The Writing Process Goes to San Quentin

by

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San Quentin Prison looms over San Francisco Bay. It offers one of the world's most beautiful views and houses 6,000 men, among them the world's most violent offenders, including those on California's Death Row. A little west of Death Row is my classroom building, Downstairs, in Room 2, for three hours every Wednesday night, I meet 75 students who are serving life sentences and who have elected to take my course, English 101: Reading and Writing Fiction.

Prewriting: "A so-called prewriting activity may simply be another activity done for its own sake — a discussion, improvisation, ..." — James Moffett in Active Voice

Rasheed and Max are yelling at each other across what Max has named our "Circle of Kings Plus One." "You can't have empathy with my situation," shouts Max for the third time. He pushes his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose where they tilt, smudged and crazily askew. "I can!" yells back Rasheed, "That's what I been telling you!" Rasheed stretches his heavily-muscled upper body out from his chair, so does Max, and the fingers they point at each other look like God's and Adam's on Michelangelo's ceiling.

Where is my whistle. The prison authorities directed me to wear a whistle around my neck at all times. Either that or carry the beeper they offered to lend me. "But be careful," they warned. "This is extremely sensitive..." — the guard held the beeper aloft — "if it goes off, we go on lockdown with guns out." So I don't carry a beeper, and the whistle I bought to abide by the rules is somewhere not around my neck. This
is the first time in the eight weeks I have met with my class that I have been nervous, though not for my own safety. I introduced the word “empathy” because I wanted my students to establish characters in their writing with whom the reader would have it. Look where it led.

The argument stems from the fact that Max is doing life without a date. Rasheed is serving 15 to life, which means a possibility of parole after 15 years. “If a person’s got no date,” explains Max, “nobody can understand.” “I can,” insists Rasheed, and thus it goes.

The other students, some with dates, most without, listen respectfully. Dwinell winks at me in silent reassurance. I forget about my whistle.

L.C. says in his elegant baritone, “Listen, you all, I’m going to tell you a story.” We turn to him. “Since, let me remind you,” he smiles, “that’s what we’re here for.”

We smile back. Max and Rasheed, too, though not at each other. L.C. soothes us, as he has before, with the darkness of his lil’: “When I was a little boy, I saw a certain film time and time again. Scared me half to death, don’t know why. It was called ‘The Onion Field Killer.’ In case you don’t know, it’s about this guy who goes berserk and kills a cop; they called him the onion field killer because that’s where it happened. Or so I have been led to believe.” Am I the only one in here, I wonder, who knows that Max is in for murder? Rasheed knows, I’ll bet. “When I grew up, one of the places I got myself into was Folsom Prison, y’all know where that is. I was a young man then.” L.C. has relaxed in his chair, his long legs stretched out before him, hands locked behind his head. He looks above our heads, staring at a time and space beyond the walls of our classroom. He is enjoying himself. He says, “One of the first nights I was there, come time to see a film. And guess what that film was. Yes, indeed, it was ‘The Onion Field.’ And I was sitting there watching and remembering when suddenly the guy next to me, an older guy he was, says, ‘That’s me.’ I looked around and he’s pointing at the screen. It was the Onion Field killer himself.”

What a story! We are entranced, we are impressed. Now comes the lesson. L.C. unfolds his hands, returns to a more formal position in his chair, and looks around the circle at us. “What I want to say is I wasn’t terrified of this fella. We both were serving life sen-
tences. And I could go along with him. I believe that’s what you call ‘empathy.’”

We are quiet for a moment. Then Max says, “Yeah, I still say...” Hectar, who rarely speaks in class, raises his hand and says, “Can we go on now?”

I remember where my whistle is: in my briefcase which sits in the corner of the classroom, outside our circle where it belongs.

