How I Evolved as a Writer

BY RICHARD HARTWELL

“We were twelve days out of Auckland, New Zealand, when it struck…”

This sentence was the opening line of a short story I wrote for a creative writing class when I was 12 years old. I went on to describe a storm of such fury that my boat was dashed to pieces on an uncharted South Sea island, and I had to make do, a la Robinson Crusoe. Defoe, it was not. Melville, it was not. Hemingway, it was not. But what it was, was me… at 12. It was the first time I wrote dynamically, with a purpose, and for me. It was written in one sitting and then polished, if that’s possible in junior high school, over the next two days. I threw myself into the process completely.

This sea tale comes to mind whenever I think about my evolution as a writer—mostly because of my teacher’s reaction. If I recall correctly, he didn’t think much of my story. He wrote “Nice” in the margin and then proceeded to correct the spelling, grammatical, and syntactical errors. I don’t recall being very grateful for these editorial comments. In fact, if he wrote anything of greater substance than this, the nature of his comments—like his name and face—has long since passed from my memory.

I could have used this as a learning moment and improved my writing. I could have continued to write short stories. I did neither because I had encountered the obvious fact that my lack of mechanical skills was more important than what I had to say. Instead, feeling totally dashed by my teacher’s insensitivity to what I was trying to do as a writer, I withdrew into myself and, like so many adolescents, became a closet poet.

Although I had always been a reader, I now became an absolutely voracious one and was often found hungrily prowling the shelves of the city library. I was fortunate to fall in with the part-time night librarian, Ms. Vera Swaboda, who was also the Latin teacher at the high school. Unlike my foggy memory of the creative writing teacher, my recollection of Ms. Swaboda is crystalline. After repeatedly thwarting my attempts to borrow books from the adult section (this was, after all, the late ‘50s and early ‘60s), Ms. Swaboda began to track my reading interests. She discovered my tastes were eclectic… and exhaustive. But she must have approved, for she granted me license to check out books from the adult section, and, miracle of miracles, she allowed me to borrow five books at a time! With her help and suggestions, I read my way through the entire library holdings of each author I touched, or rather, each author who touched me. She allowed and encouraged me to be a reader, which, in turn, allowed and encouraged me to be a writer once again.

My reading became a Joycean stream of consciousness. As an example, I read all of Ernest Hemingway, including The Snows of Kilimanjaro, Africa, right? That led to James Ramsey Ullman’s The Day on Fire. Arthur Rimbaud in Africa, right? After reading all the Ullman in the library, I read all of Rimbaud. This led to Baudelaire, which led to Blake, which led to… Well, you get the idea: I was immersed. You’ll pardon the extended metaphor, since my shipwreck in seventh grade, I was awash in the glories of language—the twist of a phrase, the juxtaposition of words crashing against or melting into one another. To borrow from Rimbaud, I was drunk on words; Le Bateau Ivre, and I was embarking on my education as a writing craftsman.

I started to write again—mostly poetry but some short pieces as well—imitating authors I was reading. But it was not until the 11th grade that I would again share my writing with anyone. Finally, I decided to show some of my poetry to my English teacher, Mrs. Miriam Self. She asked to keep it overnight. She didn’t mark it up. She returned it privately and praised it. She asked to see more and told me to write more. Don’t misunderstand; I still had little to no command of the mechanics of writing (and perhaps I still don’t), but I finally felt free to write, encouraged to write, and validated as a writer. So I continued to write.

I graduated high school, went away to have some life experiences (the usual: marriage, deaths, Vietnam, drugs, divorce, etc.), and finally made it back into school. On the G.I. Bill, I enrolled at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit liberal arts school, and among other classes, I had to take “bonehead” English. Our class was taught by Fr. Francis Duggan, a dedicated Jesuit who, I’m certain, had survived the Holy Inquisition and, depending on your point of view, may have even participated. To open the class, he read John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to us. He read it with us. We read it independently. Then he told us to write a paragraph describing the scene on the urn that Keats had described so poetically.

My paragraph got an F. It had mechanical mistakes, of course, but Fr. Duggan noted that I rambled. He suggested that I hadn’t said anything new, that I wasn’t descriptive, and that I needed to hone and polish my phrases. I felt terrible. This was my first quarter in college, and I was tempted to chuck it all. Instead, I made an appointment to discuss my grade with him.

Fr. Duggan had me rewrite the paragraph. He corrected it again. It earned a D. He told me to focus, refine, and rewrite it again. I did, and again he corrected it. This time, I earned a C-. And so on and on until—and this will sound like an exaggeration—I had rewritten that paragraph seven times. The paragraph finally received a B+, but what I had gained, besides an excellent grade, was some inkling of what it means to be a writer.

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Writing, like reading, is a process not a product, and it is a process of constant revision and refinement. Fr. Duggan didn't tell me not to rewrite the paragraph again (I probably could have gone on indefinitely); what he did say was that at some point a writer lets go and allows the piece to be "finished." I guess I still haven't let go of "We were twelve days out of Auckland, New Zealand, when it struck" but somewhere along the way, along with the detritus of failed marriages and career redirections, the manuscript of that story has been discarded. Interestingly, the final revision of "A Paragraph on 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" is still among my papers.

Since my time with Fr. Duggan, I have been in and out of so many schools that I've lost count. I've earned an AA, a BA, an MA, and multiple teaching credentials. I have numerous rejection notices from publishers but have yet to be published for money. I write. I teach writing. I study writing. Am I a writer? Insofar as a writer is willing to "let go," then, yes, I am a writer. Do I make a living from writing? Then, no, I am not a writer. But I have great difficulty in separating the reader from the writer anyway. I would not be the writer I am today if I had not become the reader I am. As well, I would not be the reader I am today if I had not become a writer along the way. Obviously, this is an unfinished autobiography of myself as a writer. However, it is time to let go . . .

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