ENTER: THE MADWOMAN

BY JOAN MELBERGER

Time flies. Time waits for no (wo)man. Time heals all wounds. A time to every purpose (under heaven). Time to begin.

Hardest part of any project is the first step. Try taking “baby steps.” How many steps before the queen? Don’t step on the grass. Look for the stepping stones in the water. Try not to get your new shoes wet.

Stepping stones. He said to write our stepping stones. There we were—pen to paper—writing in the silence. Too much silence. Silence is deafening. Pencils were scratching. Heads were scratched. Don’t scratch that itch or it will become infected! We had hardly “scratched the surface” when time turned toward the telling.

Scratching set aside for now. Clichés define us. Stones embedded on the papers. Storytellers crying over painful truths. Peeling back of layers of scars—remember not to scratch that itch! Why are we doing this? Where is the reward? Show me the money! Money is the root of all evil.

We are here to talk of curriculum and of writing— in fact—Writing Across the Curriculum. This water might be too deep. Will the stones help in that wading? Will we know when we have safely made it ‘across’?

First efforts are still very sloppy. (Lin said, “Writing is messy.”) Is this how real writers write? My own writing feels like senseless graffiti. Who would want THIS scrawled across any wall—across the curriculum, even?

When it comes down to exchanging clichés for mind storms, my judges are here. “Judge” you say? I have the entire Supreme Court in session—robes and all. And, they do not like what they see. This is not easy. Everyone is having success; they are confident. The groups have met. These are good people deserving of time well spent. So just who will scrub all the graffiti from us? Each of the group has her own story to tell. Each carries a backpack to school. These packs are laden with stories of life. Some stories are shoved to the bottom of the pack, hoping the rocks (stones?) on top will weigh them down, flatten them out, and press out all life. Other stories are lighter—they rise to the top.

Here comes the judge! Here come the clichés; it is so easy to weave them into protective covering. When will the creative feelings emerge? Where are we headed?

Joan Melberger Explains

During July of 2000, I enrolled in a writing course to enhance my skills and to gain insights into the business of helping high school students improve their own writing. As a teacher of business subjects, I teach/have taught students to understand and to practice technical writing—that required in accounting documents and in computer programs. In this genre, there is little margin for creativity; in fact, creative writing in tax returns will garner the wrong kind of attention from the Internal Revenue Service. Likewise, computer programs have been known to fail from such indignities as a misplaced or missing hyphen.

Early in this intense writing course (George Mason, English 695, Writing Across the Curriculum) our teacher, LinSpencer, treated us to a classroom session with Vic Kryston, a consultant to the writing project. Following a brief introduction to the article “Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process” by Betty Flowers, we were expected to suddenly turn creative. One of the several assignments Vic gave us that morning was to think on a topic—stepping stones. The general idea was to write a quick list of those events we would mark as turning points in life. It was from this writing that I drew references in my “Madwoman” piece.

Previous classroom discussion with Lin had enabled us to understand that the writing process is neither typically fluid nor automatic. It requires a willingness to stumble and bump along as discoveries are made. The first phase (Flowers) is described as the “madman” phase. The writing at this point is expected to be at its crudest level. Only with thought and the intervention of writing groups might the “madman” product evolve. The rest of the metaphor—architect, carpenter, judge—would allow for an increasingly more critical “eye” to evaluate the revised writings and polish them into a “possibly publishable” piece.

As a culminating project in this writing course, each participant was expected to amble through the four phases (madman, etc.) and to present a finished product for publication in a class anthology. I struggled to free the madman (woman) and come up with something decent. With apologies to Vic and to Lin (and to Betty Flowers), I offer the piece you see above. You may decide for yourself whether the architect, carpenter, and judge were ever given a chance.

Works Cited

Joan Melberger is a business education teacher at Annandale High School in Annandale, Virginia.

Reprinted with permission from The Journal of the Virginia Writing Project, September/October 2000.