Molly Adams

It Only Takes a Spark, and It's Inside of You:

Students Take the Torches We Pass with Surprising Grace

Abstract

In attempting to align all that we do as English teachers with current standards, expectations, standardized tests, and other educational stressors, we have overlooked one crucial element: developing our students as writers, not just because it is beneficial, but because it is good for their souls, their confidence, and their overall evaluation of life as it happens. In this article, the author argues that we must return to what we know best: using distant teachers and mentor texts; writing alongside our students; reading aloud using the author's chair; and encouraging them towards all methods of possible publication. By confronting our own insecurities as writers, we bolster their confidence and in all hopes, impact them for life. It's inside of each of us, waiting to be reignited.

Keywords: writing, mentor texts, publication/ publishing, distant teachers, project based learning (PBL)

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I have it all spread out before me like some scholarly picnic: my steaming mug of proper English tea, a notepad and my favorite Ticonderoga pencils, my old-lady magnification-1.00 glasses in case the white-hot glare of the laptop screen becomes too much, my trusty book of Billy Collins at my left for inspiration, and a pile of student feedback forms to my right for exact quotes. My stack of distant teachers is piled just at eleven o'clock: Goldberg, Collins, Lamott, Graves, Robinson—they are all there. They blink back at me with their usual wondering stare: "Just what are you going to do with us today? What do you need us to say? How can we serve you today, Miss?"

I blink back. "I don't know," I mutter. "I think I need you to tell me how I teach them how to write. I don't know how to tell you, reader, how I do what I do. But I'm about to try."

> … and I was only thinking
> about the shakers of salt and pepper
> that were standing side by side on a place mat
>
> I wondered if they had become friends
> after all these years
> or if they were still strangers to one another
>
> like you and I
> who manage to be known and unknown
> to each other at the same time—
>
> me at this table with a bowl of pears,
> you leaning in a doorway somewhere
> near some blue hydrangeas, reading this.
> (Collins, 2005, pp. 3-4)

Billy Collins (2005) so beautifully articulates the relationship between poet and reader, artist and aficionado, self and other, yet I have no idea how to articulate exactly the exchange between writing teacher and budding student writer. We are "known" and "unknown," side by side yet miles apart, and somehow, some way, writing shrinks the space. This past year in my English classes, I have seen a flowering of talent like I have never seen before in 13 years of teaching. I have come to see the truth behind Natalie Goldberg's (1990) *Wild Mind* philosophy: "I know many people who are aching to be writers and have no idea how to begin. There is a great gap like an open wound" (p. xv). They sit in my room every day, and the most challenging aspect of our exchange is this: Not only do they not know how to begin, they do not yet realize they need "it." The talent is there, the desire is sometimes there, but the will to learn—it often sleeps when it should be awake.

I see myself as someone who helps close the wound, who provides some needle and fine thread for a good stitch-up, and a lollipop to reward those with a stiff upper lip. I just do it with a pen.

Going Back to College

I started teaching dual credit ENGL 1301/1302 this year (that is freshmen comp and rhetoric, for those not familiar with the numbers and acronyms). My campus is a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) specialized campus as well as an ECHS (Early College High School). In place of AP or IB, we offer dual credit in spades: college in high school, with some project based learning (PBL) mixed in. Our general courses use PBL as a common delivery system and learning model, although this is sometimes hard to align with the curriculum in some of the dual credit classes.

When I was first given these classes, I shuddered with anxiety and spent a lot of time sitting with clenched teeth, staring at a wall, thumping my temple in the shower, and losing sleep at an alarming rate during my summer vacation before taking this new job. All I could think about was all of the ways I could epically fail. I wracked my brain with visions of being too soft, assigning too little or too much homework, or disappointing the college and having students know they knew more than I did. Truly, all of this now seems ridiculous, but it was how I started my 13th year of teaching. I felt like a giant baby, toddling in with my goofy posters, my word of the day calendar, and my treasured bust of Shakespeare, who is never far from a reassuring pat (which I often do to steady and center myself).

