The Writer’s Eye:
Using the Writer’s Notebook as a Lens to View the World
by Scott Peterson

I have a picture of my daughter that I took when she was perhaps two or three years old. It is not a particularly good picture. It was shot in poor light and is somewhat dark and murky. Many of the fine details have been driven into the darkness around the edge of the image.

It is, nonetheless, a highly revealing portrait. The eyes are cast down and away, avoiding contact with the camera. In the corner of one a tear glistens, ready to follow the damp path of another that had already escaped down her cheek towards pouty lips. It is a picture of pure and complete dejection.

I can remember exactly why that tear was running down her cheek. She had been set up once again by her older sister. They had agreed to take turns playing each other’s games — first with the oldest’s Strawberry Shortcake dolls, then with the younger’s Pretty Ponies. The first half of the afternoon went splendidly with both girls playing contentedly with the Shortcake dolls. Then came the younger’s turn. Painstakingly she arranged her imaginary toy land precisely the way she wanted and finally called her sister over to play. They played for five or ten minutes. Then her sister abruptly announced she was bored and flounced off to watch Sesame Street.

I found my younger daughter sitting on the side of her bed, one lone tear sliding down her cheek, feet dangling over her shattered magic toy land, a perfect afternoon of play ruined by the betrayal of her older sister. I had been taking pictures of our Christmas tree and still had my camera slung over my shoulder. I captured her despair for posterity.

I learned something very important about my daughter that afternoon. She has a very clear vision of how things should work out — so clear that if things don’t match her expectations, a disappointment way out of proportion to reality colors her world. One of my tasks as a father was going to be to help her discover that life is rich, deep, and full of miracles and the key to happiness is to find those miracles no matter how they come wrapped.

It is fifteen years later and that very same daughter is now getting ready to join her older sister in college. Yet every detail, every emotion, every insight connected with that photograph taken a decade and a half ago is still as fresh in my mind as if it happened only yesterday. Out of all the things I have witnessed in my daughter’s life, why has this one been so deeply etched in my memory?

The reason this memory resonates so deeply with me is that I was looking at the world through a camera lens. When I view things through the eyes of a photographer, I am more aware of the world around me. I see more, hear more, feel more. I notice things that at any other time would slip past unobserved. I pick up on how the light slants off a brick wall, making the texture leap out, how lines and shapes work together to give a room a distinct feel.

Slipping a lens over my eye makes me seek out meaning and beauty in the world, helps me observe more closely how people feel and move in their environment. With the lens off my eye, I probably would have patted my daughter on the shoulder, told her everything will be all right and that she should pick up her toys and get ready for supper. With the lens on my eye, I was more open and aware of her feelings. I studied her, analyzed her, thought profoundly about
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her, and discovered an insight about her
that otherwise would have slipped into
oblivion. Fifteen years later, it burns
brightly, illuminating the fundamental
truth I learned about my daughter that
afternoon.

Like a camera lens, a writer’s notebook can
be used to enhance our perceptions of the
world, helping us to seek out beauty, to find
and keep the little things that, when taken
all together, weave the fabric of our lives.
Christopher Isherwood describes the
process well when he writes:

_"I am the camera with its shutter open,
quite passive, recording and not
thinking. Recording the man shaving
at the window opposite and the
woman in the kimono washing her
hair. Some day this will have to be
developed, carefully fixed, and printed.
(Murray, 1990, p. 18)"

Enlarging Our Vision

The writer’s notebook plays a whole
different role than other types of more
functional writing. The vast majority of
people view communication, or the transfer
of ideas between two or more people, as the
main purpose for writing. Getting ideas out
and into the world is, indeed, a noble and
worthwhile purpose for writing. Our
far-flung relatives, for example, would have
no idea if their gifts had made it through
the mail if we did not communicate our
appreciation via a written thank you note.
Teachers would have at best an incomplete
knowledge of what their students received
from class if they didn’t require them to
display their insights on a piece of paper.

But to define writing only as communica-
tion is to do a disservice to the writing
process. I propose a different purpose for
writing. Rather than writing for others, we
write for ourselves first, as a way of
enlarging and clarifying our vision of the
world. I propose that in effect we use the
writer’s notebook the same way one uses
the camera lens — to see more clearly, to
observe more closely, and to record insights
and images on the pages of a notebook
rather than on film.

