Sounding Board: The Writing Teacher as Confidant

by

COLEEN ARMSTRONG

Well, Dad went out and got drunk again. He was trying to hit my mom like always, and Danielle got between them, and he smacked her right on the top of her head. It wasn't really anything. Danielle even laughed about it. But then my dad started crying about how the left side of his body was going numb, and then Mom and Danielle and I all started crying. I was begging him to stop, because he'll be lucky to live long enough to see me graduate, let alone Danielle. He just did his usual thing, called me a whore and a bitch. Funny how when he's away things are always so peaceful. Then he comes back, and the whole family starts fighting again.
— Chrissie

The above journal entry wasn't exactly typical, but it wasn't unusual either. In twenty-nine years I'd seen many like it. When I first began my teaching career nearly three decades ago, I decided in bright-eyed, eager enthusiasm that in my English classes the kids would write — so much so that putting their thoughts and experiences on paper would soon become natural, spontaneous, just like breathing.

To both my delight and chagrin, that's exactly what happened.

Delight, because I often read passages as poetic and heart-wrenching as anything published professionally. Chagrin, because in those early days I was often so clueless concerning how to respond. What could I say, for example, to a fifteen-year-old girl who had just learned that the woman she'd always thought was her older sister was actually her mother — and her father was... her father?

Papers like Chrissie's were by now common enough (and I'd gained enough insight and maturity) that I was better equipped to handle... well, not just corrections on sentence structure and hop-scotch logic, but something far more important: the substance of what a student was telling me.
If you're like most teachers who consistently try to do the right thing, you realize there are other issues involved here. You're probably struggling between the urge to give Chrissie a hug and the obligation to follow a current legal requirement: to report any form of suspected child abuse. Any form.

But what if I told you that in this case the "child" was two months shy of turning 18 — and three months shy of graduating from high school? What if I told you that she already had plans to move out of her parents' home once her diploma was safely in hand?

So what, exactly, is the teacher's most essential role? Confidant—or whistle-blower?

What if I told you that she begged me to keep quiet, that she had the situation under the best of her control, since her dad was hardly ever home anyway? What then?

I had the time of my life over spring break. I went wild and did whatever I wanted. But I also did something so embarrassing and so cruel, and I am so ashamed. I cheated on my boyfriend. The only excuse I have is that I was on pills. I was drinking. I was high. I know that's not an excuse, but I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been messed up. I just want to start crying right now. I am so stupid. How could I have hurt someone I love so much? He knows everything, and he still loves me. I messed up so bad, but I can't fix it. I just added to all of Tim's problems. God, what's gonna happen now? If you have any advice, please tell me.

—Brandi

I'm about four or five. I watch my mom's boyfriend beat her. I see her lying in the hospital helpless and on her own, with a cast on her arm, broken from the attack. He used his boots on her. I feel worthless for not being able to protect the one person I love. At least she pays him back by putting a gun to his head and kicking him out of our lives.

—Tony

So much for legislation. What if the "abuse" more closely resembles self-inflicted guilt and remorse? Or what if it occurred twelve years earlier? What should a teacher do then? (Did anyone ever think writing instruction would be simple, just a matter of opening a manual and demonstrating patterns of organization?)

I offer these dilemmas not to make you squirm, but to point out that the question of how personally involved, evaluative and judgmental a teacher should become with student writing will never be adequately addressed by any legal means. It will always be more a matter of the heart.

In Tony's case I told him that he had a real talent for drawing vivid word-pictures, and stories like his were haunting and memorable. I also told him to keep on writing, quit worrying about lousy spelling; we could always fix that! I also said that I wanted to see more of his stuff. (This was the first paper he'd turned in all year.)

In Brandi's case I offered warmth and sympathy, then gently encouraged her to figure out why she had placed herself in such a dangerous situation to begin with. Whom was she really testing, Tim or herself? Whom was she really trying to hurt?

In Chrissie's case I checked with a trusted guidance counselor and then informed her of several options: going to the police, filing charges, encouraging her mom and sister to move with her to a shelter....

And then I left the final choice up to her. She elected to remain where she was for the time being. A no-brainer, she said. Which didn't surprise me one bit.

Did I err by not pushing harder? I don't think so. By the time you read this, Chrissie will most certainly be living on her own. She has held down two part-time jobs throughout her entire senior year, socked away as much cash as she can, proudly informed me week after week of her mounting total. She is handling it. Her way.

So what, exactly, is the teacher's most essential role? Confidant — or whistle-blower? Before I answer that, it might be useful to recall some of the topics I was assigned to write about back in high school in the early 1960s. "My Favorite Animal." "Sibling Rivalry." "What I've Learned From My Grandparents." Yep. Pretty racy stuff.
What am I reading today? Take a look.

I really don't understand what my problem is with men. I can't keep a relationship for nothing. I try and try, but no one seems to want me. This year I've tried older men, guys my age and younger. I think maybe I push people away because I am afraid to get close to someone. But when I push them away, then I wonder why they aren't there anymore. I am so weird and confused. I just feel like I am going crazy.

— Stephanie

People are tweaking on me about gay shit. It makes my insides hurt. I hate it when people I know have almost the same clothes on as me. That messes up my head. Why does God let that happen? Does he do it for a joke? That shit's not funny. I don't even feel real at this moment. I feel like I'm in a dream.

— Kip

I ran out of pages, so I have to write on the backs. I didn't realize my paper was running out. Why am I such an idiot? I just feel like a great big dork. Someone needs to stop me. I feel like going off. I should cut my hair. I should get a buzz. My head would be all fuzzy. People would pet my head like a dog. I think I might do it.