I went back to my drawing board. I went back to my college freshman composition teacher, Dr. Bob J. Frye, now the Green Distinguished Emeritus Tutor at Texas Christian University. Each week he wrote us a letter, calling us by name, and remarking about wonderful things like "a friend is a soul yours can be naked with" and treasured stories about conversations with custodial staff on campus that plucked at my heartstrings. Everything he said was interesting and amazing and insightful and intelligent. I could have sat in 1301 all day long, every day of the year, every day of my life. He introduced me to Annie Dillard and poetry and trees on campus (perhaps he was inspired by Thoreau to get back to nature as a path to enlightenment, as I am learning now in graduate school). I had never sat under those trees much, or even given them much thought, yet as I looked up at my three-story maple (at least I thought it was a maple) outside of Waits Hall, I began to understand how words sometimes don't capture everything, but we do try. We do try. I rewrote that tree essay four or five times. I never got it quite right; he kept asking me to think more, see more, be more, as I sat in the breeze under my tree. He taught me that drafting is important. And that there are never enough drafts and writing is never finished. And that walking outside inspires you. And that language isn't cheap: Use each word with the care that it costs you to mean it. And that I can be a writer, too, if I would only keep the pen moving. Years later, I can still email Dr. Frye. He may not remember what he taught me, but he still knows my name and remembers my face. These lessons truly shaped my beliefs about writing.

That is precisely what I wanted to tap into for this freshmen composition class. It occurred to me that Dr. Frye must have had his own distant teachers, like those at my eleven o'clock, and he used writing workshop before it was cool to call it writing workshop. As I reflected back on my time in the National Writing Project Summer Institute at North Star of Texas Writing Project, I realized that I was "taught" all of the things he originally taught me back in 1993, which I had forgotten or put away as a teacher. In the years that followed the onset of TAKS in the late 1990s, I had cast aside mentor texts, author's chairs, nature walks, bubbles, writing about nothing and everything, trying my hand at some really bad poetry, and looking through the fragile dust that covered the "essential elements" of Gatsby to see it for all the glitzy and glamorous pearlish string of words that Fitzgerald intended it to be.

I had to find my way back.

So I pulled out my old friends, those letters from Dr. Frye and my favorite distant teachers listed previously, and instead of going straight to the usual canon of "old faithfuls," I drew up anything I could get my hands on that was just good writing. I devoured new distant teachers, like Matt Bondurant and bell hooks, Sarah Vowell and William Faulkner, Rick Bragg and Celia Rivenbark. I ate their words like candy and decided what I could piece together to feed to my hungry students.

Mentor Texts

In my classes at this new school, I have a lot of freedom, and although I use a writing workshop model for teaching, I want students who don't read (let's face it—it's most of them!) to be exposed to as much rich, rewarding, and impactful texts as I can find and have time to integrate. I am *always* looking for a new

or obscure text to share. Instead of looking only at mentor texts that *should* be read and written about, I found myself sharing texts which I loved, felt passionate about the language, wanted to put the text on like a jacket and walk around in it, and should *always* be read aloud. And something magical happened. Those juniors, who did not (and still do not) like to read, swallowed every word I said and read … hook, line, and sinker.

We started with Rick Bragg, a Pulitzer-winning Southern memoir writer from Possum Trot, Alabama, and *All Over But the Shoutin'* (Rick Bragg biography, 2010). And it was all over but the shoutin'.

