Debra Josephson Abrams

Above All, There Is a Voice

QUESTION:

You ask why I spend my life writing?
Do I find entertainment?
Is it worthwhile?
Above all, does it pay?
If not, then is there a reason ...?
—Sylvia Plath

What do I think of writing and the teaching of writing? At the moment, I am overwhelmed. From the draft of this final piece, nothing has changed and everything has changed. I think many things. They all make sense. None make sense. They are fast in my mind. I cannot slow them down. I cannot catch them. Maybe it would help if I started from what I know.

I know I am a writer because I write. I write something every day. I write letters, I write stories, I write articles, I write commentary, I write editorials, I write poems, I write postcards, I write newsletters, I write songs, I write thank you cards, I write notes to myself, I write on my calendar, I write grocery lists, I write my name, I write.

I know I have been a writer since I was five because after dinner one night, when I was five, I pulled up a table facing nowhere, scribbled non-words on a piece of paper, and to no one, read the news, pretending I was one of Huntley and Brinkley. I know I have been writing since, and wrote a play in third grade about multiculturalism and the need to get along. As I look back, I probably wrote the play because I was one of two Jewish children in my school (my sister was the other) and for years believed I was a Christ killer. The struggle began early.

I know that writing is the one thing I can count on, even when I can't count on myself. It has helped save my life. Let's just leave it at that.

I've realized that one of the reasons I write is that I am so angry. Everything makes me angry, even pretty days. They make me angry because I know that there are many more people who cannot enjoy a pretty day than can. Bad service, bad drivers, bad men make me angry. Bad administrators make me angry. And my anger creates frustration and when they shake my hand it's as though with that shaking they have doubled their strength and they grow. I am afraid that if I did not, do not write, if I didn't have that facility, I would physically hurt someone, maybe many people, maybe myself.

It doesn't matter if your favorite TV show has been canceled or if your parents won't let you stay out late, or if your boyfriend doesn't call, or if the waitress forgets and forgets and forgets to bring the French fries, or if you see newborns brought into the world only to be taken on walks on carbon monoxide-filled streets, or if there are babies born addicted to drugs, or if it's Hitler, or if it's your mom dying while you're in school and pregnant, or your dad dying while you're in school and mad at each other, or if your lover leaves you with a poem and flowers on Valentine's Day. What matters is that there are no explanations and you are angry. And I want to be able to express that anger.

And I want my students to be able to express their anger and what stems from it. Being young is hard. Being old is hard. Being is hard, very hard. And if we can write, then the being won't be less hard but it will be tolerable, perhaps even understandable. It's our chance to explore what makes us angry, who we should vote for, what CD we should buy, what cause we will fight for. Or not.

And if I am no longer angry or sad, I suppose I will write about what that's like.

I know I write to find what I have lost. Everything in my life has been based on loss. Not just loss; premature loss. Youthful death. Men who leave when love isn't over. Parents who die before I get home. Friends who aren't friends anymore. But writing is there, always there, and when I burst, the words splatter on the page like blood leaving a body ripped with explosives.
I know I like words. I like to let words roll around my mouth, to play with my cat's name (Mugsy Doodle) so she becomes Mugsy Cake, Sugar Cake, Sugar Doodle, Mugsy Noodle, Mugsy Boo-Boo ... I know I like to find as many ways as I can to say one thing, I know I'd rather say, "It rained incessantly" than "It rained without letting up." I know with words I can say, "I love you." I know with words I can say, "I hate you."

I know I like the power words give me. Writing this paper has helped me sort through things. And that's a big element of what writing is for me. And also what the teaching of writing is: the sorting through. I want my students to feel comfortable with writing and to see that it is a tool, just like any tool — that it is functional, utilitarian, useful, pragmatic. That they can use it to help sort through things, whatever those things may be. That they can manipulate the tool, they can control it, they can make it do anything they want. What power. I can't get that kind of power with numbers because 2+2 will always equal 4 — locked in, trapped, held hostage, I am powerless. I am always at the mercy of the "equals" sign. Not so with words.

I know I write because it is a daring way to give birth. It is a way to create. As a child who had no friends, it was a way to create playmates. As an adult with friends, it is a way to create playmates for others. Millions of words and no two alike — like snowflakes, Oh, you can say that words have synonyms, but what is a synonym really? It's a very close imitation; it's got its own nuances, personality, its own spelling, its own pronunciation, and just enough of a connotative difference that it isn't an exact replication of the original word. Words are like students: no two alike, each one with an inherently different sense of being, of self, of voice, of perspective, of ideas, of feelings. Regardless of superficial likenesses (taste in music, clothes, partner, beer, etc.) they are each one uniquely their own. And when I teach writing I want my students to realize that their writing is as much a part of them as their hair, their eyes, their voice, their heart and that they can make sense of an often very senseless world if they allow themselves to play on the playground with the best friend they'll ever have: their writing.

I know I like to work with words. My work has to do with helping myself and helping others express what we have to say. My work has to do with recognizing possibilities and taking opportunities: the possibilities words give us to say what we have to say in as many ways as we'd like until we find just the right one and the opportunities life gives us to use that right one: Write the letter to the editor then send it, write the proposal for a new computer system then turn it in, write the love letter then give it.

I give my students and myself assignments that challenge our worlds ... I want us to think outside of ourselves, to see how we fit into the larger scheme of things.

