

A Mother Agonizes over College Application Essays

By PAT FOX

For weeks, my teenage daughter had been locked in the procrastinator's emotional clutches. Finally it was the eleventh hour, and I dared not leave her alone to write her college application essays. She needed me to generate ideas, conference, revise, edit and help her celebrate. After all, I was a writing teacher, director of the Fox Valley Writing Project. I should know how to inspire her, create a warm and supportive atmosphere, and conference with her to draw out her voice and personal insights. Yale would love her. Columbia would beg her to attend. How fulfilling, taking everything that I know and putting it to good use right at home in our own study. What an opportunity!

Christmas celebrations were over, and we had four days to complete four applications before the December 31 deadline. I left her on her own to begin. Available for consultation, I stuck around the house. "Need any help? How's it going?" "Fine, Mom, just fine." It was an excruciating time. I bit two nails, something I had not done since leaving the classroom. I dusted. I baked cookies, made tea, provided healthy snacks. When her friends called, I

answered with a distant chill to my voice and passed the phone over to her. Conversations were brief. I left the room and returned to the kitchen.

Finally, a rough draft floated onto the counter. "Here, Mom, will you read this?" I was thrilled. At last, I could get involved. We could conference. My questions would be inspiring, cutting right to the core issue, tapping the well of her creativity. I read the essay. What was her point? What did she mean by these various vague phrases? "Well, Mom, just think about it," she said. I struggled. What could I ask? How could I phrase an inspiring question when all I wanted to say was, "Huh? I don't get it, Dear. What are you trying to say?" I complimented her on the clear writing and asked her to clarify the part about love and beauty being sisters....

She then passed the essay on to her brother, a college junior. He wrote all over it. Lines here, arrows there. He blasted her. He laughed. He teased. He yelled, "What is this?" He reminded

her of her third grade poem, "Falling": *I am falling, falling, falling*. They laughed. She listened to him. I backed off and let them work together, an example of brutally honest peer conferencing before my eyes. I went for a walk with the dogs and tried to relax. It was out of my hands. I came

in later to help with a final edit of a greatly improved piece of writing. Two days and three essays remained, but the monster of vagueness had been slain

by humor, brotherly ridicule and hard work. We conferred with her and kept the snacks, tea and encouragement flowing as the deadline approached. By four o'clock Friday afternoon, I was exhausted. Her father took her to the post office where they mailed off the four precious packages. That night, we all went out to parties to celebrate the New Year, whatever it would hold.

Now we wait until April. Then we will celebrate. I hope. I pray. She will sit in the author's chair and read her acceptances. And I will weep with relief. ✍️

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