> I knew that my mother was not afraid of much—I watched her do in a four-foot rattlesnake with a broken-handled rake and a Red Ryder BB gun—and that she could have handled life with my father, it had just be him and her, without the ghosts. They came for him in the winter, mostly. I could see them only in my father's almost pathological fear of cold, in his hatred of ice. (Bragg, 1997, p. xviii)

With such a mentor text, and with only a two-page excerpt, students could see language come alive at the fingertips of a man they had never met, with a story that was not that strange or unique. Bragg (1997) himself noted that his story "is not an important book," but that he longs for a "record" (p. xi-xii). That this all actually happened. That they were and are and will be. Students are not so different from a younger version of Bragg, who wants to tell a story, have it matter, and give his or her life meaning. However much students want this, though, they are rarely able to verbalize it. So that gaping wound sits there festering, breeding angst and discontent, without an outlet. Bragg's prose offers them such an outlet.

Natalie Goldberg (2005) offers my students a similar outlet or challenge: She recognizes that we all have a "dream of telling our stories—of realizing what we think, feel, and see before we die" (p. xii). She challenges readers and writers alike (for they are one in the same) to "'[write] down the bones,' the essential, awake speech of their minds" (p. 4). This text was so important for me personally as a writer that I had to bring it to them. I quietly and surreptitiously made copies of a few chapters (Shhhhh! It's for educational purposes, I swear. And I'm not the only one!), and tenaciously spread them across the desktops. I gave them a few tidbits in class, we read some Adele lyrics about hometowns to go with an essay assignment, and I sent them home with Goldberg. The next class, Chris, who arrives every day around 8:05 a.m., slings his backpack on the desk and makes some witty remark about gun control or whatever he is buzzing about lately—Chris says to me, "Miss Adams, that bones stuff was pretty good. I like her. I get it." I looked up from checking emails and had to tell myself to close my mouth and not act weird. "Well, great. …" I stammered, trying to sound like, "Sure—of course it is, would I give you garbage?" Yet no witty remark emerged from my mouth. I smiled a tiny smirk, gave myself a mental pat on the back, and click-clacked away at the keys to get ready for the day.

That Goldberg day in class was magical. We started with a belief chart about writing. What must Goldberg believe about writing to say what she does? Here's what went on the chart, somewhat summarized:

1. Writing can help you deal with your emotions.
2. Writing can be scary.
3. It can be funny or serious.
4. You have to do it a lot to get good at it—it takes practice.
5. It helps if you have things you like to motivate you (favorite pen, paper, computer, etc.).
6. You need a space to write.
7. One man's trash is another man's treasure.

And these were not that different from Goldberg's (2005) rules about writing, which the students actually agreed with as well:

1. Keep your hand moving.
2. Don't cross out.
3. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar.
4. Lose control.
5. Don't think. Don't get logical.
6. Go for the jugular. (p. 8)

My students have taken these rules to heart so much that they were disappointed when Fitzgerald did not go for the jugular as they had hoped for in *Gatsby*, and instead prefer the likes of new author Bondurant (2008), and his Forrest of epic proportions, who supposedly walked 12 miles in the snow with a garish and snarling slash in his neck, a small price to pay for competitive bootlegging business in the 1930s. It's not the violence of the book that "sets [it] apart," as Tom Hardy so aptly captures in his own take on Forrest in the 2012 film version of the Bondurants's escapades (*Lawless*). Film-version Forrest is talking about a real man's approach to conflict, but it applies to Bondurant's work as well: What sets his prose apart is the "distance [it] is prepared to go"—with language, syntax, imagery, irony, and all of the nitty-gritty that Bondurant deftly uses to go for the jugular, over and over again (Wick & Fisher, 2012). It was intoxicating for my students to read.

Give 'Em the Chair

We began as a class to systematically identify key strengths, beliefs, techniques, and signatures of our favorite writers, and I helped them knead those styles of our mentors into a voice each student could be proud to express. My students' own unique styles developed over time. I felt so confident in their progress that I rearranged the furniture in my room one sunny Friday morning, placed the comfiest and least threatening chair front and center, and offered up this author's chair in my bubbliest and most charismatic (or so I thought) manner possible. I was met with blank stares. Sleepy smiles crawled into corners of mouths and echoed back to me the deepest and most profound thoughts of … "You have got to be crazy, Miss Adams. We ain't doing *that*."

