Personal Memory and Fictional Character

by Kim Stafford

For years I have gone to class unprepared to teach. Please don’t tell my Dean. I don’t want to live this way, and I’m sometimes stricken with guilt. But the world is such a busy place, and the phone rings, the in-box fills with mail I feel I must answer, and I’m so optimistic about my ability to do it all that class-time rolls around, and I haven’t planned my lecture on how to write.

On second thought, though, maybe this inability is actually my greatest resource. Maybe you should tell my Dean — that I have, by force of long practice, attained a Zen-like presence of mind when I walk into class “unprepared.” In this trancelike state, everything becomes rich opportunity for teaching.

I remember a conversation I overheard between a faculty member and our writer in residence, Jim Heynen.

“I would consider it unconscionable,” said the professor, “to begin a class session without complete preparation — an understood subject of inquiry and agreement on relevant texts considered well in advance.”

“I would consider it unconscionable,” Jim replied, “to begin class with such an established sense of subject and relevant resources that we would prevent the intuitive connections at the heart of true learning.”

Of course the truth lies between these extremes, but I lean toward Jim’s hunch. I remember my father saying that early in his teaching career, he would ask himself at the beginning of each term, “Have I read enough to be a good teacher?” And he would have to answer, “No, not yet.” Then one year, when he asked himself this question, he realized he could answer, “Yes, I have now read enough to be a good teacher.” But then a different question presented itself: “Am I a good teacher?” And he had to answer, “No, I’m not — not always. For it’s like art: sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t.”

Another time he said to me that the days he found himself carrying all kinds of readings and plans to class, he knew he wasn’t prepared to teach. But when he approached class with nothing, except a question or two in which for some reason he felt great confidence, then he was ready.

It often happens that thirty minutes before a three-hour graduate writing seminar is to begin, I am standing at my desk looking at the clutter before me with a wild hunter’s total concentration: what from my current mail, my recent reading or travel, or from the notebook in my pocket might form the basis for our time tonight? Almost always, I am overwhelmed with treasure. For I find I have been preparing nonstop since the last class, simply by attending to the richest things I stumble upon. A lecture I attend, a story I read, a conversation I overhear, a quirky juxtaposition I observe, even a dream or a line from my own writing may braid their way into a sequence of writing and discussion activities we will productively try together. There may even be a short lecture in the mix, or what often feels like a sermon when I come to give it.

To test this more charitable interpretation of my teaching habits, I have typed up, as an exercise, the cluster of ideas, readings, and invitations I grabbed for a recent three-hour seminar at the Northwest Writing Institute. In the preceding week, my wife and I had attended a lecture by Kazuo Ishiguro; browsing in the library, I had been seduced by a book on Edward Hopper; nights I had been reading a biography of Emerson; my students’ questions the previous week had me thinking about Carol Bly’s The Passionate, Accurate Story, which I was bringing to class — and somehow all this led me to imagine a series of writing invitations sparked by an old idea from the short story writer, H.E. Bates. As we sat down together, I asked the class (searching for an opening) if they had some recent questions suggested by the writing they had been doing. One said, yes, she was wondering what to do with some pieces she had written for a memoir class, now that she wanted to turn to fiction. This caused me to pull out my notebook, and read to her what I had written following the lecture by Ishiguro, and we were on our way. Here is roughly how it went:

1. Kazuo Ishiguro talks about the “vacuum” surrounding certain fictional characters. They are defined by what they don’t say, what they don’t do. The most powerful thing about Spencer, the butler in Remains of the Day, for example, is the torrent of feeling he never allows to surface, the life story of companionship and expression he never allows to rise from his polite restraint. Ishiguro says that in his novel Pale View of the Hills, he has told a story based on vacuums — holes devoid of information but surrounded by tremendous expectation. The novel begins with a woman making a bold announcement about her daughter’s suicide, then saying nothing more about this. Instead, she tells another story. It may be too painful sometimes, Ishiguro says, to tell something directly. So the oblique story carries the resonance it does not directly tell.
2. Characters in Edward Hopper’s paintings — the cafe couple in “Nighthawks,” for example, or the woman with the letter in “Hotel Room,” the couple in “Sea Watchers,” the lone figure in “Automat” — are at the end of some story not specified. They sit still, remembering. Some episode of excitement, of coherence has passed, and left them in their silence. (This suggests the writing exercises of writing what one Hopper character will never tell another, or writing one of your own memories in the voice of a Hopper character, or writing the dialog of the couple when they first met, or a monologue of inner thoughts by one, the other….)

3. Goethe said, “The beginning and end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me.” Edward Hopper kept this quotation in his wallet, and told friends, “To me, that applies to painting from memory.”

4. The novelist H.E. Bates reports that he would regularly write quick biographies of people he glimpsed on trains, or in parks in the anonymity of London. He would intuit from the carriage of the body, the set of the face, the helpless expressions of hand and eye a whole life predicament. These sketches became the basis of his fictional characters. On several occasions, he found out by chance the truth of his intuitions — with a glimpse, he had seen it all.

