Beyond Blank Books and Laptops

by

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In the corner of my basement stands a big farmer’s table I bought at a flea market. This table serves as my desk, and on it I have placed a computer and a printer I borrowed from my classroom. Next to the computer, I have stacked thirteen blank books that I’ve collected over the last three years. No book is similar in size, shape, or color to any other. Some of the book covers are reproductions of the work of famous artists like Monet and Van Gogh, another is a quilted pattern, still another a map of the world. One cover I made myself, a collage of stickers of teapot and tea cups. Many of these books are no longer blank. Neither are they organized. They are chaos; they are filled with notes to myself, pictures, quotes I like, an occasional sketch or even watercolor if the paper is right. I have jotted down lesson plans, bright ideas, responses to reading, lists of books and the names of movies I want to see.

Many of the books also hold my own writing, scattered jottings in the earlier books and then more and more expansive entries in the more recent ones. I loved writing on these pages. In the process I became an author, a photographer, an artist, a scientist, a teacher, a movie critic, and a book lover. I would take one of my blank books with me wherever I would go, shyly returning it to its place in my black bag if someone asked, “What’s that?” Caught in the act of writing, I became suddenly conscious of my book’s tattered pages and aware of my illegible scrawl and my juvenile photographs and drawings. As a writer and artist, I was not a bundle of confidence. Yes, I wrote with my class, trying to be a part of my students’ writing community, but as their teacher I felt distanced by time and circumstance. It was difficult for me to join them. So I settled for endless first drafts of possibility. While I pushed students through the writing process, I stayed behind.

I believe now that I signed up for the Northern Virginia Writing Project because of my blank books, though I doubt I would have put it that way at the time. Rather I would have talked about the teaching of writing, strategies and practices I hoped to learn and apply. But the truth was I just needed to write. The time had come for me to bring my writing to life on the other side of my Monet covers; the time had come for me to live inside a community of writers. If that community was also a community of teachers of writing like me, that would be a bonus. I brought a computer home, thinking, “Now I can become a real writer, have desktop folders, appropriately labeled, and pieces in different fonts and sizes that I can edit right on the spot.” But I soon realized that my computer, like my blank books, was merely a place to store my writing. What I wanted to do was to get my writing out in the world.

This is not to say puttering around with my “blank books” and my new high-tech toy was not fun. I went through my writer’s notebooks and folded down pages of chicken-scratch I wanted to turn into fancy fonts and point sizes on the word processor. I remembered forgotten moments, found obscure half-pieces that seemed to be written by someone else. As I typed, I edited some, though I’d been told to bring in only first draft writing. “Just for clarity,” I rationalized. I hoped, prayed in fact, that my group would like my writing. That’s all I wanted, really, just someone to like it. To be truthful, I wanted to know if I were really a writer and I accepted the idea that if someone who hadn’t even met yet liked my writing then I would be
a real writer. But the opposite possibility also loomed. Suppose they didn’t like my writing? I felt both guilty and hypocritical as I realized I put my students through similar torture regularly.

When I shared my first three poems with my writers’ group—people who I still couldn’t positively identify in a crowd—I read fast and furiously, a horse out of a delayed gate. And then, silence. I imagined bolting from my chair, grabbing my bag and leaving, but I couldn’t. Although I was certainly not a professional writer, I was a professional teacher, so I stayed. I learned in that endless moment that silence kills. It killed these poems and maybe poems and other writing yet unborn. A suggestion, a question, even a nod or a creased brow, followed by a positive cursory comment would have sent me home, tired at five, but reading, writing and typing until long after my household slept. Instead I was immobilized.

I tell this story to remind us that while writing groups may inspire they may also devastate.

Over time, however, I began to see this incident differently. I began to realize that I too was part of the silence. I came to understand that a writer must bear the same responsibility as other members of the group. She must be willing to ask questions and to discuss her intent. Feedback demands input, sometimes beyond the words on the page, and I had been unprepared to offer this help.

It takes courage to pull one’s purple pen scrawlings from among the Oriole tickets and souvenir postcards that dominate a blank book, putting them out there in the world. Maybe it takes even more courage to confront silence with “this is what I meant.” But that may be what is necessary to give a piece of writing a life of its own.

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