

Our Writing Lives

I Write Because Writing Has Saved Me

BY MINDY HARDWICK

"What am I doing here?" I wondered.

I had volunteered at the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) booth at the Northwest Book Fest in Seattle. I was representing a writers organization, but I had never been published. I looked at the walls of the booth festooned with the covers of books by published authors, some well known. I wondered if the book police might appear, haul me off, and label me a fraud.

"Yet, I am a writer," I said to myself. My words are published in my church newsletters; I am working on a young adult novel; and I have a pile of short stories ready to be submitted to children's magazines. Of course, I, too, would like to see my work promoted on the walls of the book fest, but this is not the primary reason I write. I write because writing—particularly journal writing—has saved me.

I learned about the power of journal writing in high school. High school wasn't what I expected; I didn't make the pom-pom squad, even though I signed up for the creative writing class with the squad's adult advisor in the hope that she might get to know me. I wasn't chosen for the school paper, even though I took the journalism class in tenth grade with the same hope that the teacher might know me and choose me from the long list of applicants. As my dream of what high school might be like began to fall apart, I needed new dreams. Each night, I turned to my journal, documenting the day's details.

After school today, I went to a meeting for the school musical. I thought I would try out but then realized you have to be able to dance, sing, and act. I can act and dance, but not sing.

I also wrote about my frustrations with classes that wouldn't allow me to express my feelings.

Mrs. S. says write only about positive things in our journals. If I feel like it, I'll

write about negative things. I can't help my emotions.

And I wrote about trying to find my voice rather than what everyone else wanted me to do.

Remind me next time to listen to what my heart and intuition are telling me and not what other people are telling me.

In college, I majored in creative writing and worked on the school literary magazine. After college, I applied to creative writing masters programs in Boston and the Midwest and dreamed of days spent working for bustling publishing companies in the East. Instead, I moved to the West Coast and received rejection letters to the graduate programs I thought would be best.

My life was not making sense; the dreams I had planned were not coming true. So again, I turned to my journal, writing for hours, struggling to make sense of the next direction in life.

Eventually, I did earn my teaching certificate and took a teaching job, and during my first year, I kept a journal, writing about the day's classes and students. I recorded events that confused me and the lessons that made me remember why I taught. After my first attempt at small student groups, I wrote,

It's enough to make your head spin. No more groups for a while at least. Individual seat work instead.

Sometimes I wrote about the small successes that came in the classroom.

A student thanked me when I told him we were making Cave Art. This is the best thing we've done in here all year. The next day he appeared carrying all his late and missing work.

And I wrote about my doubts.

I am the authority. They raise their hands, looking to me for their answers. How do I

tell them they have their own answers?

Then, after six years in a classroom with middle school students, I found myself ready for a change. But what? Again, I turned to a journal and began to write, trying to find a new direction for myself.

The snow fell all day as I taught my new students in the second semester. I looked at the snow and thought it's like the snow days of childhood, playing school. And for a moment, I thought if it could be like this all the time, when did it become so much work and so little joy?

I also wrote in my journal after I gave notice that I was leaving my job.

My life seems to hang in limbo. I swim and I write and I try hard not to think about the fact that I jumped with no net. In August, all the security of the last six years will be gone.

In the morning before school, I would sit at the kitchen table and make lists of what I wanted in a job, what talents I could offer, and places where I was willing to work. Eventually, a new job materialized in a new school, and I teach there now.

So, am I a writer? And what does writing mean to me? At one time in my life, I wrote in my journal to make sense of my world, to find my emerging voice. Today, when I can't find my voice, I go back to my journals for inspiration. In the past, I wrote because it seemed the only option available to me in a world that often didn't make sense. Today, I write because it is a part of me; to not write is to ignore who I am. I am a writer.

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