TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Memorial to Gabriele Rico

Praisesong: One (Worn) Path through AEPL, Libby Falk Jones

Twenty Years: Reflections and Questions, Alice Brand

Hitchhiking the Labyrinth, Thomas Gage

The Dance of Spirit in AEPL and Beyond, Susan Schiller

Stepping Beyond, In, and With JAEPL: Twenty Years of Hope, Kristie Fleckenstein

Coming to Nonviolence, Paul Heilker

To the Contrary, Beth Daniel

The Personal Creed Project: Portal to Deepened Learning, John Creger

“Put Your Ear Close to the Whispering Branch”: Deep Listening in the English Classroom, Jessica Jones

Out of the Box: Drawing Is Learning, Laurence Musgrove & Myra Musgrove
Here I go again. Just last week, I used these same lines from Rilke to introduce my sabbatical research presentation:

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I do not know if I will complete this last one,
but I give myself to it.

—Ranier Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*

I lived and taught at a Kenyan university for the five months of my sabbatical, so Rilke’s lines rang true. What I see clearly in *JAEPL’s* 2014-15 collection of teacher narratives is just how much teachers must reach out now: across a bridge, a barrier, a culture, a social class—or even across oceans and continents. There is always a distance to navigate, a new place to arrive.

When I was a student in the traditional (product-based) classrooms of the 50s and 60s, teachers knew what knowledge students needed to learn. Students knew, too. They knew they could sit in rows and, if attentive to the authority before them, they would get it. They would also get the grades to prove they got it.

Then a movement washed over us. Its current is so strong now. The surface is not stable; sometimes waves break over it and into our life rafts splashing us square in the face. This movement became even more palpably present, visible, to me in Kenya as I looked through the eyes of a researcher. The classroom where I taught my section of the required writing course at Daystar University was surrounded by classrooms whose instructors were teaching writing straight out of my 50s-60s Ohio high school. My sabbatical research project was to teach “the new way,” which meant a student-centered, process-based curriculum. Daystar’s faculty was rooting for me. They had asked me to come because their students didn’t like writing, were bad at it, and the whole faculty was complaining and blaming them for the bad papers they had to read. To make a long story short, some of my students crossed the barrier and discovered, let’s call it, the “secret” of the movement. They learned to give themselves to it, as Rilke says, and enter the widening circles to which the movement leads. And because they did, their discoveries led them to write wonderful things.

Other students gave themselves to that movement too, which has brought forth the stories that the authors of these “Connecting” narratives tell: living a life in a widening circle, reaching out across unstable waters with an uncertain destination. Why? Why indeed! This is a new world where widening circles are what we have. This is the new narrative for teachers. We can’t claim to know what we need to know as teachers anymore. Now we must become model learners ourselves because it is how we think and
interact, how we discover and how we share—that is the knowledge that students can learn from us.

The first two pieces in “Connections” are, appropriately, from Kenya. Two faculty from Daystar University—Wandia Njoha and Ann Wachira—tell stories about reaching out to their students, to bring them closer to the uncertain newness of an untried writing pedagogy. Then comes David Bedsole’s wry poem. A dog’s bark may never sound the same to you again, as it shifts from the background to the foreground of Kenneth Burke’s theory of motives, widening the narrow circle of scholarly study. “Connecting” ends with W. Keith Duffy’s tale of the assumptions we make about our place in higher education. His long-ago experience in a grocery store gives us a sharp insight into how we look to people who don’t share the privileges that we take for granted, forcing us to widen our circles even when we don’t want to.

Aisle Four: Ice Cream, TV Dinners, Humility

W. Keith Duffy

I stood there in Kroger’s freezer section, frozen in place.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” I insisted. My voice went up an octave. “But . . . but I’m not even like that!”

These emphatic declarations didn’t matter though. My words were bouncing off the back of his head. He had already turned and walked away, already dismissed me. Slowly kneeling, he continued stocking the shelf with frozen peas. A nearby shopper furtively glanced over the top of his Fudgesicles box, trying to determine why I was yelling, and who the hell I was.

The answer: I was a fourth-year doctoral student in the rhetoric program at Bowling Green State University trying to survive the lean, mean Ohio summer. Other than the constant grind of reading and writing, life during the fall and spring semesters was relatively easy. There was always teaching, always a meager (but welcomed) stipend to buy food, pay rent. However, when the summer came, the sidewalks were rolled up, many classroom doors were bolted shut, and that teaching assistant’s paycheck evaporated. I dreaded the onset of summer. Doctoral students were still required to take courses to complete the Ph.D. on time. And occasionally, one or two leftover, first-year writing courses were tossed into the pit where we grads would scramble for them like ravenous dogs. But if you weren’t feisty enough, too bad. Yes, summer always brought a nervous uncertainty in the “grocery money” department.