Stan stays after class which means he will miss showers. He tells me that an inmate, in here 22 years, asked him, “Tell me what it feels like to pet a dog.” Stan tried to describe his own dog’s coat, the dog he hasn’t seen for seven years. “What does a dog’s bark sound like?” the man asked. Stan barked. Still another inmate wanted Stan to tell him how the rapid transit works. He’s seen it on TV but has been in longer than the rapid transit’s been alive. Stan did all this. Is this empathy, he wants to know.

Two men on Death Row want to sign up for more than one course. Most inmates will take only one class since they work in the prison forty hours a week. Those on the Row, exempt from prison work, will sign up for more. One says, “I want a degree and I don’t have all that much time.” Because of the unusual circumstances, I give them a little test:

Writing Prompt: Write about someone who had a strong influence in your life.

One response:

And another:

I guess I would have to say it’s my mom who influenced me the most. At the age of three, she taught me
to get the candy out of the gumball machine. At five, I could open any hotel door with a credit card. I guess if it wasn’t for my mom, I wouldn’t be where I am today.

Both passed the test.

Most of my students have been in prison longer than the writing process has been in town, so early on in the course I give the presentation I have given so many times in so many institutions: “An Introduction to the Writing Process.” I make a big noise about revision, about how Less Is More, Slow is Fast. They listen politely; they even take notes, and at the end Thomas says, “I know this story I want to write has to have people talking; otherwise, it isn’t a story. But there’s something about those marks (he holds up his hands and curls the first two fingers of each hand) that I never learned. I’m not writing any story until I know what to do about those marks.” He crosses his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes into what passes for a belligerent stare. Correctness comes first for these men. It is what they failed to learn in school; not following the rules has got them into trouble. “Gimme some rules!” Thomas demands. “Coach me!”

WRITING: “Members of a writing workshop may come together only for one session ... or they may stay together for weeks or months and enjoy the benefits of increasing trust and familiarity.” — Moffett, p. 24.

With or without rules, they are fluent, though they don’t know it. Once I have convinced them that writing is not about spelling and punctuation — that we can worry about that down the line — then their favorite part of the class, they will tell me in their end-of-semester course evaluation, is when I say “Let’s write.” Then we are all quiet for ten or fifteen minutes. And afterwards, just about everybody reads. The prompts they like best are ones I, and eventually they, make up on the spot; they go like this: “Give me a color.” “Red.” “Give me a body part.” “Teeth.” “Give me some weather.” “Thunder.” “Let’s write.” Sometimes, we write from what John Gardner tells us: “Write a dialogue in which each of the two characters has a secret. Do not reveal the secret but make the reader intuit it.” Intuit becomes a favorite word. But this John Gardner stuff is really hard, we agree, so we take it “home,” and work on it. Is that revision, I wonder.

RESPONSE: “After a writer has done some version of her composition or begun to put together some material she has collected, it’s often helpful to get advance audience reactions while changes can still be made.” — Moffett, p. 19

Donald, a former Oakland cop, sits way over there, unwilling to join us in anything let alone a response group. No amount of encouragement from me would budge him. Eventually, after a few of the other students motion him out of his corner, he joins our circle and writes about his experiences with the Black Panthers. (“Donald, this is supposed to be a story, not a police report,” I tell him to no avail. The final draft, complete with dialogue, interior monologue, and figurative language, still sounds like a police report: “It was alleged that night had fallen...”). Although I demonstrate and talk about the value of writing groups, and though the students get into them once in a while, neither Donald nor any of the others are convinced that their writing might benefit from peer response, if that’s what this is. No, the response that matters is the teacher’s. Conferencing is big.

We sit behind my desk. Each student in his turn pulls his chair close to mine, and I become aware of the powerful smell of men in prison. It is dark and musty and enormously sad. Though we sit close together, neither our knees nor our shoulders, nor even our fingers touch. Yet this is one of the most intimate experiences of my life.

