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NOT LOOKING AWAY:

THE HOMELESS JOURNAL

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It is a hot, steamy day, as the rays of the sun bounce off the pavement. She is positioned in her usual spot. The heavy black coat hangs about her shoulders like a metal shield. Beneath the coat, she wears several sweaters, a shirt, and a burlap skirt. Silver bracelets line her wrists in search of a resting place. Her shoes are made of cardboard boxes folded with a piece of string holding them together. She also wears an old, black felt hat and chants the same tune to each passerby—"Can you spare a quarter today?" Positioned beneath the garbage can and the train station, always with the black trash bags full of mysteries close by, she patrols up and down the sidewalk with the dignity of a Buckingham Palace Guard—always on duty. For the commuters who pass her both morning and afternoon, she is a common part of the scenery, a familiar face. She is as much a part of the setting as the top of the Washington Monument in the background.

This description is actually a combination of two women who were often near the train station each day in Washington, D.C., and as one might imagine, I simultaneously felt great compassion and despair for them. The description is also one that I often use as a starting point with students when introducing the Homeless Journal.

However, a more vivid image has found a place in my mind, as well as in the minds of my students. I see the faces following Hurricane Katrina, people wading through the water, or clustered on a bridge with an all too common blank stare, a loss of hope, a sense of dismay and uncertainty. The kind of homelessness that occurs instantly, the kind to which anyone of us could fall victim. Therefore, if I were introducing the Homeless Journal today, there would most certainly have to be some mentioning of the devastation following Katrina, a

devastation which still prevails, images which live on long after the storm.

The writing of the character sketch is an important first step in the journal; however, before elaborating on the journal in more detail, it is beneficial to have a brief history of the assignment. Much of my teaching experience has been with apprehensive writers, and while teaching freshman English to primarily nontraditional students, I found that the students were often nervous about the writing process, as well as exhausted after arriving to class after eight or more hours of work. The students acknowledged that they felt threatened by the evaluation process, and some were intimidated by the writing assignments. Frequently, students said they had no source of reference for a given topic. This feeling may have been justified in some cases; however, it has been my experience, after many years in the classroom, that often what students need is confidence and not necessarily a new topic. For example, during the first two weeks of any of my freshman composition courses, I generally spend a great deal of time prewriting with students on a variety of topics. Often, I will have them create a branch or cluster using something like “green” or “purple.”

Of course, the initial response is, “I don't know anything about green or purple.” However, when students think for a moment, they are often surprised by the ideas they are able to generate, which is the point of the exercise. By exposing students to numerous topics, I encourage them to think and not be intimidated by any topic. For the apprehensive writer, as well as the nonapprehensive one, the topic may be a source of great anxiety; however, if students will calmly consider their options, they are generally able to determine an appropriate approach to the topic.

While I do not feel that students should be intimidated by the topic, I do feel a responsibility to develop topics that will challenge students, stimulate them to think creatively, and generate the type of response that I hope to achieve. Therefore, as a way of introducing narration and description, I require students to develop journals by assuming the identities of homeless people. All of the students have seen homeless men and women at some point, and all of them have preconceived opinions about homelessness. While simply having seen the homeless does not make the students experts, it does mean that they are not starting with a topic that is totally unfamiliar to them. Therefore, unlike some other topics that they will confront later in the semester, there is less stress associated with this one.

After a brief discussion about homelessness, I present students with the guidelines for the activity. The Homeless Journal generates an enthusiasm for writing. During the first few years that I used the exercise, I would bring a toy shopping cart to class, along with part of an old blanket, a few cans, and miscellaneous items. I said to students, “These are your only possessions, along with the clothes that you are wearing.” Again as the first step in the process, the students develop character sketches, similar to the one that I gave earlier, but longer, and each day students are required to choose a different place to eat and sleep. Some students spend a night at the shelter; others locate a cardboard box or a doorway, and still others manage to get arrested for a night. One student made this entry in his journal of day one:

It is Monday, the day before trash is to be picked up. Most normal people dread Mondays, but to the homeless, it is a lot like a Christmas full of surprises. All sorts of items may be found if one is lucky enough. So, the first items of business today are to check the trashcans and then find a meal. I head straight for my favorite site, the compactor behind the Salvation Army. This has long been the most fruitful stop I have. After just a few minutes of rambling, I find an umbrella. This is a huge find and could not come at a better time. The clouds on the horizon do not look good. I will have to find a meal quickly so that I may beat the storm. I think I will go to the bakery. The cooks always throw away the weekend's stock that is unsold, as fine a meal as one can hope to have out here. God must be with me today; the cooks have thrown out more bagels than I know what to do with. By the time I leave, I am stuffed and have more than a few bagels stashed away for supper. I had better get moving; the storm is not far away. I know the perfect place to rest and wait this out. The bridge is in sight, and only the smallest of showers has started, I decide to take my time. Now is a perfect time to try out my new umbrella. (qtd. in Matthews 85)

For this student and others in the study that I conducted on apprehensive writers, the Homeless Journal provided an opportunity for them to actively engage in the writing process without the usual fear of evaluation.

