Suzanne Harrington

Writers: They Who Know the Magic

I am a person who writes. I have conquered my fears, and I now willingly sit at a computer to put my thoughts into words, my love and anger into stories and poems. The writing phenomenon has happened to me in the last few years of my life, a life that will never be the same.

When I enrolled in my first National Writing Project graduate course I accepted the idea that if I wanted to teach children to be writers, I needed to experience writing myself. In that way, I could understand what my students were going through, even though I knew that in my real life I had no time to write. During the course, I wrote a personal narrative, a shift from writing educational papers. I rediscovered something I had forgotten along the way — writing is hard work. But when I shared my narrative with the class, I also uncovered feelings I had not anticipated. My story caused a stir; I got a reaction from my audience of fellow teachers. It was a thrill and I was hooked.

I once thought that writers were born knowing, that the words flowed forth from their pens to the delight of English professors and editors. I was convinced that the rest of us would never be of the chosen, they who know the magic. I now know that becoming a writer involves the act of putting the words to paper and the discipline of revising them until they sing. I do not need professors or editors to tell me as the next Hemingway to know that I am a writer. I have learned to think and act like a writer.

The Addiction
In the beginning, I wrote only about safe topics, protecting others, protecting myself, but I soon found that I had to shed the restrictions of safety because the will to write is much stronger than polite conventions. I write about my good self, my darker self, my family, my friends. How did this happen? How did I become a writing monster? I can tell you that writing is an addiction. The more you write, the more you need to continue to write. If you write with abandon, "throwing up on paper" as a colleague suggests, sometimes the dark things come out, and I for one am glad.

Turning at the intersection, my hands mechanically steer the wheel to make a right, but I am shocked at the poem which punches me in the stomach as I look to the left, to my grandmother’s grave a mile away. Because I have not yet come to grips with her death, it is a topic I can’t escape. Swerving the car to the right, I am struck by two different emotions. As her granddaughter, tears spring into my eyes because the emerging poem says what I do not want it to say — she is dead, and can no longer feel the rain that pounds against my windshield. But as a writer, my heart races and my hands shake because I know that I’m onto something and I’ve got to get it done on paper. I have no choice; I brake the car. In someone’s driveway, from my writer’s perch, I jot the words of a poem which may help me to accept her death and heal.

All events in my life have become potential topics; the people I know and meet are the characters. The personalities of my colleagues at school come into play for a short fiction piece about my first and worst plane ride. Jamie, a former student, who came to my second grade classroom every day carrying a backpack of worries and responsibilities, is the subject of a poem about the effects of alcoholism on a child.

Jamie thinks about his mother drunk last night, in the bathtub, flooding the apartment, as the contents of his school desk fall to the floor in a muddy puddle. Second grade math class, big problems to solve. He searches his teacher’s face for an answer.

Writers examine with a stethoscope and a microscope the nuances of life, and in doing so, often discover the significance in the smallest details. I relish the surprises
that appear when I allow myself to take detours in my writing. Composing a humorous article on family kissing customs, I am surprised to realize that my mother still holds my hand when we cross the street together, even though at thirty-eight I know to look both ways. This memory is a found treasure, a new facet of me, and my mother and I are closer because of it.

The Reason to Write
I write to see the point. Thousands of arrows dart at us from all sides constantly throughout the day. The arrows come from people, situations, memories — and we spend the day living from the seats of our pants, making decisions which affect our lives and our students’ lives, without time to see the connections or reflect on the consequences. I have found that writing can be a release from this frustration, a way to throw it all into the computer to see how it comes out. In my journaling, I sketch out my thoughts, ask myself questions, and answer them too. Writing has become so much a priority in my life that taking the time to do it is no longer an issue. In my journals, I sometimes find the topics interesting enough, different enough to write about. The connections I uncover help me to see the significance of events, or to see things in a different light. After purchasing handmade tiles at the historic Moravian Tile Works, I wrote in my journal about each piece. The thoughts I scribbled in a notebook revealed the reason I bought each tile. I had connected each one to a person in my life. This realization became a poem, “Choosing Mercer Tiles,” celebrating my family.