5. Emerson had this to say on the use of familiar things in art: “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lessons for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impressions with good-humored inflexibility, then most when the cry of voices is on the other side.”

6. Question: how can writers draw on their reservoir of memory without being limited to strict autobiography? How can we avoid “spending our capital,” but instead learn to write forever on the interest from our capital: fiction based on the library of memory transformed? Every vivid memory holds some essential truth about one’s vision of the world. How to refract this through characters?

7. Someone said that all you have forgotten becomes compost for the garden of your imagination.

8. One rich beginning for writing of all kinds is the 3-10,000 word autobiography recommended by Carol Bly in The Passionate. Accurate Story. (I do urge a reading of that book with all its richness about this project.) One approach is to write episodes of a page or two in the order they occur to you, without regard to chronology or “importance” of the memory. This becomes a basis for poetry, fiction, essay, and other forms, in addition to strict memoir.

9. This all suggests an exercise for writers, by which we can draw on memory but produce fiction. We can savor strangers around us, and invite them to become fictional characters in possession of our own most vivid recollections. I invite everyone to try some variation of the following:

- Write your random autobiography of 3-10,000 words in a series of episodes garnished with maximum detail. No order, no development, just rich moments told in particular. Get 5-10 pages into this project this week, and then keep going until you reach 10,000 words.

- Collect a set of characters from observation of strangers in life and art: half-page profiles of intuited wants, fears, family backgrounds, adventures, losses, weaknesses, visions, and other internal and external particulars — just start taking dictation on your guessing faculty as you observe characters around you.

- Do some listing and clustering in which you graft several of your own memories onto particular characters you have observed (it might be wise to change gender, age, and social situation so you don’t end up writing about yourself, or someone very much like yourself).

- Write a story in which two or more of these characters meet and tell some truth, hide some truth, and see what happens. You are grafting yourself onto the stranger and telling that hybrid life with full freedom.

The idea is for characters you half-observe and half-invent to remember and enhance things you actually did in ways that make them discover things you have never known.

10. You don’t write your whole life, but the vivid parts that have stayed with you. You don’t write a character’s whole story, but —continued on p. 13
Writing: Hows and Whys

Prewriting, models, perhaps a piece of great literature, the class period is nearly over and instead of allowing the release that comes with an extended period of time for writing, the teacher looks at the class and says, "Well, we're just about out of time for today, folks, so we'll pick up tomorrow where we left off." Not bloody likely. I wouldn't want to imply that I haven't guessed wrong about the pace of a class period. I simply want to remind all of us that such occurrences must be the rare exception rather than the rule.

Let's say that we've created the ideal conditions for launching a writing activity. We've allotted enough writing time. We're managing to keep our mouths shut. Our final chance to extinguish the fires of urgency before they have a chance to rage out of control is to dishonor our students' experience by turning to an unrelated task.

"This is sacred writing time," we say, but what we do is pick up the roll book, or a stack of papers, or the book order, or whatever other paperwork seems most pressing to us at the moment. I'm not naive enough to assert that a teacher should never take care of paperwork during school hours. However, I do believe that if we hope our children will take writing seriously, that if we expect them to give it their full intellectual attention, we must write with them. We must honor the seriousness of the work we are asking them to do by doing it ourselves. We must recognize that moments of growth for our students, the very formation of the safe classroom for writing, depends on our being an ordinary citizen in the community of writers rather than its mayor, or worse yet the bookkeeper.

And last, if we would help them look forward to the next occasion for writing with a glad heart, we would give them time to share their words, even if only with one other person. If I've written a poem, for example, I'm generally feeling terrified but proud. I don't know if it's any good. I suspect not, but I hope so. If I have to wait a day or a week or even a month to have an audience, I definitely will have convinced myself that it's not good. I need to touch base with another person, even if it's only to share one line of something I've just written.

As I finish these words to you, my fingers are flying across the keys. I feel the urgency to write. At the same time I'm in awe of what a hard job it is, how serendipitous when all conditions converge to make this single creative moment. I know that I want more of these moments, and I believe that more often than we know, our students want them as well.

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The deft fragments that must be told. The whole secret in writing, the hinge-pin that opens all, is the ability to recognize the good line, the part that sings, the sliver that is new, and old, and deeper than what surrounds it — idea, rhythm, insight — the whole work of writing to hone this habit of selection. We find the small, rich beginning that speaks, and we let it grow according to an imaginative logic of its own. End of sermon.

And then we did some short writing exercises to test these ideas, shared some of our discoveries, and the three hours were over. We had a major project ahead of us, for any who chose to carry out this sequence in our own writing practice. And the next week's class was pretty much taken care of, as we would report what was happening as we married personal memory to fictional character. If I were to arrive then too prepared with new lessons, the unfolding of this one would be cramped in the bud. Make a note to myself to step back next week, and hear some work in progress.

It may be, in fact, that this approach to teaching is the educational equivalent of what Ishiguro was talking about. Maybe the vacuum surrounding the teacher's intention becomes the opportunity for telling stories to each other that is the deepest source of learning.

"How long did it take you to prepare for class?"

"All my life."

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