We Are No Stephen Kings: The Reluctant Road from Coal Mine to Classroom

by AIDA MAINELLA EVERHART

In November, 1995, the Martinka Coal Company in Fairmont, West Virginia, closed down its operation, shutting down the lives of 350 men and women. Many had worked twenty-five or more years at that mine. Ironically, at a previous United Mine Workers meeting, the officials of Martinka assured all of their employees, union and company, that Martinka had hundreds of miles of unmined coal and that they could almost guarantee each miner at least eighteen more years of employment. Within a month and with no forewarning, Martinka closed, leaving millions of dollars worth of machinery, copper and tools entombed within the mine. Within weeks in Morgantown, not more than fifteen miles north, Arkwright Mine closed its entire mining operation, furloughing over 350 more coal miners.

My students' academic histories are widely disparate. Three members of my class are barely literate; ten are avid readers, reading at a high-school level; several read on a third- to fifth-grade level; six have accumulated college or university credits; and four are forty-ish college graduates who, at the time of graduation, opted to work in the (then flourishing) coal mining industry. My average client is forty-six years old, predominately white and male, but I also teach two females, four blacks, one Lithuanian who speaks English as his second language, one who speaks German as a second language, and six students who are pushing sixty. More than two dozen have served in the Armed Services, many in Vietnam. More than fifty percent are divorced; ten have admitted to having a drug and/or alcohol abuse problem, and approximately seven have undergone a twelve-step rehabilitation program.

The coal miners have an equally wide range of exceptional talents and skills. I teach top-notch mechanics and semi-professional musicians (three lead singers, two who have recorded, one who writes music, arranges and directs, and two who are experienced recording engineers). Four are gourmet cooks; several are master electricians, landscape technicians, carpenters, plumbers, home builders. One young father supplements his meager income by restoring and detailing classic cars. Two miners are experts in telecommunications, and several possess solid sales and marketing experience. Two are avid organic garden-
ers and herbalists. One is a talented portrait artist; one, a creative craftsman of fine wooden patio furniture. At least a half-dozen miners own and maintain West Virginia farmland of 50 or more acres, plowing gardens to make an extra buck. One is a professional boxer. But despite all these differences, the miners share several important traits. Each and every one of these displaced miners possesses a deep-rooted work ethic; all are dependable and trustworthy; and all want nothing more than to reenter the work force in order to support themselves and their families. And none has ever written a creative piece of literature in their lives — until now.

On this first day of class, after our introductions, I begin to outline some of the activities I have planned for this class. When I mention keeping a journal, the miners go berserk. A few become belligerent. "How will this help me get a job?" "I’m not planning on becoming a Steven King," "I can’t write a damn thing." I explain that I do not intend to read nor will I attempt to correct, God forbid, their journals. They finally agree, after some pretty heated discussion, that keeping a journal would not only be good therapy, but that keeping a journal would allow them to record a little piece of their very own autobiographies for their children and their children’s children. Journalizing these traumatic times would allow them to put down in words instead of merely thinking angry thoughts about how coal mining has affected and continues to affect their lives and those of their families. I never again mention their journals, but before the semester ends, several miners share some of the ideas they’ve recorded.

As the semester progresses, the ex-miners revisit and revise some of their journal entries into articles and poems. A few students offer pieces for publication in our school newspaper. The following piece, “A Grain of Sand,” was written by a 54-year-old miner who knew no other job his entire adult life than mining coal deep within the bituminous bowels of the North Central West Virginia coal fields:

A Grain of Sand
Upon hearing that I lost my job, I was devastated.
I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.
Then I realized I was nothing to the company.
The company I devoted over 22 years of my life to.
We, the miners, were just a grain of sand
For them to walk on
To crunch into the ground and
To bury. (K.S.)

Another miner’s journal entry is transformed into the story they all share, a story of broken promises and uncertain futures:

Get Over It and Survive
...Our mine foreman has just told us we had eighteen more years of work and most of us were set for life. AT 10:00 A.M. the following Monday morning we were told the mine would be closed in thirty days. I was not mad because the company closed the mine, but I was furious because they lied to everyone about our futures, breaking their promise of 18 more years of work, I felt that the company and the world owed me and my family 18 years of work. But with the training I am now getting, I hope I never have to go into the coal mines again. Yes, I was mad, hurt, upset and depressed but now I have to get over it and survive. (S.V.)

