I first set foot in Dr. Blankenburg’s classroom as a ninth grader at Catonsville High School. To be perfectly honest, I was there because I had a massive crush on an older poet (we’ll call him Danny) and had ulterior motives when I volunteered to read for the school literary magazine, Ellipsis.

Even now, three decades later, I can remember how it felt to peer around Room 316 for the first time. Dr. Blankenburg was different from other teachers, and you could tell right away—from his large leather armchair to the bright posters plastered over most of his walls. Hanging plants suspended from the ceiling made the air feel lush and green. There was music on the radio. The windows were open.

Alas, “Danny” did not return my love. But Room 316 and me? We were a match. For the next four years, I would return week after week to gather with the assorted oddballs who found refuge in those after-school Ellipsis meetings. And a year later, in tenth grade, I signed up for Dr. Blankenburg’s creative writing class and decided that now I was a real poet. It was probably the single best academic decision I ever made.

Maybe I should mention at this point that I did not exactly excel in high school. I’d tested well enough to be placed in gifted classes, but a slew of health problems (and also a slew of attitude problems) made me a far-from-ideal pupil. I was often lazy, always impatient, and prone to endless debates with my teachers. (Poor teachers!) In the end, I got booted from some of those accelerated classes, though I managed to scrape by in a few of them with imperfect grades and incomplete assignments. I graduated from high school with a 2.4 GPA, but that didn’t matter. By the time I walked across the stage at graduation, I knew what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I was going to be a writer thanks to Room 316.

It wasn’t that Dr. Blankenburg thought I was a better student than I actually was. He could tell that I was lazy and impatient. He knew I often forgot to turn in work. In my senior year, when I was assigned to his English class for British Literature, I submitted my final term paper handwritten, scribbled in green felt-tip marker. This annoyed him, to be sure. I remember that he let out a deep sigh when he saw it. But he didn’t seem to think that made me a bad person. Rather, that made me a person. Imperfect like everyone else. Other teachers would say “Oh, Laurel, I just want you to do your best.” But Dr. Blankenburg labored under no such illusions. He knew that I wasn’t always doing my best. For some reason, he seemed to think that was okay.

And for me, in the years when I was having a hard time even showing up at school, that was a critical lesson. That we all—students and teachers alike—were just people trying to get along. Not always doing our best, but doing anyway, continuing on. I took from this lesson that one particular grade or test or sloppy presentation or terrible poem would never define me. That it was okay to fail daily and keep going. That, in fact, I would have to, if I wanted to be a writer. Or if I wanted to continue living in the actual human world.

Looking back, I think Dr. Blankenburg’s ability to see past our failings was rooted in his own sense of personal failure, about which he was extremely honest. Dr. Blankenburg was, in those years, suffering from a prolonged bout of writers’ block. To hear him tell it, he’d given up on ever writing anything worthwhile again. But
rather than becoming defensive or resentful of his
students’ prolific (if sometimes awful) attempts at poetry,
Dr. Blankenburg chose to share his misery, his attempts.
He was generous and truthful with us in a way that made
it feel reasonable—even inevitable—that we would all fail
regularly ourselves, and that we’d still be okay. As any
writer will tell you, this is an essential lesson we all have
to learn, because the publishing world is chock full of
failure and rejection, and will continue to be so, forever.
Writers fail daily in one way or another. Constantly
deleting, revising, starting over. If you can’t fail, you have
to quit.

If I’ve taken one lesson from Dr. Blankenburg that has
mattered more than all the others, it is this: failure is not
shameful when you share it. Failure only turns into shame
if you hide it away, if you bury it inside yourself. When
shared, failure breeds trust, a bond of sorts. It helps other
people to be more authentic and share their failures
too. In high school, I had never known an adult like Dr.
Blankenburg, and I’m not sure I’ve known anyone like
him since. Utterly transparent about his own self-doubt.

“I’m an old, old man,” he would
say, seated in the deep leather chair at
the front of the room. He would comb
his fingers through his long beard and
sigh, wistfully. And then he would ask
us to read our poems to him, which
we could do comfortably, because
he’d set the bar for success so darn
low. And though he always offered
criticism of one kind or another, Dr.
Blankenburg seemed to marvel at our
energy, our youth. He made us feel good about ourselves
and our silly dreams of writing poems forever and ever.
He encouraged us to keep at it, to keep failing in new and
better ways. Which is really all any artist can hope for.

There we were, clueless kids writing poems about
our adolescent heartbreak and our mean parents and
our disdain for society. But to Dr. Blankenburg, our
ability to write at all was a wonder. He encouraged our
looseness, our freedom, our willingness to share and fail
and try again. In a chapter of life when one is constantly
being tested and measured and compared to others—in
a moment when one is being asked to reach for the stars
and consider one’s permanent record, this was a massive
relief. In Room 316, I learned to be vulnerable and brave.
I learned not to pretend I was successful or overconfident.
I learned to expect vulnerability from others.

