I flunked my first theme in college. My composition instructor had said to write on “your home town.” OK, fine, I could choose one of three — where I grew up till adolescence, where I went to high school, or where my parents currently resided, which I knew only in summertime. Today I naturally see in my lethal choice of number three a fine example of how composition begins with decisions about which raw material to use. But those were pre-prewriting days.

Below the grade of flat E the instructor declared, with terrible justice, “A mass of tourist-guide propaganda clichés, FW [fine writing], and J [jargon]. Moreover, you really have no exact subject — your title gives you away [My Home Town]. Quite below college demands.” Here was I not only an untested freshman fearful of losing a full scholarship by not attaining a B average, but I was half-convincing anyway that I didn’t really belong at Harvard and had only got in by way of some back door carelessly left open. Furthermore, I figured to major in English!

Brittle grad school bachelor that he was, toiling away in one of the 2-odd sections of English A, my teacher really acted charitably. He knew I was on a trolley headed utterly the wrong way, toward endless suffering, and that only a powerful jolt right at the start would derail me so that I could make it in that course and even perhaps in college generally. My first paragraph read:

Los Angeles, while not exactly the city of angels as its Spanish name proclaims, has within its environs a multitude of entertainments to please natives and tourists alike. Regardless of what his individual tastes may be, deep-sea fishing or listening to a fugue by Handel, there is probably always something which will satisfy his whim.

Over this you can see already a New Yorker type of rubric, Themes I Never Finished Reading. But it was a perfect thesis paragraph, for it stated exactly what kind of bullshit the reader was expected to wallow
through afterwards. We toured the beaches of Santa Monica, the Hollywood Bowl, where “an open sky of stars lends enchantment to the symphonic works,” the nearby desert, where “the moonlight accentuates the unique charm of the quiet expanses,” and the downtown L. A. theater district. One topic-sentenced paragraph was on sports, one on food, one on nightlife, and so on. No chance of the reader getting lost here. No problems of transition or organization or about what we had read to make sure we had done the reading and to see if we had got the point. The teaching of writing in this country has for so long been harnessed to the testing of reading that few teachers I meet even today can grasp the enormity of this bias and the consequent mischief and fraudulence.

Whenever I was asked to write about something outside of books, the subject was so remote from me, such as national affairs, that I could know it mostly only secondhand and hence could hardly do anything but paraphrase the information and arguments that I got from newspapers, radio, and grown-up talk. But that’s the point. My teachers really just wanted familiar, adult-sounding prose. This they equated with mature writing. They wanted phrasing they recognized, views they had heard aired around them, because this meant their students were joining the adult world. Isn’t that the whole point of school? They loved and encouraged my five-dollar words, straight out of Readers Digest vocabulary quizzes, because big words show learning and correlate with intelligence. They were nice people who didn’t know much about composition as such at all. They too had never written anything besides the usual school and college testing stuff — book reports, term papers, and essay exams — and so they had never learned how to shape material not predigested for them by others. Anyway, a glittering travelogue on a glossy town seemed OK to me.

After that first failure, I got the point quickly. (No doubt I was relieved too to know that the institution I was going to spend the next four years at wasn’t going to deal in that kind of bullshit.) My instructor advised me to do the assignment over — and knock it off this time. I did and got an A. Great, a happy ending, but what was the difference? Well, it was all the difference in the world, and yet I was pretty much the same person I had been the week before. I didn’t know any more about organization or sentence structure, I didn’t have a better vocabulary, and I hadn’t acquired any new “writing skills.” Nor was I a more logical thinker. For my second chance, I chose to tell about “My Boyhood in Jackson,” a significant decision because

cohere. The signposts were all there, and the sentences scanned grammatically. But it was atrocious writing. In fact, it wasn’t really writing; it was a paste-and-scissors job, only collaged inside my head instead of with physical clippings and splicings. My teacher rejected it out of hand because it was so borrowed and so unreal that he had no way of assessing it as composition, nothing to come to grips with. It was ghost writing of an unconscious sort, very much like the great majority of papers English teachers waste time marking up.

I wrote that theme as I had written stuff all through school. An all-A student in all subjects through high school, I always did what teachers wanted. The teaching of writing, and of English generally, remains now about the same as then, in the ’40s, some exceptions having occurred by dint of strenuous innovation and many of those having been wiped out by the regressive movement that has prompted publishers to dust off and re-issue the English textbooks of that time. Mostly, my classmates and I were asked to write
that town really meant something to me. I told how my friends and I played out our adventure fantasies against the Mississippi background as Twain's characters had done in Missouri. In the dense foliage along the Pearl River we pretended to be buccaneers, explorers, and Stanley looking for Livingston. Or I was a scientist—the sole survivor of an expedition sent up the Amazon on an important quest. After I staggered from the jungle to the clearing, my feverish body fell lifeless before those waiting for me. In my outstretched hand lay a small vial containing the juice of a rare plant—the cure for cancer.

