

NOTES TOWARD A PAPER

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Pens move quietly across paper. Mara writes furiously, head down, eyes intent on the words flowing blue across her pages. Bob writes, stops, looks up, puts his hand over his mouth, smiles at what seems to be wry private humor, writes again. Holly is finished, leans back and looks out at the center of the room. Should I stop them? Move on with the next prompt? But Mara is still writing. I wait. Holly picks up her pen, writes swiftly, in the margin of her page. I wait. Now Barbara looks up, straight at me, but she's not seeing me. She's looking deep into some image far beyond this room. I smile; she doesn't notice. She writes. Hall noise filters into the room. Now I feel I can break it. "If you're not quite done, make a few notes to lead you back," I say. "Now, what activity is the opposite of writing? Describe that activity—let us be there and do it with you." Almost everyone sits back. Hands cover mouths. One student gets up to refill her coffee. Then one, another, all of them lean forward and begin to write.

Half an hour later, when they've written to the rest of my series of prompts, they stop. They've been delving for an hour into their memories of and their feelings about writing. They're very tired. But they want to talk. One by one, they begin to say what they've been discovering. "I don't write the same way for every kind of writing, I think. Is that normal?" "I realized I never write without some purpose—I never write just for myself." "I saw that for me, writing is love, and love is action, and those three are together in some profound way."

They won't stop here. This hour has been their initiation into writing a paper describing their own writing process, one of the most important of the assignments asked all year of the participants in our annual Puget Sound Writing Program Institute for Teachers of Writing. Each year, writing this paper brings into sharper focus for each of them their own behavior as writers, provides for them

a grounding of information for observing how their students really write. As a participant in the program in 1981, I had to write that paper. By writing it, I discovered the profound connection in my own desire to write between the physical feel of inscribing words on paper and my pleasure in shaping thoughts on the page. I discovered, too, the function of my incessant and worrisome procrastination, its providing the incubation time my thoughts often needed to be shaped into coherent statements. I wrote an essay, prompted by an assignment to "Write a process paper," and by my own ruminations about what I do when I write.

Last summer, dissatisfied by the repetitious nature of the process papers the students were writing, my co-director and I changed the way the process paper was assigned. For the first time, participants began their writing with a series of heuristics designed to encourage imaging, metaphoric thinking, and more analytical cogitation. But before we began the exercise, the teachers in our Institute challenged us to live up to our own advice by writing with them as we had said they should write with our students. So, for the first time in eight years, I began to articulate again, formally, on paper, my sense of how I write. By this time, I had changed as a writer. I had begun to write poetry seriously, and to publish it. I had begun to use a computer consistently as a writing tool. I was in the middle of the longest piece I had ever attempted, my dissertation. As a doctoral student whose exams required extensive reading in rhetoric and composition, my observations of my own writing process had become continuous as I read description after description of what other scholars claimed human writing processes to be. I had been introduced to Winston Weathers' notions of Style B in a lecture to our class earlier in the summer. So, when the students said, "Write with us," I responded by writing that exercise with them and found in Weathers the permission to write a completed piece that was neither an essay nor a poem.

I discovered as a result the piece of writing that follows. Its collage-like structure allowed me to explore the physical and emotional aspects of my writing, to set them side by side with my logical definitions of what I believe I am doing by writing. Second, by this juxtaposition, I discovered the profound connection, for me, between taking in and giving out, a connection that has puzzled me ever since the night fifteen years ago when I found myself at midnight, alone in a quiet kitchen, pouring out in one con-

tinuous torrent a five-page poem recounting family memories for my daughter and then, when all the words had come, frantically munching all the cookies I could find. I felt the connection then; now, having written "Notes Towards a Paper," I see the connection so much more clearly. It is the need to fill again after pouring out. For me, then, food served to give me back to myself. Another issue to explore.

The students, too, seem to find the exercise powerful. As it moves in a dialectic between distance and presence, from metaphor to analysis, between self and other, from mode to mode, it allows the students to discover deep connections in reflecting on their own writing behaviors and their feelings about their writing. The freedom to keep in the finished piece these disparate but intuitively connected fragments allowed another freedom, the freedom to say what is known in other ways than by formal analysis, logic, or evidence. The students' papers that resulted were more exploratory both of content and of structure, as if they had been as freed as I by the heuristic and by their introduction to Style B.

I offer this piece, then, and the directions for the introductory heuristic exercise, as one instructor's method for stimulating students to personal discovery and as one writer's insights into what her writing does and is for her. Perhaps it will serve as a piece of evidence against which to place other information about human writing processes. Perhaps it will encourage others to try the same exploration, to discover by following its prompts their own modes of working.

NOTES TOWARDS A PAPER

OPPOSITES:

Eating is all
hands and fingers and mouth and tongue
grasping, licking, chewing, swallowing.
Eating is butter floating across the tongue, sugary
seedcake crunching between the teeth, pungent
cheese flattening against the roof of the mouth.
Eating
gathers in, keeps.
Eating makes you sick
if you do too much of it.
Eating is what I do when I finish
writing.

DEFINITIONS:

Writing: the gathering of thought and emotion and image into
shapes on a page called letters, sentences, paragraphs,
chapters, books

Writing: the expression of the inner self through a physical
manifestation that may be removed from the maker's
presence and perceived by others distant in time and space

BLOCKS:

What impedes my writing most are lack of knowledge and unwillingness to confront what I do know I know. Ignorance stops me by giving me nothing to say. Ignorance burdens me with the weary knowledge of how much work I must do to be ready to write. Knowledge stops me by fear of discovering clearly that which I want to keep hidden from others and from myself.

But if I forget myself
the words ride themselves onto the page
like the wild dreamhorses of the Camargue.

FOCUS:

Not audience. Not image.
Not emotion, even recollected in tranquillity.

Who/what, then?

IT IS MY VOICE SPEAKING OUT to a shadowy “person” whose presence hovers beyond the glassy aura of the image within which I write, part of the dark foreground toward which my words float.

PROMPTS: THE WRITING PROCESS PAPER

THE FOLLOWING LIST IS A SERIES OF HEURISTICS TO STIMULATE YOUR THINKING ABOUT YOUR WRITING PROCESS. WHAT DO YOU WHEN YOU WRITE? WHAT DOES THE PROCESS OF WRITING MEAN TO YOU?

1. SENSES: How are your senses engaged as you write?
Where
When
What tools papers movements
2. MEMORIES: Can you remember learning to write? Describe it. Can you remember a vital moment that involved writing? Describe it. Tell the story of it.
3. PURPOSES: What moves you to write?
Audiences
Structures
Stimuli
Pleasures
4. OPPOSITES: What activity is the opposite of writing? Describe that activity—let us be there and do it with you.
5. DEFINITIONS: Define writing in an image or metaphor. Define writing in abstract terms.
6. BLOCKS: What keeps you from writing?
7. FOCUS: What, above all, is writing for you?
8. FREEWRITE: Reread your notes, then freely write what you know about how you write. Write as fast as you can, and don't worry about how you will shape this for an audience.

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