My confidence popped like a too-full balloon. In my personal reflection to follow this moment, I remembered that Goldberg (2005) also reprints Jack Kerouac, who knew a thing or two about the journey of a writer, fraught with obstacles:

> Accept loss forever
> Be submissive to everything, open, listening
> No fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language, and knowledge
> Be in love with your life. (p. xiv)

And in that moment of sudden loss, shame, disappointment, and fear, I tried to be in love with my life. It was just too soon to give them the chair. They were loving writing, and reading great texts, and finding teachers who knew stuff besides me (but made me look more right; thank you, Mr. Hemingway), and finding their own small voice in the din of those who balked at reading and writing outside our walls.

But they were not yet ready to share.

They had confidence issues made of bricks and mortar that could only be removed from inside, by their own hands. I had to be patient.

I remember from writing workshop and Penny Kittle's (http://pennykittle.net/) brilliant philosophy and books that I needed to sit down beside them and write with them. I mean, I had been writing with them, during journal time, and on some of the essays I had assigned, but I neglected to share my writing with them, to take the author's chair myself. So the next week, after the author's chair "incident" and wide-eyed terror and shrinking back in seats and avoiding all manner of eye contact for the duration of class, I decided to practice what I wanted to preach. They wrote; I wrote. They read; I read. We read aloud; we read at home. We looked at poems, short stories, essays and my favorite nonfiction-fiction (the real stuff that is written like a juicy novel, and is often shelved in fiction rather than biography or memoir). I assigned a trio of essays to write on hometowns, significant people, and important events, knowing I had a few good ones I was proud of tucked away in my shabbily decorated writing folder, edges frayed with time. Our process was simple: We read a mentor text, returned to our belief and technique charts, discussed in groups, reflected in our writing, and shared back as a class. Then came the moment when I plunked down a stack of photocopied essays, *my* essays, on the table. I asked them to grab one at random. I climbed on the stool up front, my preferred kind of author's chair, and took a deep breath.

And as I read off the last line, I felt a deafening silence. I looked up over the top of my paper, and looked around my room. I heard a scatter of whispers of "wow" and "sheesh" and "I can't believe she wrote that" and "is that even true," and suddenly … for a moment, I was a hero. Not because I played paintball (which I am pleased to say earned me some bonus points), but rather because I used words to make something come alive, move around, and take shape, right before their eyes, and as that thing danced its jig on their papers, they began to see why the author's chair was important.

"Now listen. Like you, I am scared to death to put this in your hands. What if it's terrible? What if you don't think it's interesting? What if you don't understand what I am saying? What if … God forbid … after this, you think I'm not as smart as you thought I was before? These are my thoughts. Probably not that different from yours. It's important to talk about our thinking, to be a *community* of writers. Just as you are scared to take the chair up here and share, I am scared as well. I'm terrified. But watch me—I'm going to keep it moving. I'm going to push through it. I believe in myself and that I can be a writer. And this is how I start. I publish by reading it aloud. It is real because I say it out loud. Get ready."

And I plunge in, headfirst, into this cheesy, almost haphazard (to me) essay about getting pelted by paintball guns in a soggy English forest. And how I found a way to laugh through my popped and swollen lip. And how an 18-year-old can validate a

seasoned teacher who didn't think she needed it. And as I read off the last line, I felt a deafening silence. I looked up over the top of my paper, and looked around my room. I heard a scatter of whispers of "wow" and "sheesh" and "I can't believe she wrote that" and "is that even true," and suddenly … for a moment, I was a hero. Not because I played paintball (which I am pleased to say earned me some bonus points), but rather because I used words to make something come alive, move around, and take shape, right before their eyes, and as that thing danced its jig on their papers, they began to see why the author's chair was important.

We added some statements to our belief chart that day:

1. Sharing our writing matters.
2. Sharing our writing maybe helps someone else see what's possible.
3. If I share, someone else will.
4. Reading aloud is publishing, but less paperwork.
5. Anyone can use words to entertain, impact, punch, or lift up.
6. You just have to.