One might think that, in letting go of set expectations
and measurable outcomes, in letting go of success as a
model, Dr. Blankenburg might have diminished our
goals and dreams, but this was never the case. While
he seemed to feel that failure was inevitable in one
sense, he also believed deeply in literature, in poetry, in
communication and music and art, as vital aspects of
daily life. And this was another lesson I took from him—
that the creation of art is what makes life better or more
meaningful. That even when we fail in the pursuit of the
sublime, the fact that we attempt it is of value.

Dr. Blankenburg read us the poems he loved best and
brought in published local writers to share their work.
He loaned us copies of his favorite literary magazines
and told us about poetry events around the city. Then,
together, our little band of geeks would venture out in
borrowed cars, to sit and listen. In cafés and Unitarian
church halls, we drank dark coffee and caught a glimpse
of working artists, people who had made writing their
top priority and integrated it into their everyday lives.

This is a nice enough lesson when one is having
a hard time getting the words out, but it has perhaps
served me best when I am closest to something that feels
like success. When I publish a book and it gets some
nice reviews and I get to travel around and attend fun
conferences, it is dangerously easy to feel satisfied with what I’ve already
completed, with the work behind me. But this isn’t what makes me a writer.
What makes me a writer is that I write every day. That I read every day. That I
risk continuous failure and live daily as a writer. That I am in endless pursuit
of a mythical beast and that the quest
is what matters most.

Does that sound ridiculous, that I
am on an endless quest for the sublime? Maybe it does,
but when one has had a teacher who earnestly believes
in art, one is able to keep going on such a journey. I
have, in moments, lost my way. I have, at times, been
embarrassed to say these things out loud, to claim the
ridiculous search for the perfect words or a life devoted
to art. I have worried about the ego required to make a
life as an artist. But then I think about Dr. Blankenburg
and what he meant to me as a teacher, and I think that it
isn’t a selfish thing to make art. Rather, it’s what brings
us together with the other ridiculous questing people,
the other weirdos who think they might have something to
say to the world.

And that is maybe the final lesson I took from Room
316, though I didn’t know it for a long time after I was
gone. In gathering us together week after week, Dr.
Blankenburg modeled, without ever saying it explicitly,
how important the literary (and now the literacy)
community would be in my life.

Years later, in college, I would sit on the steps of my apartment in Tennessee and read poems aloud to my friends, who would in turn read to me. And when I moved to Atlanta thirteen years ago and found myself lost and lonely, I did a funny thing—I posted flyers around my neighborhood advertising that I was looking for other writers to meet for a beer. Because in a world where we sometimes make friends for random and irrelevant reasons, it means something to build friendships around the crazy love of words. It means something to fail together.

Today, when I’m having a dark moment, it is almost always the community of writers I turn to for reassurance. Or I attend a reading, just as Dr. Blankenburg taught me. I sit in a calm quiet room and swim around in someone else’s words, surrounded by the community of writers I first encountered in Room 316. A community gathered not because we were succeeding or gifted or Ivy-League bound, but because we were there, and we wanted to be. Even when we were doing a bad job. Even when we failed.

Looking back, I remember how clueless I was that first day. I only went looking for a cute boy who would never love me back. But you want to know something funny? To this day, “Danny” remains my friend. What’s more, he remains a writer, just like me. This is true of so many of us kids from Dr. Blankenburg’s class, far more than seems reasonable. We are scattered all over the country, but most of us are still connected to words, to the power of poetry and the satisfaction of writing daily. And in many cases, we are still connected to each other by the experiences we shared in Room 316. If that is not a testament to the power of a writing teacher, I don’t know what is.

I have had many teachers and mentors, and I am grateful to all of them—for believing I might succeed, for opening doors, and for helping me maximize my potential. But I think I’m most grateful to Dr. Blankenburg, who showed me how to be honest and vulnerable, who taught me to fail and keep going. It is because of him that I’m here today, sitting at my laptop, writing this essay for you. Of course, I’m doubting myself, as I always do. I’m reading back over what I’ve written and wondering—is it my best work? Have I succeeded? It never feels that way. But thanks to Dr. Blankenburg, I can finish this essay anyway. I can type THE END and hit send and walk away, knowing that even if I’ve failed, it’s okay. My work still matters, and—even when the words aren’t quite right—so do I.

---

**Fellowship Opportunity**

**Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color (CNV)** invites fellowship applications for its 2018–2020 cohort. This NCTE Research Foundation–supported program provides early career scholars of color with support, mentoring, and networking opportunities. In the program, doctoral candidates and doctoral graduates who have completed their dissertations up to two years prior to application cultivate their ability to draw from their own cultural/linguistic perspectives as they conceptualize, plan, conduct, and write their research. For more information on the program and guidelines on submitting an application, go to [http://www.ncte.org/research-foundation/cnv](http://www.ncte.org/research-foundation/cnv). Completed applications are due **March 15, 2018**.