a matter of arrangement.” And sometimes writing seems that simple, moving the letters around to see where they land, being surprised, like a child playing with primary-colored block letters, to find these twenty-six letters arranging into recognizable words. At other times it feels as though I’m working in the wrong mother tongue, with consonants that don’t shape into words, an alphabet splayed on a page without form or meaning.

I don’t know how I write, really, only that when I write, the world has a certain tilt—everything is more interesting and vivid; everything becomes relevant in a different way, as if I’m searching for clues on a great scavenger hunt, filtering life through an idea I’m trying to locate. Like teaching, writing has its own consuming trance. If, after three decades, I’m more surefooted about teaching writing and more passionate about it, I imagine it is because I teach not from a set of secret codes or passwords, but from my own work as a writer, waiting to be surprised by the alphabet’s infinite possibilities; and from encouraging students to write as if they have an audience, a gathering, waiting to receive their words.

Perhaps my teaching narrative, when told retrospectively, seems inevitable, as narratives often do. But my narrative, more oscillating than sequential, has its threads of discontinuities and detours—of not being hired, six-months pregnant, because a department chair thought it unfair to students if I gave birth in the classroom; or of finding myself, in rural New Jersey, balancing motherhood with part-time teaching, a double life of diapering by day/teaching by night.

As my children grew up and I started writing, I led another kind of double life—teaching by day/writing by night or vice versa. The teacher in the classroom, dressed in a pin-stripe suit, exhorting her students not to split infinitives or dangle modifiers, sounded very different from the writer at home who composed sentences as she curried chicken, wiping cumin, cardamom, and cayenne off her fingers; or as she crafted essays to include all the living, breathing sources around her—found objects from home and work. The writer by night wanted to connect the dots, to figure out what she could make of these sources and her double life, teaching and writing, and to write as if everything were relevant.
It all sounds simple in retrospect, but writing is neither simple nor straightforward. I tell my students—writing is so uncomfortable and difficult at times, so always wear socks. And as I write, I wear my winter woolen socks, even in summer, to protect against the inevitable—an idea that seemed so interesting in its conception, but insubstantial in its execution; or a reviewer’s big red question marks to say, “You were really seeking the wrong clues on that scavenger hunt of yours; try again.” It takes many leaps of faith to write into, and not away from, the jumble of confused ideas in an early draft, and even more leaps to know how to do something different, better, in the next draft, hoping that on the other side, possibly, perhaps, a clearer vision will emerge.

Over the years as my teaching and writing narratives intertwined, I pulled up my socks and worked across drafts, seeking a voice that could push against the either/or categories of being personal or being academic. Voice is that elusive category we talk about with students—“find your voice,” we urge, as if they left it somewhere, in a dresser drawer, perhaps, as if they could purchase it on Amazon. But there is no lost and found drawer for voice, no way to shop for it, or stumble upon it. It is something you have to write your way into, something that takes practice and play, attempt after attempt, as you arrange the alphabet into comfortable shapes and sounds, listening for your own idiosyncratic take on the world. I tell my students they can’t park their voice at the college gates; they can’t write as if they’re wearing someone else’s socks. I, too, had to learn that I couldn’t write in the meek voice of a girl who winds bobbins, nor in the strident voice of a feminist who storms the woodworking shop. Part and parcel of who I am in the world is a teacher, and I want to write as I have come to teach: setting out on a quest, with leaps of faith and good humor, attempting, as essayists do, to figure something out, and always, always imagining an audience on the other end.

What sustains a career in teaching writing, year after year, to keep it fresh and new? Looking back, I see that what brought me to teaching—a desire to convert students into people who love to read poetry and conjugate the color green—is quite different from what has kept me in the classroom. What has kept me here is the passionate belief that teaching writing is, as it has always been “since the dawn of humankind,” both a literary and civic calling: helping students write clear declarative sentences repairs the world. To write “Be Specific” in the margins of students’ papers is to encourage a habit of mind—an attentiveness to details and particulars, to words and their meanings—a way of being thoughtful, both on the page and in life. And to comment on their drafts “Develop this” or “Analyze more” is to encourage students to add to the world through writing, to make new ideas possible, by contributing their idiosyncratic voices to the ongoing conversation of humankind.

What keeps me in the classroom, exhilarated each September to return after summer’s interlude, is that teaching, by now, is practiced and comfortable, familiar and recognizable, and not at all fresh and new. Perhaps these terms “fresh and new” are more suited to a double life, where something new, something fresh is always needed. Yes, each semester brings the excitement of new students, but after decades of teaching, you come to welcome being practiced and surefooted, with
an anecdote always at hand, building on what you’ve done before, with a keener sense of how to help students write with clarity and precision. And you welcome the comfortable feeling that you and your students, collectively, have a hunch that the writing class matters—that if you do your part, and they theirs, they’ll become stronger writers. You believe it because you’ve seen it happen, abundantly so. You’ve sat with students, bewildered when their ideas wouldn’t arrange, and gently asked: “Tell me what are you trying to say?” You’ve found ways to coax the saying, ways to turn students into writers, a class into an audience for each other’s work. And you know if you didn’t quite get it right one semester, you’ll tweak and adjust, revise it the next; teaching, like writing, is always a work-in-progress. You welcome the chance for your teaching voice and your writing voice to merge, giving you a sense of belonging, both in the classroom and on the page.

Sometimes I like to imagine a gathering of all my former students, a reunion of sorts, nothing gauzy or sentimental, no need for streamers or balloons, toasts or fancy speeches. I just want to ask: What did you make of our time together? Where have you taken your writing as you moved through college and into the wider world?

Writing is too small a word to describe what happened in our class. And if writing is too small a word, teaching writing is too small a phrase for something I hope extends beyond the classroom walls. I hope that they’ve taken the lessons of our class—about argument and audience, voice and style—to enter public debates, as thoughtful educated citizens. And I hope that they’ve found their own writing trances, their worlds tilting, absorbed and consumed by the pleasures of writing. Yet perhaps that’s not what they took from our time together. What I know, though, is that our narratives are inevitably woven together—that during our time together, we’ve helped each other find something to say, and a reason to say it.

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Call for Nominations

The CCCC Stonewall Service Award is presented annually and seeks to recognize members of CCCC/NCTE who have consistently worked to improve the experiences of sexual and gender minorities within the organization and the profession. Nominations should include a letter of nomination, 3–5 letters of recommendation, and a full curriculum vitae. Please send nominations to cccc@ncte.org by November 1, 2015. Please visit http://www.ncte.org/cccc/awards/stonewall for further details.