About a week later, after the paintball story, we were in the process of drafting number three of the significant event essays. Darrell, a student who most other students underestimate regularly, particularly related to writing, brought his piece up to me and without looking me in the eye, said, "Miss Adams, would you, um, have a look at this and tell me what you think?" I took his essay. He rolled up a chair, put his chin on his arm, and watched me. I began reading, and as a little laugh bubbled out, he smiled and I heard a tiny "yes!" escape his lips. I decided not to react and to keep reading. I laughed some more. I marveled at his ability to revise and edit with near perfection, almost zero conventions errors and with a profound breadth of imagery and vocabulary. He used dialogue deftly to propel the action and demonstrated paragraphing that enhanced his more reflective moments. It was, in a word, remarkable. I was so impressed but didn't want to gush or scare him. He looked back at me with such a worried look on his face, like the essay was so terrible and he was preparing for the worst, and I just said, "Wow, Darrell, that's actually really good. *Really* good. It's so good, you have to change the title, and it has to have something to do with the sandwich." He grinned, and took the paper back, mumbled an "okay" and lumbered back to his desk. After class, I called Darrell over and told him that he was going to have to read that in the author's chair on Friday that week, that he just had to do it. He emphatically told me no, no way I'm doing that, no. "I can't," he moaned, "it's not even good."

"Oh Darrell," I said, "it *is* good. They need to hear you. They need to know that it's not that hard, that if you do it, anyone can." He finally agreed, and begrudgingly, that Friday, he read "Courage on Sliced Bread" aloud to the class, the first student of the year to take the chair.

Again, pin-dropping silence and jaw-dropping looks followed. As a few uncomfortable seconds suspended between Darrell's last words, he apprehensively glanced above his paper at the crowd of onlookers who just caught the "show," and suddenly, the class burst into spontaneous applause. Darrell just grinned from ear to ear. Ever since then, no matter how much Darrell doesn't want to write, he does when I ask and sometimes he even does because he enjoys it. And since that day of "courage on sliced bread" which Darrell so bravely mustered, getting students to sit in the author's chair and share a line or a paragraph or the entire piece has never again been an issue. Even the quietest mouse in the class screws up his or her courage, clutches that paper with bated breath, and plunges into a read just as breathless as I did that first day I read aloud to them.

The Final Chapter

Don Murray (1980) suggests that "every writer—student or professional—comes to the page with a personal history as a human being and as a writer" (p. 57). He goes on to say that "we write well, not by forcing words on the page, but by listening to those words which collect themselves into a meaning while they are recorded on the page by a good listener" (pp. 70-71). Although Murray is speaking of the importance of dictation in drafting of writing, I think the thought can be applied to listening to each other's work. When students can extend beyond writing, editing, peer editing, redrafting, and turning in homework, into worlds of reading aloud because they can, posting on blogs or discussion boards to tease out or convey convictions, or even attempting publication by submitting to this journal, confidences are bolstered, chances are taken, and more fodder for writing floats to the surface.

Sometimes, instead of author's chair, I make copies of de-identified writing and let students look at each other's work. When working on some responses to *The Things They Carried,* Tim O'Brien's (1990) voice echoed in their prose like the tangled and scarred string of stories he weaves in his fictionalized yet somewhat true story of his time in Vietnam during the war. One of my students, Daniel, responded this way:

> When I first read this chapter I was amazed by the amount of detail put in to the dead soldier. I felt a little sick to my stomach (might of been the meds I was taking) just reading about the body sitting there, mangled and destroyed. The corpse of a once young man sitting with his "jaw" in "his throat" and a "star-shaped hole" in one eye (p. 90). I thought about how traumatizing this must of been for the author, a first to something so horrible. I almost set the experience to one you would have in a near death crisis, all the things that would roll through your head in all their craziness and truth. …

> This chapter treated the war with a seriousness and almost disgust. The thought of killing the man, innocent as he was, severely impacted the author. All he could do was stare, horrified at the thought. "Stop staring," a soldier would tell you (pg. 91). But you couldn't. You couldn't.