— Scotty

Did you see that TV show about people being addicted to sex? Well, I think maybe I am. Please don't think any less of me. But if I go for even a couple of weeks without it, I just feel like pulling out my hair or ripping off someone's face. I don't understand. I don't know any other girl who has these same feelings. Even if I just meet a guy, it's like they can sense that if they start with me, I won't say no. What can I do to get myself under control? I've been staying home and doing nothing for a long time, but my social life is going downhill. What is my problem? It's like sex has ruined my life. I just lost my virginity last June, and I've already been with five people. Am I this way because I have no self-confidence and think I'm nobody? Can you help me?

— Maria

Some authorities feel the only "right" response to papers like these is to ban certain topics from student writing, most particularly objectionable language. Some teachers have been lambasted, even terminated for allowing total journalistic freedom. But what does censorship accomplish? Where do questions like Maria's go? And let's get real: isn't an off-limits policy better designed to protect teachers than students?

What I've learned from reading my kids' writing for nearly 30 years is this: non-academic teenagers are only interested in becoming better writers if we respond first to who they are and what they're saying. Chrissie is a tough-as-nails street kid. (On the outside, of course. She also has a dimpled baby's face, with lustrous blonde hair and soft, green eyes.) But now that we've established a relationship, she actually listens when I correct her "he don't's."

Let's get real: isn't an off-limits policy better designed to protect teachers than students?

Tony is sullen and uncommunicative. But when I ask if I can borrow his essay, he pulls it instantly out of his backpack. He's been carrying it around ever since I returned it four weeks earlier. (There's a clue here.)

I've also found that kids who would never dream of coming in at lunchtime to talk over a problem will reveal themselves with incredible candor on paper. Nearly all of my teacher-student friendships, many of which have endured decades beyond that single year in the classroom began through our scribbling back and forth. (How else, I ask you, is a withdrawn 16-year-old boy going to talk to a 50-year-old woman?)

Teenagers need grown-ups in their lives. They need our insights and our reassurance far more than they will readily admit. (Every good teacher knows this.) But they must feel free to reveal themselves to a sympathetic, non-judgmental adult in an atmosphere where they can be fully themselves. If I truly want a class where kids are allowed to find their own writing voices, then I must adamantly refuse the role of traffic cop. I have no right to "out" them without permission, report indiscretions or violate confidences. They must know beyond any doubt that whatever they tell me will stay private unless they decide otherwise.

Which, occasionally, they do. Julie was brash and outspoken, someone no one messed with. I was genu-
I am in dire need of someone's help. I have looked inside myself to find the answers to all of this pain, but I'm getting nowhere. As of April 27 I'm supposed to take on a brand-new last name and become the wife of a man I love dearly. But (yes, but!) I'm starting to feel like I'm just not ready to be married. I'm literally scared to death of the word forever, because I'm only 18. I've been hanging out with Ken since Dwayne left for California, and now I don't know what I want. He's begging me to give him a chance. Maybe I should be committed to Hughes Ward. If I break it off with Dwayne I have a white dress, two gold wedding bands, flowers ordered and my friends in expensive bridesmaids' dresses. Everything is ready, and I'm trying to decide what to do?? PLEASE HELP. Could I have some advice?
—Angie

I am so sorry for not turning in my essay questions. There are so many things on my mind. I can't seem to concentrate on anything. I know if I don't get straight I won't graduate. Maybe I'm afraid to. Maybe that's why I'm not trying. If I don't graduate I won't have to leave all of my friends, will I? I can just make time stop. Does this make any sense to you?
—Joe

Yes, it certainly did — primarily because it was something I'd heard before, not once, but dozens of times, and I understood too well how it felt to be young and bewildered by one's own feelings.

That's why I'm really here. Not only to correct grammar and spelling or to scrawl "fragment" or "more details please" in margins. But to reassure, offer support, give kids like Angie and Joe a ready ear and a safe sounding board. Help them to tread water until they feel better able to swim on their own.

Coleen Armstrong has taught secondary English in the Hamilton, Ohio schools for twenty-eight years. In addition to teaching, Coleen is a prolific writer with nearly three-hundred free-lance articles in print, and she hosts her own cable-television talk show called "Hamilton Impressions."

inely surprised to learn, then, that when she was twelve her father began creeping into her bedroom each night to "check" how her body was developing.

Once she'd begun to write about her molestation, she did something that surprised me even more: she started to talk publicly about it. Not only in my class, but in others as well. For a time I was frightened for her, afraid that her peers would start saying cruel things behind her back, start charging she must have somehow encouraged it. Julie tossed her head. She didn't care. She'd found an angry voice, and she intended to keep on using it.

What I feared most never happened. Julie received nothing but support from her class. Maybe it helped that they were seniors and had developed their own respect for life's solitary journey, as I so often called it. Or maybe they'd learned something from their teacher about being non-judgmental. I'd like to think so.

But what, you might ask, about cases where kids write about actions that are morally reprehensible or even illegal? What then? Well, like most teachers I've seen my share of stories about cruelty to animals, vandalism, drug abuse, even a case where a kid had been arrested for dropping bricks from a freeway overpass. No big deal, he said. It was fun.

I took a day or so to calm down, gather my wits and remind myself of my own rules for giving advice: keep it short. Don't get preachy. Have faith in the kid's inherent good sense, and most definitely downplay the shock value. Horrified gasps may be exactly what he wants. But still, find a way to get his attention.

"Someday," I whispered to Jeff, slinging one arm over his shoulder in the hallway and precisely punching each word, "you'll have a two-year-old strapped in a car seat. Your wife may be driving that road." Then I walked away.

Okay, maybe it didn't change his life — or even make him stop and think. But maybe it did. And I can certainly guarantee that Jeff will remember my words when he first gazes into the face of his own newborn.

Most of the time, though, a situation which calls for intervention is serious, but not life-threatening. Most of the time I see papers which just cry out for personal responses.