Max has written the following and brought it to conference:

THE QUARTERLY 3
Snakelike brown muddy water dribbling down, the magical melting chocolate river, you see the saint get ducked, comes up anew in funk. Sweet brown sugar residue still in the corner of the mind like the Python leaving the scene on full. The bridge was taken long ago, hypnotized, intoxicated, now victimized without bail.

I am impressed and say so. "This is a prose poem." "Yeah?" he says. "Is that good?" "Yes," I say, "but I wonder what it's about. Do you think, when you revise, you could ..." Mike's face falls and he looks at me through his glasses smudged and crooked on his nose. "It's my mind, man! It's my mind on heroin!" He wipes his sleeve across his nose. "And it could happen again! Don't you get it?" I do, so I shut up.

Stan wants to show me a story he's working on in which the main character is getting ready to leave for the golf course. He describes his sleeping wife with whom he has made long-night's love. "She lies there not moving, pale, slender, her breasts twin globes," etc., etc. I ask, "Stan, is she alive?" "Oh, yes," he assures me. "And then just after that the cops dropped out of nowhere and slapped the cuffs on me. The next thing I know I'm standing in front of the judge for sentencing." "Wow," I say, and shut up again.

**REVISION:** "All writing has to be an edited and revised version of the inner speech someone produces at a particular moment under the influence of random or controlled circumstances." — Moffett, p. 27

Victor begs me, "Please, Professor, fix my verbs." Do I say, "Go back to your group?" No. Besides, the groups seem to have dissolved right while I was fixing Homer's verbs. One night, Tim tells me, "I been reading my writing to my cellmate. He likes it and all, but thinks it's kind of long. What do you think?" I think he's got a smart cellmate and I tell Tim so. L.C. adds, "I find that since I have been discussing my writing, I have more to talk about with other folks. My conversation is much more interesting."

**PUBLICATION:** "...a cardinal rule is, 'Put writing to some realistic use after it is done, and make clear in advance of writing what purpose and audience are.'" — Moffett, p. 23

I am insistent on two requirements; in the syllabus I hand out the first night of class, I have written: 1) At the end of this course, you will submit to me and to your classmates a portfolio of your work, complete with drafts and cover letters. 2) You will submit at least one of your pieces to a newspaper, magazine, or journal for publication. When a few students murmur that they have no typewriters, no stamps, no envelopes (no confidence, I would add), I do not relent. "We're doing this," I say, nodding grimly. "You tell 'em, Professor," says Kareem.

**Tom has cleaned out his prison account (his life savings) and sent away for an electronic typewriter... so "I won't lose my hard-earned writing skills."**

It's a nightmare. Prisoners are not allowed to buy stamps. The prison must see and pass on everything that is sent out from the prison. Those are the rules. Add to the rules the fact that they are paid 14 cents an hour for their work and so I pay considerable money for the materials necessary to uphold my dictum. Then there is the matter of where to send their stuff. I buy Writers' Market. Victor gets increasingly anxious over completing the requirements, "Here I am doing time, and I haven't got any." It's O.K., they're going to do it. And they do, every last one of them. The last night of class looks like this:

We are enjoying ourselves. Gino and Jack write furiously; so does Tui. Bob and Tom and Jonas and Donald exchange portfolios, bend into them, read quickly and write their remarks on Post-its. Occasionally they laugh, tease each other. "I couldn't get over you, man," Jonas teases Tom. "There you are in your cell banging away on your new typewriter, and there's no paper in it!" What has happened is that Tom has cleaned out his prison account (his life savings) and sent away for an electronic typewriter. He explains to me that the typewriter is necessary so "I won't lose my hard-earned writing skills." I nod and smile and return to my own writing. Every once in a while, someone motions me over. Jack wants to be sure he puts the address in the right spot on the envelope. "Where," he says, "show me exactly where." I draw a square on the envelope. "OK, thanks." The sun has begun to go down behind the wall-sized, multi-paned window. In the winter the radiator against this wall
bangs and hisses throughout class. This spring the sun
has beaten its way onto our heads and into our eyes so
that sometimes, until evening comes on, we find
ourselves huddled together in the corner of the room
the sun has yet to scorch. Now it is cool and quiet. Near
the end of class, as people make ready to leave, I say
almost to myself, “I always feel better after this class.”
Gino’s smile breaks across his face. “Me, too,” he says.
“By the end, I always feel good.” He hands me his
portfolio. “You know, I took this class because I thought
it would be fun. And it was! You worked us hard! Whew!”
and he wipes his hand across his brow. As they file out of class, we shake hands, all my
prisoners and I, and they say nice things. “What I
could say about you,” says Tim, “boy, you’d feel like
a queen.” (Later, at the end-of-the-year ceremony he
does and I do.) Smiles all around.