The mural set in mastic among
the masses of topaz clay,
the family story revealed in earthy hues,
hieroglyphics for some future archeologist.

I write to be heard. I have taken a giant leap from dabbling in writing to anticipating publication. In order to ever write anything good, I must accept this goal, even though I face the hard reality of rejection slips. There was a time when I wrote only to complete an assignment. The teacher was the audience; my level of concern was low. But now, with newly found confidence, I find that I have stories to tell about so many things — writing, teaching, relationships, the world at large. My audience has become you, someone, everyone. I read each piece as a third party, a critic, and I revise with everything in me to please my critic.

Writing my stories has given me a measure of self-esteem not equaled by anything else I have ever done. I walk with the assurance of a person who has the power to put closure to troubling events. As often happens in writing, undercurrents suppressed in daily life become words on the page. The act of writing allows me to face feelings and put them aside. In this way, writing is a therapy even if no one ever reads my words.

Tricks of the Trade
Even though life is the inspiration for writing, life gets in the way. Taking my son to the baby-sitter, I have a brainstorm for an article. I compose the beginning in my head as I turn the car into the driveway. I try to hold onto the words as I say hellos, good-byes, trip over children, and head to school, where I find that even though I have plenty of paper on my desk, the perfect words have drifted away. When I finally have time to write the article, after teaching remedial reading classes, attending two meetings, grocery shopping, and an hour waiting for my son’s karate class to end, the voice is gone, the writing is stilted and doomed. My eyes droop, my back aches. Giving up, I go to bed.

I have learned the hard way to develop some writers’ tricks of the trade, some survival techniques. I now know that I should be like the Boy Scouts, always prepared. I carry pencil and paper with me at all times, and since writers are often inspired at 3 a.m., I keep a pad at bedside as well. I use my enemy “Time” as wisely as possible. You, fellow patient, may see me physically occupying a chair in the dentist’s waiting room, but I am really miles away, perhaps capturing the rocky coast of Bermuda on paper.

Writers need good conferencing partners. For me, this is definitely not my husband. He tries to be helpful, but he’s often either too complimentary or too close to a topic to be objective. I have found that a writing colleague who attended the University of New Hampshire Summer Writing Project with me is the person I count on the most to help me through trouble spots. I also belong to a writing group, six teacher-writers who know that we are no different than the children we teach. We need just the right amount of praise, strokes, gentle criticism, and thought-provoking questions. The writing group keeps me motivated and accountable. Even with the busiest schedule, I wouldn’t think to attend a meeting without something to share, something of quality.

Reading, always a much loved pastime, now also prepares me for my craft. With pencil in hand, I savor sharp writing, and I hoard the best to be read over and over again. I feel physical butterflies when I confront strong images or a perfect word. I am green with envy as I fall in love with good endings. Beautiful poems and essays only spur me on to write more, to write as well.

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Chinda and I are conferencing. I am her reading teacher; she is a Cambodian refugee. An American fifth grader now, she is not yet comfortable with the English language. We have written poems which we share with each other. In my piece, I write about a Native-American woman hiding her child from dangerous people. I tell her that the woman is like me, protecting my child from bad things. Chinda then reads her poem to me, and her words take my breath away; it’s the first time she has written anything about her frustration as a foreigner.

The white men take me to their house
and let me see everything they have.
I hear the white man talking with his friend.
It sounds like singing, ‘S-s-s.’
I feel bad because I don’t know what they talk about.
They might talk about me.

We applaud each other by writing notes about the poems. I tell her that I will never forget the image she has created. Chinda knows the magic. She shares her thoughts with me, one writer to another, on a 3x5 card. It says, “I like your mother poem. Keep up the good work.” I tell her I will try to follow her good advice.

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