When students see each other's work, like Daniel's here, they are shocked and amazed at the power and skill each other has, and it boosts confidence further when coupled with a steady stream of mentor texts and a bevy of opportunities to demonstrate new techniques and styles as they are trying to develop their own unique voices as writers.

But here is where the rubber meets the proverbial road: Does this writing workshop approach really work? When we as teachers throw out the old stand-bys, the traditional canon, the things we hate to teach but try to pretend we love each year, the things we feel we *have* to teach each year, what do we do instead? And by the same token, what really happens to our students? What about the state testing? Can they pass? What about my benchmarks and STAAR and campus expectations and all of the great big balls of stress we balance ever so carefully for nine months out of the year? Well, this year, I took a leap. I went all writing workshop, all the time. I rarely used a textbook (I know, scandalous!). I used mentor texts that I loved and could be excited and passionate about in class. I wrote right next to the students, right alongside them. I struggled. I talked about my thinking. I made mistakes. I read my stories aloud. I encouraged, sharpened pencils, made more copies of better excerpts (shh!), and took more hours to write comments and notes back to students about their ideas, their work, their truth they laid down in pencil each day at my behest. And here is what some of my students said on their first semester course evaluations:

- The short story was what I loved the most. I love to make up happenings. [I liked] Tim O'Brien, Writing Down the Bones and that country guy—they all gave me a feel of what exactly writing is like and how it should be. – Lexi
- I learned everything that makes me credible to talk about PTSD. [I prefer] Goldberg: her tips for writing helped me ALOT. I've only gained from this class. – Reese
- [I'd like to improve on] my writing. I don't feel that I am reaching my highest potential. I think if I could try harder and practice more I would improve a lot. I enjoyed writing on the personal essays. This was because I had never written essays like that. I expressed myself like never before in writing. – Josh
- I've improved my voice in my papers. I've learned structures of essays. I've broadened my vocabulary. Leonard Pitts had a huge impact on me. His writings were very eye-opening. – Chris
- Pitts changed my view of the "writing rules." I liked writer's chair because I could see other's talent. – Becky
- The most impact was from things Miss Adams wrote, because it's from someone I know. I have improved my writing skills. I have learned that I actually enjoy writing. I have learned that I can do essays the night before and they turn out good. – Darrell
- I believe that the short story, "The Ledge," was something I might enjoy for the rest of my life. [I enjoy writing] short stories, since I always found them interesting, and personal essays, which always seem to make me gouge my eyes out in a pleasant fashion. – Sawsan

As I was revising my first submission to this journal, I had announced to all of my classes the possibility of getting published by submitting a student piece on "walking in my shoes" to the journal. Mimicry is its own form of flattery, I guess, and as I was finalizing my own piece, Darrell and Sawsan from 1301 came into my room one afternoon and said, "Okay, Miss Adams, what do you want us to do for this journal thing?" After we discussed some ideas, they went home and drafted pieces to submit. We edited them together; they went home and revised and redrafted again. Sawsan wrote a deep and intuitive poem about walking a mile in the shoes of students who are outgrowing their own "soles," and Darrell chose his go-to, the personal essay. As we finalized their pieces for submission, it occurred to me that my own piece on how I teach writing was worth changing; one of them had written about me. Because of my teaching, or influence, or writing, or a combination of my whole crazy show that I put on every other day for them, Darrell chose to write about me and how I had impacted him as a future engineer with a burgeoning writing career, even though he drags himself to the pencil and paper, kicking and screaming, still considering this new hunger as a writer which he isn't sure he wants to feed.