The student quoted above mentioned an approaching storm at the end of his day one. The weather changes daily, and journal entries reflect such changes, as well as students' feelings as homeless individuals struggling to survive life on the streets. The weather for each of the seven days is written on index cards and randomly selected for the week. Weather conditions include hail, tornado, rain, snow, freezing temperatures, hurricanes, and sunny days. For example, one class experienced a tornado on the second day, and a young man in the class described his situation on that particular day in this way:

Sirens were blaring all around me, and I jumped to my feet. I thought that the police had finally caught up with me. It took a few minutes to realize that the sirens were for a tornado coming to town. Was God punishing me, and if so, for what? I had just collected my things when the door behind me opened up. A middle-aged man looked me over once and shrugged his shoulders. "You here for the shelter?" (qtd. in Matthews 82)

Students are also to find a different place to eat each day, and another student made this entry in her journal on a sunny fourth day:

I was finally in the front of the line, and I told the cashier that I wanted the number four. She told me it would be \$4.99. I dumped my change of \$5.00 on the counter, and she gave me an awkward smile. I wish these people would stop giving me looks of pity. I took my meal to the park because it was such a beautiful day. I sat under a tree and watched a family play Frisbee with their family dog. One of the kids ran over by me to pick up the Frisbee, and his dad ran over and snatched the child away from me. They thought I was going to harm the child. (qtd. in Matthews 82-83)

Even during the early days of the assignment, it is clear that the students, apprehensive and nonapprehensive, do not view the writing as punitive, instead they look forward to making their journal entries.

In addition to changing weather conditions and sleeping arrangements, students are confronted with various situations. Some of the situations include having a blanket stolen while one is sleeping, spending the night in jail for panhandling, finding \$5 on the street, or being bitten by a dog. The majority of the students experience no difficulty in writing the journals, and often they seem more inspired to write. On two occasions students interviewed homeless people that they knew in their communities to gain a better perspective. It is significant that the students valued the exercise enough to go out and research the topic and authenticate the voice in their journals. One of the two students, a young woman, was so inspired by her homeless friend's plight that she wrote her journal from a male perspective. Generally, students enjoy the activity and learn that they do have ideas worth sharing. Students are "homeless" for six days, and on the last day, they have to find a realistic way to stop being homeless. Of course, some of them buy a winning lottery ticket on the seventh day; a few go home, and still others choose death.

Students share their journals throughout the week, and they look forward to reading each other's entries. The journal allows the student to engage in the writing process and have a sense of writing for a real audience. An evaluation checklist is used to grade the journal, and students present oral reports on the last day of homelessness. In the past, some of my students have been very creative. One young man came to class

dressed as his version of a homeless person, complete with a shopping cart. Another student wrote her daily journal on a piece of newspaper, an envelope, or other pieces of paper because, as she explained, living on the streets did not afford her the luxury of writing paper. Each time I use the activity, students report that they enjoy it, which is especially significant for apprehensive writers, since they often do not enjoy the writing experience.

Writing activities that allow students to draw upon their own experiences are especially beneficial. Alice Scott-Gilliam in “‘Treading Softly’: Dealing with the Apprehensions of Older Freshman Writers” conducted a study of 42 older adults using the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test and questionnaires. Gilliam found that one of the factors affecting apprehension is “memories of past difficulties or rigid prescriptions about good writing” (5). As a result of her study, she suggests that we “design writing tasks that draw upon adult experience or to provide the information necessary for the writing task (i.e., a statistical chart which students are to analyze in some way)” (Gilliam 9). The Homeless Journal achieves both of these goals. Students are provided with daily situations and specific guidelines for the assignment.

The Homeless Journal also actively engages the students in the writing process, and for the week that we complete the assignment, it changes the atmosphere in the classroom. For example, while teaching a developmental writing class at the high school level several years ago, I used the Homeless Journal with students who had failed the writing portion of the graduation exam. They were students who avoided writing situations, who actually hated writing, and ranged in age from 16 to almost 20. Many of the students had taken the test two or three times. It became a challenge to develop activities that would encourage the students to write and provide them with the necessary practice before they attempted the exam again. Teaching at the high school level, maintaining some type of discipline also became a challenge. What I found was not only did the Homeless Journal encourage the students to write on a daily basis, but it also made them excited about the process of writing. They were anxious to get their situations for the next day and share what they had written. I witnessed the same type of excitement with the students in my writing apprehension study as they completed this activity. George Hillocks, Jr. uses the term “environmental teaching” as “teaching that creates environments to induce and support active learning” (245). The Homeless Journal achieves that goal. The activity allows even those who are having difficulty with the writing process to experience a degree of success, since the journal is not evaluated in the same way as an essay. In addition to allowing all writers to experience a degree of success, the Homeless Journal encourages students to write more. They approach the assignment more enthusiastically than any other assignment during the semester, and they write longer paragraphs.

In addition to being less apprehensive, students leave the assignment with a different attitude toward the homeless. For example, there are those who prior to the exercise said that they would never give money to the homeless. They felt that the person would use the money to buy drugs or alcohol or possibly that the individual was not even homeless. Others argued that there are agencies to handle the problem, or still others said that they donate to specific organizations. Some students said that a dollar or quarter that they would give would not make a difference. Individuals have to decide for themselves if it is worth the risk, and yes, there are community organizations that provide for the homeless, but the funds do not always reach those for whom they are intended. A person living under a bridge, in a garbage dumpster, or in an alleyway does not have an address.

I started this essay with a combined description of two homeless women that I saw many years ago and mentioned that I would include images from Katrina in anything that I would consider presenting to students today. I, too, was one of the commuters in the description that I gave earlier, and on a recent trip to Philadelphia, I found myself with yet another reminder and actually one that made me think of the title of not looking away. Last year, a colleague, a student that we had brought to the National Honors Conference, and I stepped out of the Marriot Hotel, and there in November, on the cold, grey concrete, a man was lying on the sidewalk, and people were simply passing by, no one showing any great concern, and in many ways, we were all looking away, not wanting to see the human suffering.

Through the Homeless Journal, I want students, as well as myself, to choose not to look away. Raising awareness is the first step in addressing the problem. The men, women, and children who are struggling to find an existence should not be viewed as merely shadows or images from which we must divert our eyes. In

essence, they are more like mirrors. How far away are we from being in the same situation?

Works Cited

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