Adolescent Writing Paragraph by Paragraph

BY BONNIE FAUMAN

In recent years, teachers have added some new forms to their basic bag of motivational tools to inspire student writing — the I-Search paper, the Dialectical Journal, and the internal monologue, for instance. But this does not mean that the tried and true writing prompt babies should be thrown out with the proverbial bath water.

One of the representative forms that remains valid, particularly for middle school students, is the autobiographical vignette. Most of us have learned how to direct these autobiographical writing prompts. We know that the classic request to write about “What I Did on My Summer Vacation” is likely to produce uninteresting chronologies while the more specific “My Most Memorable Meal” may summon rich details of mouth-watering prose.

On the contrary, however, a teacher does not want to make the personal prompt too specific. Almost every student, for instance, can find room to get into the topic “A Lie I Told,” but if the prompt were on the topic “A Lie I Told to My English Teacher,” large numbers of students would claim they have never lied to an English teacher. Some of them would be telling the truth.

But as teachers we should understand that when an autobiographical prompt is broad enough to include everyone, we need to be prepared for a whole variety of responses. When I assigned the prompt, “A Lie I Told,” I urged students to treat this topic lightly, telling a fib turned out to be funny, or perhaps, how the lie backfired, resulting in a little moral lesson.

Many pupils who chose to write about fibs and lies did, in fact, write about innocuous topics: one girl told of putting the supper dishes away when she knew them to be unclean, others wrote about staying up late with the TV or with a book under the bed covers. There were stories of borrowing a sibling’s clothes without permission and eating half a gallon of ice cream and blaming it on the dog — all time-honored 12-year-old topics. There were others:

At a party I went to, I was asked if my dress was new, and I said, “Yes, it is.”
But really, my mom bought it at a shop that sells used clothes. I felt funny lying because the party was at my church, and God might have heard me.

Andrew read his composition to the class, at the request of Rebecca who sat behind him reading over his shoulder. A sheepish grin widened over his mouthful of braces as he read:

One Saturday when my parents were playing golf, I broke the antenna off the little kitchen TV. The man at the hardware store sold me a new one and I learned how to replace it without my parents ever knowing anything. About a week later, my mother said to my stepfather, “I thought the TV antenna was silver. Here it is, gold. What do you know.” I went into my bedroom and never said anything.

Other students entered a more seriously confessional mode. Caroline wrote:

I stole some little soaps from a pushcart in the mall. I feel bad. My mother suspected that something was wrong, and asked me, “Did you do anything at the mall today that you wouldn’t be proud to tell me?” I said, “No.” I know it was a long time ago but I still feel awful because I think I was wrong.

But another student went even further, using the opening I had provided to write of a dark and devastating secret. Alex wrote and wrote while others were wrapping up or finished. Her brow was furrowed in concentration and melancholy. Her eyes never wavered from her computer screen. When the printout came out twenty minutes after the class was over, I found her typed paper.

On the weekends I go to hockey and I am the goalie. So I have to wear more equipment than the rest of the team. I play for the Red Hornets, an all boys team. I don’t like to lie, but I love to play hockey, so I suit-up and go out and nobody on the other team ever knows I’m a girl. When I’m asked a question I answer, “Grunt” which doesn’t come out sounding like the way it’s spelled. It helps that my name is Alex. It could be anybody’s name. I don’t tell the truth, and I don’t lie. Who cares anyway?

But this funny story, which may itself have been a little lie, was not the story Alex wanted to tell. At the end of her hockey piece, Alex had typed in a big, bold font:

PLEASE GO TO MY FILE AND READ THE PARAGRAPH I WROTE UNDER ‘DAD, I DIDN’T PRINT IT OUT, BUT YOU CAN READ IT.

Knowing that it might be important, I found a quiet moment and her disk, and read what she had written:

I tell a lie all the time. I say that my dad died of a heart attack and that’s not really what he died from. I’m scared to tell you what he died of. When I was five years old, he got
drunk and went to a tree and hung himself. He used to go to the Dunkin' Donuts across the street, so he knew the best tree. The next morning two detectives came to my house and I was asleep so my mother answered the door and let them in. The police said there was a body hung last night and he had a wallet with this address in it. My mom had to go to the station to identify the body later. “But first, I have one more question,” said the officer. “Does he have any children?” And my mother said yes, that there was me. It was my dad. He actually killed himself. I’d rather say it was a heart attack.

Alex’s paper seems an emotional torture and a catharsis. Normally, however, these directed but open-ended prompts usually bring predictable responses, and a teacher can be pretty sure what seventh graders will write when asked to explore a general topic.

“A Time I Disappointed Myself” usually brings repartee about not studying for a major test, bullying a neighborhood child, or letting a baby cry until a commercial break while watching a TV show during a babysitting job. But the teacher needs to be prepared as well for the exception when a child replays an incident that is more revealing.

_A Time When I Disappointed Myself_
_by Juan C._

_We came back from a week of vacation at Cape Cod and the car was filled with garbage bags. There was leftover food in one, dirty and wet clothes in another, garbage and dirty diapers that smelled up the car, and games. We passed a dump in Mansfield and my father pulled into the dirt road. He told me to get out and throw away the garbage and the trash, which I did. After another twenty-five minutes or so, my parents realized that the smell hadn’t gone away, and that I had thrown out the dirty clothes, worth hundreds of dollars. They didn’t get mad or yell. They knew how I felt. They turned around but by the time we got to the dump it was too dark to go hunting for our stuff among all the other garbage bags, every one green too. If my dad had yelled, I wouldn’t be so disappointed in myself. I wish he had gotten mad instead of upset._

In the last two sentences here, Juan seems to be dealing with the real source of his hurt and disappointment, an insight that may not have occurred to him before this writing.

For the teacher, writing like this is a kind of trade off. While the exercise may be cathartic for the student, the teacher is cast into a role of intruder on a secret diary entry. Any personal topic, regardless of how seemingly unobtrusive, may lead a student to explore issues that some teachers believe are none of a teacher’s business.

Despite the risks, however, these autobiographical paragraphs motivate students to move beyond writing to fulfill an assignment toward writing that means something to them.

So I propose that as we go through changes in writing education, we hold on to our belief that the directed autobiographical paragraph remain a powerful tool for all students, particularly middle schoolers. Such narratives may prove enlightening and surprising to students — and especially to their teachers.

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