The final line of this miner’s bitter poem reveals the fear they all face:

I want a job as a butler
free uniforms
free limo
free food
free drugs
free booze
minimum wage (O.T.)

On one occasion I ask the class to jot down in their journals words, phrases, anything that may convey a thought, idea, opinion regarding the changes that have so abruptly taken place in their lives due to the mine closings. Two follow:

change in my lifestyle:
face losing health insurance which is desperately needed
face an unknown future; retirement plans are lost: no security;
expecting my first grandchild;
won’t be able to buy and do what I would have been able to do for him
can’t play golf as often or eat out or take trips;
forget the new truck
may have to leave state to get a decent job with benefits; I hope not.
who will hire me. I’m 52. (P.T.)

Changes
Dead dreams; new dreams
Money troubles; credit rating gone
Less spending, less money: less travel
Less repairs on home, car
Sold $3,000 harley for $2500
More time with kids; more time for hobbies
Dead dreams; new dreams (S.B.T.)

I write with my students, and through our writing and sharing they learn that I have much in common with them; I am as old as many of them are, and coal mining in my family goes back as far as my grandfather who was a coal miner after migrating to America from Italy. I am also the daughter of a coal miner who lost his life in a coal mine. My father was one of the 78 miners killed in the mine explosion heard around the world which occurred on November 20, 1968, when the Farmington Number Nine Mine owned by Consolidated Coal Company blew up. The only good thing to come out of this heinous tragedy was a change in weak mine safety regulations. I share the following:

Kohl Lined With Coal Dust
This newborn heart and his beat as one
Like Porgy, he sings

“Summertime”
His little honeybunch am I
And the livin’ is easy
My first true love
Kohl lined from coal dust
I see his green eyes
His fabulous face I smell
Old Spicey, pinchy, smoke scented
Crisp, raw smell of just mowed grass
Mild misty rains of early spring
Sudden bursts of apple blossoms
Icing covered conifers of winter
Vanilla ice cream in sugar cones, he is
And hand-packed galloons
Hand picked berries in pies
Coconut birthdays, essence of orange cakes
Cosmic colorbursts, thunderbooms, Fourths of Julys
Old Glory, Ole Saint Nick Glory, Glory Hallelujah
Sandlot baseball, Sunday Mass,
Saturday Night boxing
Segovia’s chords, the Fighting Irish,
Crayola colored mountain memories of autumn
The pride, heritage, grand child legacies
Style, sparkle, splendor, savoir-faire
Soft snowfalls of Christmases past
Memories become memories
Cognizance ceases, senses desensitize
The heartbeat of summertime gone
Kohl lined with coal dust
The explosion... I died

To my Dad, David Mainella, Sr.
From his honeybunch, Aida

Silence follows my reading. Now, for the first time, some of these miners understand that my experience was their experience.

As the course continues, some of my students’ writing begins to turn toward a hopeful future ...

I And Only I
At 44 years of age,
and unemployed
for the first time in my life,
I entered her class
with a lack of self confidence
and bitterness brewed by
a seemingly insensitive system
which allows loyal
productive workers
to be swept away
by the mere whims of those
who control our destinies.
Her wisdom,
compassion
and sensitivity
helped me to realize that
I, and only I,
could once again
direct my course
of future endeavor... (K.C.)

...while some cannot escape the past:

What Will I Do Now?
...we removed trolley wire and feed line,
fifty feet into the pit mouth
as well as the eighty-five pound rails;
we were told to build a barricade
so no one could reenter the Arkwright #1 mine...
all the equipment, supplies
and tools abandoned in the mine
approximately $2,000,000 worth of
copper trolley and feedline...
Damn, I'm 50! What will I do now?
The nightmare is just beginning. (D.D.)

The miners' attitudes toward writing and reading have slowly, but distinctly, changed. At the onset of the program, they were adamantly against such folly. They knew the transition from the mines to a post-secondary education or training program would take some real doing. They understandably felt pressure, tension, and intimidation as they were forced to replay the long-extinct roles of students from twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty years ago. "Hooking" these students is as important as, if not more important than, hooking high school students. I knew that straight diet of academic exercises — memorizing times tables, diagramming sentences — was not the way to teach them. So we talked, we commiserated about the weather, the O.J. trial, the mines closing. We worked on resumes. We listened to the employment security people; we sat through lectures and seminars; we attended job fairs, we watched for job postings; we talked of divorce, drugs and alcohol problems; we did a little math and then we began to gravitate to reading. And then they began to write, to freewrite words, phrases, one or two sentences or maybe a paragraph; then a passage, a poem, an article.