I told how we dug niches for thrones in the steep white clay banks of the railroad cut, using tie spikes for tools, and lit discarded flares to stake out our thrones with. Then the train roared through the cut. The surging power of the locomotive was mine, for I felt it pass through me as the earth rumbled under the passing train. Besides, the engineer gave it to me by the friendly waving of his hand.

I concluded unpretentiously that although I might well have play-acted some of the same things had I lived somewhere else, the fact is that “I played and grew in Jackson, and that is what endears it to me.”

In a way I was being myself in the first theme too: the glamour of Los Angeles and the emptiness masquerading as impersonality were true for me to the degree that I was attracted to the one and had learned to put on the other. So the difference between the themes was reality in the level of the self. I just suddenly changed my whole orientation toward writing. My teacher had said, in effect, “No one wants to read what he knows already or could come out with himself. We read for something new. Write what only you know, or what you have put together for yourself. Make something, don’t just take something.” I had no problem with that. We all live on all planes of shallowness and depth all the time and so can shift planes at any moment if someone or something sets us straight. I thought; “Oh, I see. That’s how it is. Writing isn’t what I’ve been led to believe. It’s saying what you really think and feel or what you really want to put over.”

But of course I had known that before from reading great writers and from trying to write extracurricular stories. It was curricular writing I had a false notion of. And this dissociation of writing from reality afflicts most students in this country.

From the Editors

This expanded issue of The Quarterly celebrates our past and embraces our future. In it, we reproduce lively and controversial articles from our archives as a way of honoring the distinguished and recently-deceased editor Miriam Ylvisaker as well as the editors who preceded her—Melanie Sperling, Jerry Camp and Keith Caldwell.

At the same time, as new editors of The Quarterly, we will use this collection as a reminder of the excellence we intend to maintain.

Readers will note that most of these articles, some published over fifteen years ago, have an eerily contemporary ring. The issues that concern these writers have not gone away. Hucksters continue to sell slickly-produced, simplistic “writing process” packages, and “experts” in assessment keep designing 50-yard-dash writing exams.

We have asked these contributors to submit brief afterwords commenting on their earlier writing. While the form of these second thoughts varies, most of the writers stand by their views, an admirable quality at a time when “waffling” has meaning far beyond the International House of Pancakes. Steadfastness seems characteristic of those who think they are on to something. However, this attitude, while exhilarating, can be dangerous if it leads to smug and defensive close-mindedness. As editors of The Quarterly, therefore, we intend to produce a publication that serves as both the strong advocate of thoughtful writing teachers and researchers and their continuing gadfly.

In these efforts, we will be supervised by Richard Sterling, the newly appointed director of the National Writing Project, and Sarah Warshauer Freedman, the director of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy. One of this duo’s first official acts was to authorize this special, expanded issue of The Quarterly. These folks are going to be fun to work with!

Art Peterson
Peggy Trump Loofbourrow
The main reasons for this are two. Traditional schooling has shown no respect for writing, exploiting composition instruction as a way to service its testing system and as a way to spawn the pencil pushers required to stock all those clerical jobs in industry and government, where you do not want thinkers. You just want people who have passed minimum standards — can read just well enough to follow directions and write just well enough to take dictation. But I'm not talking about some conspiracy by them. All of us share through our culture and bear within us a deader, less evolved aspect of being that calcifies because it is still mineral or vegetates because it is still plantlike or preys because it is still animal, all while the human aspect of the self works toward its partly divined divinity. This sludgy element of individuals settles out in society as sedimentary attitudes and institutions that mire down efforts to better ourselves.

The other reason for the shallow tradition that has neutered the teaching of writing is that teachers themselves have practiced writing so little that they fall back on hopelessly irrelevant procedures. Many simply don't know how real writing takes place. It is patent to anyone who has worked much with teachers that the less practice they have had, the more they rationalize book reports, formal grammatical analysis, paragraph formulas, sentence exercises, vocabulary quizzes, and a prescriptive/proscriptive methodology. "You have to teach them," they say, never having learned how themselves. Compelled once to coach a sport I had never played, lacrosse, I too gravitated toward a simplistic rules-results approach that was an effort to distill experience I had never had.