I became emotional just reading his piece once, not because it was so touching or because it was, like his other pieces, extremely well written, but rather lumps rose in my throat and tears welled in my eyes because I had actually set out to do a thing—and I had accomplished it. Somehow, some way, we did it, together. We walked up to the edge, jumped off, and shot like like Kerouac's Roman candles across the night sky. And I had no idea that we were even sparkling. Darrell and Sawsan both reminded me just how far we had come as a writing community, as I observed their vocabulary and mastery of images and language, the unique and talented voices they are developing, and the future that is safer because they can express themselves in astute and enlightened ways, even if only for their own enjoyment, which they now actually consider as an option.

You Can Do It

Any teacher who is feeling less confident about teaching writing since the onslaught of new standardized testing, any teacher who is longing for the days of old when we read and wrote what we pleased, and any teacher who fears that your cries of literary passion fall on deaf ears, hear this: You are not alone. It is not the

When you are in your "element," doing what you know in your heart works, they *will* hear you. Your passion will be infectious, the silence after reading your own words aloud will be palpable, and the exchange that grows between you and your students will not only be magical, but it will have a more comprehensive and measurable lifelong effect than any standardized test or transcript ever could.

end. I was there. We have all been there. Set up any constraints you have as a teacher, mention any obstacle you face in teaching literacy or developing curriculum, divulge any secret desire to lock all the people who tell you what they think you should do better in a very small closet, and I will do you one better: Everything you need to make this work, to leave your mark, is inside of you. You "carry the fire," as Cormac McCarthy (2006) says in *The Road* (p. 283). In the inspiring book *The Element*, Sir Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica (2009) explain it like this:

> The world is changing faster than ever in our history. Our best hope for the future is to develop a new paradigm of human capacity to meet a new era of human existence. ... We need to make sure that all people have the chance to do what they should be doing, to discover the Element in themselves and in their own way. … [This book is] also about understanding the conditions under which human talents will flourish or fade. It's about how we can all engage more fully in the present, and how we can prepare in the only possible way for a completely unknowable future. To make the best of ourselves and of each other, we urgently need to embrace a richer conception of human capacity. We need to embrace the Element. (pp. xiii-xiv)

We have to be part of this movement, this change. It has to start with us as literacy teachers, or educators in general. In fact, this is who you are, writing teachers; it's in your educational DNA. You have everything you need at your fingertips and written like words tattooed across your hearts. How many lines of Shakespeare have you memorized over the years? Which of the characters did you really want to befriend in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Does Faulkner's rich language dripping with history's dark secrets ever make you quiver? And what does it all mean? How can you tap into these this internal gold mine of information and methodologies? When you are in your "element," doing what you know in your heart works, they *will* hear you. Your passion will be infectious, the silence after reading your own words aloud will be palpable, and the exchange that grows between you and your students will not only be magical, but it will have a more comprehensive and measurable lifelong effect than any standardized test or transcript ever could.

Like Collins (2005), "I wonder how you are going to feel / when you find out / that I wrote this instead of you" (p. 3). I, too, wonder how you will feel, since when we started this journey, we were indifferent salt and pepper shakers idly watching each other across the table, wondering if we could really walk in each other's shoes. This is your story too. I hope that by listening to the real teachers, our students, especially in this particular issue of the journal, that somehow, some way, we bridge the yawning divide, soothe the gaping wound, and bring all writers to the same table to read aloud and share our experiences. For "book[s] about writing [aren't] enough. Being a writer is a whole way of life, a way of seeing, thinking, being. It's the passing on of lineage. Writers hand on what they know" (Goldberg, 1990, p. xvi).

Take some time to let your students share what they know. Just as Dr. Frye took a risk and a step back to pour something special into my own writing talent, I have tried to honor his legacy by doing the same in my classroom. If you teach them what you know is best, what your mentors and distant teachers taught you that merited passing on, then also take some risks. And let them take the chair. Let them teach you. Let them know you, and get to know them.

I promise you this: they are full of surprises. You were once, too. And perhaps, you still are.

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