Writing Within a Community

The following is excerpted from a speech Dr. Kim Bridgford, Associate Professor of English at Fairfield University in Connecticut, gave at the Connecticut Writing Project's celebration of its 15th anniversary and its new affiliation with Fairfield University.

BY KIM BRIDGORD

The focus of my talk today is on writing as community. There are three levels of community that I need in order to thrive: 1) a one-on-one relationship with someone I trust to be honest about my work, 2) a class-size community to discuss not only the writing itself, but issues surrounding the writing, and 3) lastly, a community of readers. I think that many student writers understand the need for private time to write, yet are less certain about how their work connects with other people. One of our jobs as teachers is to remind students of the importance of these communities. One of my former students said, "I knew I had grown up as a writer when I realized other people had to care about my work. Otherwise why was I writing?"

The concept of writing as community may seem paradoxical, since most people associate writers with solitude. Bonnie Friedman talks about both the difficulty and joy of facing that solitude. She, like many of us, sometimes procrastinates, so difficult is it to face that blank page. She would rather kill flies, feed her cat, or answer the phone—anything—than sit down to write (Friedman 15–16). However, when she actually begins writing, it is an intricate and beautiful process. She explains, "In New York I saw a Buddhist monk making a sand mandala. He had six or seven bowls of colored sand—egg-yolk orange, midnight blue, dusty gray among them—and a metal cone the size of a bull's horn, which had a tiny hole at the end…. In the hour I watched... the monk shaped the tail of a lion... It would take three months to finish the work. It would take hundreds of hours of steady focus. Then, when it was done... He'd throw it to the wind" (Friedman 20). The gift of solitude is being able to surrender to the writing in just this way, although most writers I know would keep extra copies of their manuscripts.

The smallest community—the one-on-one honest relationship—is crucial in the development of a writer. For many people, this person is a mentor, for others a friend, still others a spouse or parent. However, if you choose any of the last three, remind that person to be honest. Remember that your mother will always love you. My mother has a pile of my childhood manuscripts, which she reminds me of whenever we see each other. She cries, and then I cry too—especially thinking about the doubtful quality of some of those manuscripts. Let me give you an example. I wrote a novel in the fifth grade. It was not successful. In brief, it was an international crime novel with a cast of nefarious types, all to be dealt with by a nine-year-old girl named Veronica. Her nickname was Ronnie; I suppose to make her androgynous and difficult writing structured poetry is? He does. Doesn't the nineteenth century have virtues? It does. Then I look at the poem again. He is right.

Without a good reader and editor, you are likely to fall in love with your faults and not love your strengths enough. You may not communicate what you most want to say. Many of my students confuse what they're saying with how they're saying it. To me, the content of the piece is less important than the craft. I have been surprised by poems about outer space, crows, a pea, fishing holes, and Stevie Ray Vaughan—not necessarily all subjects I would have chosen. Yet when I read a good piece of writing, I am interested; I am flying with the words down the page.

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...more elusive. The book was called "The Four Seasons," but ran out of steam with the third. One character's maiden name was Debbie.

Whether we are ten years old or forty, we need help. The writing process is usually sloppy, and yet because of the difficulty in getting started and our relief at filling the pages, we sometimes forget there's work yet to do, once we have reached our goal. Annie Dillard tells us, "Several delusions weaken the writer's resolve to throw away work. If he has read his pages too often, those pages will have a necessary quality, the ring of the inevitable, like poetry known by heart; they will perfectly answer their own familiar rhythms. Sometimes a writer leaves his early chapters in place from gratitude" (Dillard 6).

The person who helps me is my husband, a fiction writer himself and an astute editor. I can spend days working on a poem, and he will find the most vulnerable parts in five minutes. "The ending isn't right. You haven't quite hit it," he might say, or "The language is fuzzy. What do you mean?" Occasionally, for a reason I can't really explain, I write as if I lived in the nineteenth century. He will remind me of this when I start to declaim a poem, as if the high-necked dress and button-top boots were materializing before his eyes. For a moment, I am silent, and then of course, I want to explain away the flaws of my poem. Does he know how

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should be commented upon, on the other. I've had students ask, "Who am I to comment on someone's feelings?" I would reframe the question to "Who am I to comment on someone else's poem?" but my answer is "Who if not you?"
If we are writing in any larger community, it is our responsibility as readers to register our responses. Then the writer can take those responses and consider them. Without such detailed comments, the writer has little, if anything, to work with later and might as well have stayed home and gotten some writing done.

Although I have heard some negative stories about workshop sessions, including one involving a student who set another student's work on fire and said, "That's what I think of the story," most people suffer more, in the long run, from groups that are too kind. It's always nicer to receive the compliments, like a box of Godiva chocolates. Yet, later, you're left knowing that the poem is unfinished, that you're having difficulty placing it, and perhaps feeling that people have been patronizing. I would rather hear what is getting in the way of my work, at least as I have envisioned it. For example, years ago, I wrote a poem about a woman in an insane asylum; people in my workshop thought the poem was about making bread. I know there are some who would say that it is up to the reader to interpret the poem. However, for me, this situation was a problem. I began again and may have even titled the poem "Woman in an Insane Asylum" in order to keep on track.

The truth is, honesty from a group, like that from a mentor, saves you time. Several years ago my mother decided to experiment by painting the front door of her house a different color. As each of the children arrived home for the holidays, we complimented my mother on how beautiful everything looked—and it did: the tree flickering with lights, the decorations throughout the house, her thoughtful sleeping arrangements for everyone arriving. Then, later, she asked all of the children, "Be honest, now. How do you like the door?" The members of the workshop will tell you if they don't like the door but will also cherish you for the way in which you present yourself. If they don't like the color of the door, that doesn't mean they don't like the house.

References


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