I know I write because it helps me sort through the jumble in my mind. I give my students and myself assignments that challenge our worlds (or at least I hope they do). I want us to think outside of ourselves, to see how we fit into the larger scheme of things. At eighteen (often when we're much older too) we are so self-centered, which is a posture that is indeed necessary. But the posture cannot become a life style, which it has seemed too often to become. And then self-centered eighteen-year-olds become self-centered thirty-five year olds and when we're self-centered, it's easy to forget about the needs, troubles, concerns, desires, worries, of others. It's easy not to care. It's easy to be someone mercilessly, repeatedly, with clubs or words if you have no idea who he is or what he is about. It's too easy and life isn't and, so, whether my students are ready for it or not, I introduce them to Rude Awakenings, because, really, no one is ever ready for Rude Awakenings and they never come soon enough: divorce, AIDS, toxic ground water, polluted air, unexpected pregnancies, anti-Semitism, racism, child abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism. They don't happen just to the person next door. So I at least try to provide a safe environment for students to practice being visited by Rude Awakenings. At least in a safe place, students can experiment in writing with their motivations for things, whether it's why they use drugs, or why they steal, or why they have a lot of unprotected sex, or why their parents got divorced, or what they want to do when they "grow up." And maybe by safely exploring the motivations, they'll wait a minute or two before they do anything crazy.

I ask my students, "What are your least favorite and favorite memories?" or "In what ways are you like and unlike your parents?" or "Describe something you did that was wrong. Would you do it again? Why/ why not?" Granted, these questions seek "I-based" responses, but life itself means nothing unless we find a way to make it meaningful to us. The questions also ask students to examine themselves in ways they perhaps never have and they ask students to examine themselves in relation to those around them and in relation to those with whom they have shared significant moments. When students can see themselves as integral to the "big, bad world out there," they can, through words,
begin to make sense of their jumbled ideas about their place in that world and others' places in that world; maybe they will appreciate the variety of perspectives and ideas and colors and attitudes and beliefs and gods which exist. It's much easier and probably more rational to begin with asking students about their world because once they understand it, they can more easily understand and appreciate and respect others' worlds.

I know I am often a good writer. I have had some success as a writer, which until recently meant getting published and maybe even getting money for writing. Regardless of how much I wanted my students to write, I never thought of my students as "writers," because they weren't "professional" writers, they didn't do it for publication or money. But my understanding of the term has broadened so it includes anyone who, literally, for whatever reason (and no reason), writes. The writer who writes is successful.

I know I am a student of words. I know I am a teacher of writing. I know I teach probably more as a reaction to all the bad teachers I've had (there have been so many) than in tribute to all of the good ones (there have been so few). Let me define my terms: "bad" doesn't mean those whose paradigms hadn't shifted thirty, twenty, ten years ago; the age of paradigm enlightenment hadn't visited the educational community then (the shift was still stuck in the ivory towers). By "bad" I mean intention and motivation, those things that drove those who so brazenly called themselves teachers. "Bad" was Mr. Boyd, who didn't know algebra himself and cared only about his job as basketball coach, something he couldn't do unless he also "taught." There were so many like him and we all know them; but why waste time with them (I've wasted more than enough time in their classrooms already). Instead, let's talk about the "good" ones.

In retrospect, we (at least I) accepted the pre-enlightenment teachings (everyone sit facing front, no talking, no group work, and Dick, Jane, and Sally) of teachers because they had the passion and love for teaching that "good" teachers have. They are those who have an intuitive, instinctual, intrinsic sense of what makes for a positive educational experience. "Good" is Mrs. Von Ahnen, my first and second grade teacher whose teaching methods today would be deemed archaic, but whose love for students and her desire to see them succeed as people must be duplicated by anyone who expects to be a teacher. "Good" is Joe Bonner, one of my high school English teachers and advisor to the newspaper of which I was editor, Joe's laissez faire approach to both language and self-discovery made every student adore him, for reasons we didn't know (we couldn't even say the word paradigm then). We knew only that he loved reading and he did it a lot and it made him always in a good mood and we wanted to be always happy too, so we read. "Good" is Ricki Wadsworth, my freshman comp instructor with whom I became and remain dear friends. Her respect for language and her ability to challenge students to stretch themselves (oral and written finals, as freshmen, no less) went far beyond her classroom setting where we all faced front. Her recognition of the interests of the individual (she gave me her dissertation to read and invited me to sit in on her Ph.D. defense, which, of course, I did) made me feel special and provided me with a positive model of "instructorship."

"Good" is Arnost Lustig whose ability to survive three concentration camps and still smile inspired me to write a short story and to consider embracing life. "Good" is anyone who has only the deeply imbedded and gripping passion and desire (a passion and desire which holds us hostage and won't let us do anything else but teach) to provide students with a safe environment in which to grow and discover and fall in love with learning.

I know that words are the only nemesis I love and will forgive. Words, for all my love of them and for them, are still a burden. They are a burden because they do not come easily; they take hours, days, often years to find and that search frustrates me and I try to wrestle, gnaw, box, kick, and scream my way out of the finding but I cannot. But when I find the words, and arrange them the way I want, the way they want, then we, the words and I, are, finally, dancing. And when we dance, finally and together, I know that no one leads and no one follows: we are partners.

**ANSWER:**

I write only because
There is a voice within me
That will not be still.
—Sylvia Plath

I know I write because I am powerless to not write.

Above all, I know I am a writer.

Debra Josephson Abrams is a teacher consultant and board member of the Northern Virginia Writing Project and an assistant professor at Montgomery College, Germantown (Maryland), where she teaches writing and literature in the English and Women's Studies programs.