Jesus, I had no idea how incredibly privileged I was. Having entered into the dissertation stage of the program, I was spending my days reading books of my own choosing and writing paragraphs of my own design. The grand title: *The Role of Spirituality in Re-envisioning Writing Pedagogy.* How I actually convinced my dissertation director to agree to that topic, I’ll never know. Yet I had enthusiastically embraced my role as a lowly teacher of remedial writing, as a rugged representative of the most ghettoized specialty in English studies—Composition. Some called it “Bonehead English,” but to me it was the most important discipline being taught at the
university level. I was a member of the underdog pack and damn proud of it. And
the dissertation work was cracking me wide open as well. I was breathing in the
ideas of spiritual thinkers and leaders from a variety of doctrines, becoming freer
and less prescriptive in my teach-ing, seeing my chosen discipline in a completely
new, transformative way. I was slowly relinquishing my judgmental habits,
confronting my will to control students’ writing, acknowledging my fragmented
nature, and understanding a central paradox: wholeness and strength comes from
embracing weakness, honoring brokenness, and speaking our stories. And all of these
insights being given to me would change my way of being in the writing classroom in
powerful ways. Heady times, indeed.

But I still needed to eat. That’s why I was in the freezer section at
Kroger’s grocery store looking for cheap dinners. Summer was a month away still, so
my cyclical fear over being penniless from early May to late August was not
yet a reality...but I was getting nervous.

Looking up from the frosty Banquet Salisbury Steak packages, I saw one of my grad
school colleagues, who was a year behind me in the program. We struck up a conversa-
tion—frankly, the only conversation that ever seemed to happen this time of year:

“Hey! How’s the dissertation coming?”
“I hope this doesn’t sound like bragging, but it’s going really well. It just seems to be
happening on its own, as long as I get out of its way, if you know what I mean.”
“That’s good to hear.” A pregnant pause, a raising of the eyebrows, a little grimace,
then: “Hey, what’re you gonna do this summer?”

I knew what he meant. This was the same question on all our lips. I just didn’t want
to have to think about the answer yet. So, I played dumb: “You mean for work?”

“Yeah. What’re you gonna do for money?”

I exhaled deeply, and glanced over my friend’s shoulder. Six feet away, a thirty-some-
thing man, black hair, in tan khakis and an apron (sporting a characteristic blue “K” for
Kroger) was kneeling down. He was methodically stocking shelves. I focused back on
my friend and shook my head.

“Oh hell, I don’t know. I may be doing THAT this summer.” I motioned casually to
the shelf-stocker, sighing and laughing a bit at the same time. “Who knows?”

My friend nodded. “Okay. Well, I’ll catch you later.” He wheeled his cart away.

I started to return my attention to the frozen rectangles of dinners, but I already
knew something was wrong. It was a sharp, tight, angular feeling. Something was ter-
ribly, deeply, disturbingly wrong.

And that something was me.

But before those thoughts had really coalesced, before I had articulated the problem
internally, my peripheral vision caught an image of that tan apron with a blue “K,” that
30-year-old man with black hair, rising and advancing toward me. I turned to him, all
of it in slow motion and out-of-focus. I tried to smile, but my face didn’t seem to want
to work that way. And then, I got what was coming to me:
“Listen, buddy.” His voice seethed, barely a whisper. He was standing within inches of me. His index finger pointed at my chest. There was spittle on his lower lip. He peered directly into my eyes. He wanted to punch my lights out. In one unbroken sentence, he said: “I may not have a lot, but I have two daughters and a wife who I love, and I provide for them just fine by doing this job and doing it right. But having to hear uppity shit like yours doesn’t help at all.”

His eyes narrowed further. Then he spun on his heels and walked six feet away. That was it.

As I watched him kneel and grab a bag of frozen peas, I struggled to breathe. Slowly, as the world came back into focus. I knew things were no longer the same. I knew my place in the universe a little better . . . certainly more than any dissertation was ever going to teach me. I still blurted out my idiotic protest: “I didn’t mean it like that! I’m not even like that!”

But I knew I was lying. I did mean it like that, and I was precisely like that.

I’ve carried this humbling incident into the classroom for 15 years. I can relive and re-feel that sense of shame and despair on cue. That vacuum where I had no way to salve the wound that my words had made. That irony of thinking I was enlightened and free, when in fact I was just blind to my own privilege.

The sting of this incident brings me clarity. It makes me small. There’s one vital lesson I’ve learned: when I recall that this life is truly not just about me, then real learning can take place inside and outside the classroom.

For this, I am grateful.