The writer’s notebook serves as the lens
that magnifies and enhances all that is
happening around us. It helps to pick out
the uniqueness nestled amongst the
mundane, to find the one flower in the
crack in a sea of concrete. Saul Bellow
writes:

_"I blame myself for not often enough
seeing the extraordinary in the
ordinary. Somewhere in his journal
Dostoevski remarks that a writer can
begin anywhere, at the most common-
place thing, scratch around in it long
enough, pry and dig away long
enough and, lo, soon he will hit upon
the marvelous." (Murray, 1990, p. 81)

The writer’s notebook is the tool that helps
us pluck the specialness out of the routine
events of life.

The writer’s notebook serves also as the
basket where we store the nuggets dug out
of the routines of life. It is a place to keep
the wisps of ideas, images, and emotions
that flit through our minds like the wings of
a hummingbird and then drift off forever.
To grab these events and record them in our
notebooks serves a dual purpose — it
allows us to experience life twice, once
when we participate in the event and again
when we record it. Anais Nin writes in her
notebook, “We write to taste life twice, in
the moment and in introspection” (Murray,
1990, p. 81).

Writer’s notebooks can be used in
the classroom as a way to make
students more observant of the
world around them.

Let me describe how the writer’s notebook
works in action. Not long ago, I was driving
to school on a fall day. The weather had
finally cleared after three days of cold
drizzle. The sky was deep blue and the tree
branches sparkled brightly in the early
morning sun like white lights on a Christ-
mas tree. I was driving slowly to work,
drinking in the splendor, when I rounded a
corner and came across a breathtaking
sight. Up ahead was an ancient oak that had
turned a brilliant, flaming yellow. Under-
neath, washed in the warm backlight from
the tree, was a group of kids waiting for the
school bus. Most were playing around and
roughhousing in small groups. But one lone
girl had separated from the rest of the herd
and stood alone, framed perfectly by one of
the huge limbs of the oak.

I realized immediately that there was
something in that scene deeper than the
surface beauty. At first, my attention was
drawn to the perfect combination of early
morning light, blue sky, and color, but then I
realized that it was the lone girl framed...
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underneath the branch that set the whole picture off and touched a place in my heart. When I got to work, I brushed aside the pile of papers that cluttered my desk and whipped out my notebook. I had to probe around and find out what carried the emotional impact in that scene before it flitted away forever.

I started by writing down exactly what I saw. I wanted only the colors of the leaves, the sparkle of the sunlight off raindrops on the branches, the smell of the fresh fall air exactly as it was. I wanted no analysis, no interpretation of the meaning to contaminate the memory. I wanted the sights and sounds and smells to show me the meaning that lay underneath the scene. The emotions and deeper meaning would speak through the concrete details.

And they did. As I scribbled the words in my notebook, the emotional impact of the picture began to reveal itself. The lone girl under the tree seemed to be focused on her own thoughts, removed from this beautiful tableau. She was letting the experience pass by unnoticed, unobserved. I am old enough to realize that there is only a finite number of such moments in a lifetime and each one needs to be seized before it flutters off forever. I wanted to drag her back into the immediate present, to make her see perfection before it was lost.

Once the meaning of the scene emerged, it was fairly easy to turn the hodgepodge of words on the pages of my notebook into something more meaningful. After some experimentation and many rewrites, they coalesced to form this poem:

Driving to work, the air fresh and clear after a drizzly night.
The sky is blue and clean, grass sparkles as the sun washes the world in morning light.
I round the corner to face an ancient oak filled with bright yellow leaves.
Underneath, bathed in the warm back-light of the tree stands a woman/child.
Simply dressed in stone washed jeans and long sleeve white t-shirt
soft dark hair circles her face,
dark ovals for eyes
clear, unblemished skin.

She is perfect in every way.

To the woman/child, though, it is just a perfectly ordinary morning,
one in a series of cookie-cutter days.
She thinks the sun will shine like this everyday,
the mighty oak will last forever,
the skin will always be unblemished.

But there are those of us who know better.
We know there will never be another morning
quite like this one,
that the mighty oak that has stood its place
for a hundred years
may be gone tomorrow,
the unblemished skin will crack and wrinkle,
the hair will stiffen and turn gray,
the flat stomach will sag and form paunches around the hips.