The National Writing Project has succeeded and gained support precisely because it makes teachers practitioners instead of mere preachers. When I am teaching teachers to write in summer institutes, I see the same thing happen to them that happened to me with that first freshman theme. They discover that if they write from the heart they not only have something to say, something that interests others, but that they can better order their thoughts and can actualize their latent talent. It is more than ordinarily moving to see teachers discover how writing really occurs, often after many years of frustrating themselves and their students. Maybe I identify with late bloomers, but I'm especially touched by the delicate transition from recalcitrance to confidence that takes place as they find out just how well they and their partners can, after all, write.

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**Afterword**

Since 1980 the writing profession has made considerable advances, no question, by dint of pursuing the "strenuous innovation" I referred to then. But the institutionalism that impeded educational change then still makes it difficult to enact.

Writing is still too much "harnessed to the testing of reading." "The dissociation of writing from reality" has lessened but remains a serious problem. Teachers now write more but still not in a great enough range, and their writing practice is still more likely to occur in inservice programs like the NWP institutes than in college composition courses, which resist innovation most of all. Teachers know more about composition but have little more power than in 1980 to put what they know into practice.

"Whole language," "the process approach," "writing across the curriculum," and writing workshops and portfolios have become accepted, but in many schools and colleges they are still talked about more than they are really or fully implemented, and some places have retrenched. Also, some members of a new generation of writing theorists have challenged the direction of this movement even though it has never won the day in the majority of American schools nor had the opportunity to fulfill and prove itself. The current governmental initiative for national curriculum and assessment works against this fulfillment as its previous de facto versions of standardization always have.

The note I sounded with "partly divined divinity" and orchestrated much further that same year in "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation" has increasingly become a theme of other educators as both the academy and the public have started to realize the need to spiritualize education in some universalist way. *College Composition and Communication* published in May 1994 a forum from one of its conferences, "Spiritual Sites of Composing," and in 1992 NCTE enfranchised The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives in Learning, founded by college

*continued on p. 61*
confession teachers to explore alternative modes of knowing, including non-materialistic. Two of its founders, Alice Brand and Richard Graves, have brought out a collection of articles along this line, *Presence of Mind: Writing Beyond the Cognitive Domain* (Heinemann, 1994).

What I did not attempt to say in my “Confessions” is that I think writing should be totally customized in the sense that individual students write on different topics and in different genres at the same time although often with partners or as members of writing groups. Now I feel there is a profound connection between such customized learning and spiritual development, as I have argued in *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening Though Education* (Jossey-Bass, 1994), where I propose a framework so holistic as to be spiritual. *The Holistic Education Review* (Brandon, VT), also focuses on development of the whole person.

Until we spiritualize educational institutions, they will continue to prevent teachers from enacting new understanding.

*Editor’s note:* Moffett, in his latest book *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening Though Education* (Jossey-Bass, 1994), brings together the secular and the metaphysical in his conception of spiritual education:

> It is intended to include everyone, however they feel about other worlds or otherworldliness. It brings to our daily efforts to improve our life in this world a sorely needed focus on being good for one another because we’re not just thinking of ourselves. It energizes these efforts with a life force common to everything but working through each of us in a particular way characteristic of our individuality. It validates the inner life of thought and feeling and the sense of personal being in the face of depersonalization and a preoccupation with physical things. It calls us back from surfaces to essences, to whatever may be at the bottom of things or beyond our immediate kin and kin. It invites us to seek commonalities beneath commonplaces, for the sake of mind as well as morality. It’s a toast to wits with spirits. (p. 19)

culture shock – linking her experience to the work we’ve done together in class, trying to connect the Korea of her past with Napoleon Chagnon’s account of the Yanomamo (we’ve just read “The Fierce People”), and connecting both to her own recent visit to the Pennsylvania Amish.

> “Why does this matter, what you’ve written here,” I ask her, “this alienation?”

She looks up at me from her paper, her pen poised in the margin of a paragraph, and waits.

> “I don’t know,” she finally says. “Why is it important?”

Rereading James Moffett’s “Confession of an Ex-College Freshman” after 14 years, I see in it an emphasis on the personal that still needs balance. But I am struck by the truth of one of its central contentions: that both in writing and teaching, the structures of school can “mire down efforts to better ourselves.” Rereading my own essay, “Moffett, Freshman Comp, and the Teaching of Writing,” I still accept its chief claim: that writing requires skill and care, power and grace. Teachers of writing need to help students take themselves, their ideas, and their words seriously. But I know now, perhaps better than I once did, after years of teaching writing, how difficult this is.

In our talk this morning—Carmel’s, Trish’s, and mine—I was trying to help them value their own ideas, to figure out what they wanted to say and to fashion the best language they could to express the intimations of their experience. When they asked me what it meant or why it mattered, I said, “I don’t know.” That was the truth. I would have to wait for them to tell me. But it also left unexpressed an intimacy of my own: that in answering for themselves, they can transform not only their writing and themselves, but their world.