We will miss each other. We will miss the quiet
concentration on reading and writing and talking that
takes them (and in a sense me) far away from the night
that descends on us in the yard as we leave the
classroom. We will miss the way we like each other.
Max asks, “Do you think we’ve grown as a class? You
know, like a unit?” Yes, I do. “We get along good,
don’t we,” says Gino. Yes, we do.

POST-WRITING: “The benefits will transfer to fu-
ture writing.” —Moffett, p. 24

Teaching in prison gets turned all around. Not just
the writing process, but every expectation. I ex-
pected that surely, unlike high school, absences
and tardies would not exist; my students would all
be in class; where else could they go? Turns out,
they can go lots of places, like the hole, which is
where I am told Hectar is, “Don’t expect him back
anytime soon.” And the teacher’s ideas of what
teaching is about get shaken up until Lord knows
they could drop right out of you. To wit: I come
armed with my Pollyanna smile and 30 years of
practicing homilies in the classroom. The truth shall
make you free. Knowledge is power. Writing is power.
Writing can give you knowledge. And power. And
freedom. I said them over and over to myself and to
my high school kids. Freedom for my convicts
would be freedom from San Quentin, so during my
first few weeks of teaching there, I revise my think-
ing to read: Knowledge is powerful. It can stir one up;
it can make a whirlwind inside the head, a windmill
in the gut. What is my responsibility to my students
for opening a can of worms that smells to high
heaven? I don’t want it. I write about it in my
journal.

They are talking about their truth. Will they write it?
What purpose is served by talk of the truth of despair,
anger, pain? Wasn’t it better for them to stick to
politeness? Maybe it’s good we meet only ten times.
Let’s Pretend served us well for most of the quarter.

So for this class they have written about any damn
thing they want to, and not a one of them has chosen
to write about what got him sentenced to life in prison.
Jason will tell us frequently, “I participated in the
taking of another human life,” but he won’t write
about it. And I do not insist. I get humbler all the time.

And the writing process, where did it go? Well, in fact,
it never went anywhere at all. It was right there all the
time, getting jerked around by living human beings
just as it got screwed up by the high school kids.
Sometimes, it looked as though it would get blasted
right out of existence. But it didn’t. It shifted here and
there, ducked some powerful artillery, fluttered in the
winds of discourse but held its ground. In the end,
talking and writing and talking some more, then
rewriting, got this from David:

My first engine was an International Harvester DT
4656, an inline six-cylinder diesel engine for a grain
mill. She was like my first girlfriend. Once you’ve
been down deep into an engine all the way down to the
pistons and have held them in your hands, and have
held and cleaned every single part and assembled
every piece with care hoping it will be a success and
last forever it’s like an intimate relationship. If the
engine runs well and doesn’t blow up well then that
relationship was a success, and you don’t want to give
the truck back to the owner, he won’t know how to take
care of her. Seeing the trucks rolling down the high-
way that I have had involvement with is like seeing
old girlfriends. You remember the long, intimate
nights together, like women you really love but don’t
own and can’t hold on to, you wish the trucks well and
send them on their way.

And that’s the truth.

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