Sustaining Urgency

by Jan Isenhour

I have often used the word urgency to describe the way I feel when I'm ready to write. And so in reading Bird by Bird, I had a pleasant moment of recognition when Anne Lamott also used that word. Remember her chapter on writer's block? Keep working, she advised, and the following may happen: "It was like catching amoebic dysentery. I was just sitting there minding my business, and then the next minute I rushed to my desk with an urgency I had not believed possible" (180). While Lamott's sense of urgency sounds more scatological than mine, I know exactly what she's talking about.

When I launch a writing activity in one of my classes, I watch for the number of students who experience the urgency to write. It takes a lot of careful setup to bring a group of human beings to the moment when they are desperate to write—would postpone any other immediate gratification for the chance to put pen to paper or fingers to keys in order to share a story, an opinion, a thought, or just some random image. Over time I've come to believe that a writing teacher's first worry ought to be finding ways to bring a group of people to the moment when they are experiencing the urgency to write.

I've also learned that it just will not do to say something as simple and seemingly straightforward as the following: "On Friday you will all turn in a story about your grandmother" or "For class tomorrow prepare a paragraph that explains the structure of protein." If either of these prompts, on their own, made anyone feel they had caught amoebic dysentery, it was for entirely different reasons than the urgency to get quickly to paper and write.

Given the difficulty of learning how to create that sense of urgency, you'd think we'd automatically be wise enough to know how to keep it going. Observation tells me this is seldom the case. In addition to teaching writing workshops, we often have school groups who visit the Carnegie Center for writing and computer activities, which gives us the opportunity to reflect on our own teaching habits and to observe the teaching habits of others.

Here's a common occurrence: a group of middle school students, accompanied by their teachers and a number of other adults who have been invited along for crowd control, come for a writing activity and computer lesson. Our stock offering is a poetry lesson, a simple formula poem centering on a window that has been important in the writer's life. This exercise, coupled with the lure of the computer, is magic. Students immediately buy in and within five minutes are intent on composing, revising, and printing a poem. They are focused, quiet, and for a moment, as grown-up as any writer imaginable. They have the urgency to write.

The wisest teachers who accompany these young writers sit at a computer themselves and write the assignment or circulate quietly about the class helping with computer problems or simple writing glitches. The adults who frustrate us the most spend their time talking while the children are trying to write, talking either to each other or to the children themselves. "Did you watch the Cats play last night, Chad?" they boom convivially as Chad jumps in his chair. I've seen the flicker of annoyance that passes across the child's face when he loses a thought before it's penned to the paper.

Another sure way to kill the sense of urgency is to mis-pace class time. After a wonderful preliminary set full of
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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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