I have an urge to grab her and drag her into this very moment
to see the world as it is and
to use this morning to judge all others.

Writer’s notebooks can also be used in the classroom as a way to make students more observant of the world around them. I start by gathering together books that excel in descriptive writing and saturating my students in the rich, detailed language of these master writers. Picture books work especially well for this purpose because I can bring a wide variety of styles and authors into my classroom in a relatively short time. The clear, sharp prose in a well-written picture book serves as an excellent model for students to emulate. Marion Dane Bauer’s When I Go Camping with Grandma contains these gems of descriptive writing:

The sun grows flat and red as it dips into the edge of the lake. … The moon floats low in the bluing sky like a balloon left from a night party. (Bauer, 1995, pp. 15 and 23)

Ann Turner’s fine book of poems, A Moon for All Seasons (1994) personifies the procedure I want my fourth-grade students to follow. She goes out into the world, finds one of those small miracles of life that would normally slip by unnoticed and unappreciated, observes it closely, then captures it on paper in words and images so sharp they cut like a knife to the essence of a scene. Feast on the poems “Taste Sky” and “Winter Moon” to catch a taste of her writing style:

The sky empties buckets of snow
feathery as small wings.
I lie on my back and watch them falling, feel them falling, and taste sky on my tongue.
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Someone has been polishing that moon, whirring it on a grind stone until it is sickle sharp.  
The sky hurts where the moon touches it.

As a class, we put fine examples such as these under the microscope and examine them carefully. I make copies of other prime examples of descriptive writing such as Pam Conrad's *Prairie Song* and have students underline words and phrases that appeal to the five senses and color-code them according to each sense — words that appeal to the sense of smell underline in blue, the sense of sight in green, and so on. I will also read aloud passages from well-written books such as the first chapter of Farley Mowat's *Owls in the Family* (1981) while my students have their eyes closed. Mowat’s lyrical description of the Canadian prairie creates vivid, sharp mental pictures in students' minds. They will then translate their mental images into a picture on paper.

**Collecting Scenes**

The purpose of these activities is to get kids to see the contrast between the relatively undetailed writing we often use and the rich language needed to bring a scene alive. After completing the process described above, we are now ready to go out into the world and capture a piece of the world in our writer's notebook. On a nice day, with the sun shining and the birds chirping, we go outside and find a spot on the school ground where we can record our sensory perceptions. Each in our own place, we record what is happening around us, using clear, sharp prose as the world comes to us through our five senses. A page from one of my notebooks harvested these images:

- I see the sun peeking through a thick layer of gray clouds.
- I feel a gentle wind, heavy with moisture blow across my face. It brings the sweet smell of grass with it.
- In the distance, a bird chirps — short, staccato sounds.
- Another calls sadly, waiting into the wind like a newborn baby.
- A man gets out of a truck and starts a saw—a harsh burst of sound, like a swarm of angry bees.
- On the other side of the pine trees are the soccer fields. They stand alone, empty, waiting for the soccer season to begin and the thrill of children's feet tickling its back.
- I walk across the playground. The ground is soft and spongy and squeaks as I walk.
- The smell of pine fills the air. The small skinny trunks of the pines sway in the breeze, their needles flowing in the direction of the wind. Pine cones and needles litter the aisles between the neat rows of trees.

This process emphatically demonstrates to students one of the powers of the writer's notebook. Very quickly they develop the habit of collecting scenes and images that would otherwise slip by unobserved. In addition, my elementary students begin to feel the emotional impact of being more receptive to the world around them. On their own, they will meet during recesses and on weekends to capture more of their lives in their notebooks. Many of these ideas and images are later incorporated into poems and prose pieces.

Whether any ideas from my students' notebooks ever bloom into a serious piece of writing, however, is not important. Whether or not the poem that germinated in my notebook is an effective piece of writing worthy of being published doesn't matter, either. The mere act of writing it is the key. By keeping a writer's notebook, my students and I have learned that the process is more important than the product because it leads away from the distractions of life and toward the heart. Journals open up a window allowing us to learn new things about ourselves. Our journal observations that begin as snapshots can be developed into ideas that make meaning of experience.

**References**


Scott Peterson is a teacher consultant with the Third Coast Writing Project and teaches fourth grade at Mattawan Elementary School in Mattawan, MI.