More Miners Write

a foul odor
there is not too subtle pressure
a weight that leans on us
who are going to class daily
following all the rules
simply to draw a pittance of a pay
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us

why are we being pushed to
enter another training, mr. dulaney
to pacify the government, the state
the vo-techs, the politicians, the resa's
or simply to cover your ass
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us

we are frustrated with all your red tape
two point six million
allotted for our retraining
i suspect the funds are there
contrary to what you say
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us

poor uneducated coal miners
we sense the figures are not adding up
usually there is a certain foul odor
with large sums of money
allotments and disbursements
i smell a force trying to rid itself of us (S.T.)

Our Largest And Best Debt

...the new truck that I never could afford in previous years had to go. The log splitter was next. Our only means of enjoyment, the RV will be next. House repairs and the garage I was going to build this summer are now on hold. Since we can't sell our largest debt of all, she went to work to help provide the needs we usually provided. An honor student, a cheerleader, and now a hostess at a local restaurant, our pride and joy, our sixteen-year-old daughter is helping us share our new responsibilities. My wife and I are very proud and truly blessed to have such a child. We budget and compensate necessities for our survival. I say survival because it is no longer a life. Am I bitter? I don't think so. Do I blame Eastern Associated Coal? No! Who do I blame? I blame myself for not having the foresight to see what was coming and for not being better prepared... (D.S.)
Now they admit that it was not as difficult as they had earlier imagined. I witness as they witness their thoughts flowing from the brain, via the muscular arm, into the callused hand, through the dexterous fingers, into and out of the “Berol” pencil and magically spilling onto the ruled paper. Emotions, ideas, feelings stare back like a photograph in black and white. Many tell me that writing down their feelings or just journaling the day-to-day routines (routines so unlike that lifetime coal mining routine a lifetime ago), has not only become therapeutic but makes them feel as if they really can do something creative, innovative and worthwhile. They seem to say, “Now how many coal miners do you know who want to, like to and are able to read a good novel and write a little ditty?” They realize that thinking creatively and writing and reading for enjoyment are skills can in fact prepare them for real work. Now they feel prepared, motivated for the day they will be required to read a highly academic or technological piece or will be assigned to write an important report or letter.

Follow-up
Nine months have lapsed since the crew of coal miners-turned-students has exited my transition class. Four miners have received their GEDs (High School Equivalency Diploma); three were accepted into nursing school; about a half-dozen have passed the Journeyman Electrician Test, thus becoming certified, licensed electricians; a handful have left the state to work in nonunion coal mines in Pennsylvania and Alabama; a select few have enrolled in local colleges. Four, I am told, are attempting to receive disability payments due to cancer, impaired learning ability, heart conditions (in the last six months, two men in their forties have suffered heart attacks). The majority of the class is presently attending or have attended local vocational-technical schools, taking courses in fields such as robotics, electronics building construction, heating, plumbing, and air conditioning. But one hundred percent of the miners are still looking for a good job to support themselves and their families. And down deep within the somber, silent souls of each and every one of these inexhaustible men and women lies a shred of hope that the coal mines soon will reopen and that any sweet day now, the miners will return to the job that was so secure, the job they want, the job they were comfortable with, the job down deep within the underbelly of West Virginia, doing what they do best: B.T.’s poem capsulizes their anger, pain, and hope.

Interruptions
We’d rather be in the pit
Working night and day
Than playing the part of scholars
To draw one tenth the pay
Frustrated with all the red tape
A subtle form of rape
Changes beyond our control
We were shoved and forced to enroll
To calm certain people with cloud
Now they are showing us out
To wash our benefits out
Why interrupt our class
We are learning new skills, at last
Refreshing dim memories
To receive federal monies
Good counseling in our midst
The education we almost missed
You insult us and those who teach
No funds you constantly preach
Get into another school
You take us for a fool
Why do you interrupt our brain
Have we not enough pain and strain (B.T.)

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