

A WRITER'S AWAKENING

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The small office was cluttered with hundreds of books and journals, books and journals which could have easily filled a room twice the size. Stacks of papers framed the top of the desk so that only one small area remained clear. I heard Rick talking on the phone so I stood in the doorway, just outside of his view. He reached for a scrap of paper that had fallen to the floor, and looking up, saw me, motioned me in and pointed to an empty hard back chair. I walked in and sat down.

“Yes, so I’ll have the paper to you by the end of the week,” he said into the phone. “Give me a number where I can get in touch with you.”

As he jotted down the number, I realized that the small cleared space on his desk was for writing out phone messages, messages that flowed in a constant stream whenever he was in.

As I rearranged the papers on my lap, I took a long silent breath and rubbed the palms of my hands on my jeans to rid them of the nervous sweat. “This paper is in shambles,” I cried to myself. “Why did I even make this appointment? Surely graduate students have better things to do than make fools of themselves in front of their advisors.”

“Sorry for the delay,” Rick smiled as he hung up the phone. “How’s everything going?”

“Fine,” I lied, hoping that my cheerful attitude would hide the failure I was feeling about the manuscript I had brought in for him to read.

“Do you want me to read parts of this, or should we talk about it first?”

“Oh, I think I need some feedback on this,” I responded with pseudo-confidence. “I need some help with the ideas. It seems like a jumble of words all meshed together.” I prided myself on how steady my voice sounded. I was determined to keep back

the panic I was really feeling about the state of this paper. Maybe he wouldn't think it was that bad, if I played it cool.

As I handed him my draft, Rick eased back in his large desk chair. It was one of those ones that rocked slightly and noisily. Rick adjusted his small round glasses and began to read. After a page, the rocking stopped and he readjusted his glasses.

The sweat was returning to my palms. "These damn little rooms in these old Victorian houses are always too hot," I silently asserted.

After a couple of pages, Rick set the paper down.

"What is this?" he asked, his eyes sparkling. "You don't talk like this. Why do you write like this?"

"Wh . . . Wh . . . What?" I stammered, my voice now crackling. "Wh . . . What don't I talk like?"

"Listen to this: 'The theoretical principles around which each of us, as writing teachers, must respond to student writers are based upon years of research by such authors as'" Rick stopped reading. He sat back in his chair, locked his fingers behind his head and smiled.

"You don't talk like *that!*" he exclaimed. "When we talk you're always relating personal stories about your kids and conveying your excitement about what you do. Why don't you do that in your paper?"

"Oh, God," I thought, "how did I ever get myself into this mess? Me and my big idea—all I wanted to do was come up with better ways to respond to my students' papers. Now, here I was, over a month after I had started the paper, in the midst of total confusion. There in front of me and Rick, my mentor from my university, sat fifteen typed pages of detailed principles of response theory, and none of these pages seemed to say anything barely understandable, let alone useful. Why did I even come in for help?"

"Margie, what do you say to your students during conferences?" Rick asked, as he slowly positioned my paper atop the phone number he had just jotted down.

"Well, it depends! You know."

"Tell me," he prodded.

"Well, for example, I just found out that this one student, Kay, doesn't even know what a sentence is. Everything she writes is in fragments, like a stream of consciousness. When we were talking one day, I mentioned that it helps the reader if every

sentence has a subject and verb. And her response was ‘You mean, every sentence has to have those things?’ ”

“So, did you work on subjects and verbs first?”

“Well, actually, no. You see, when I read her paper, I simply didn’t know who or what she was talking about, regardless of the fact that everything was in fragments. I figured she wasn’t a very good writer, and the last thing I wanted to do was get into sentence structure right away. So I simply asked her who she was writing about and why. And we went on from there, talking about ways she could tell me more about the who and the why.”

“It sounds like you were getting at her purpose.”

“Exactly! I couldn’t see working on sentences when I didn’t even know if she had anything she wanted to say.”

Rick sat up in his chair, “Tell me more. What kind of writing do you encourage students to do?”

Before I knew it, over an hour had passed. We had spent the entire time talking about how I responded to students, in conferences and in writing. Rick never mentioned theory and I was having so much fun discussing ways to respond that I never mentioned it either. Finally, Rick picked up the draft he had earlier set down and handed it to me.

“Revise this thing: Put the theoretical section away—maybe for good, maybe for later—and explain how you respond to your students. There are lots of TA’s around here who could really benefit from reading about how you respond.”

As I scurried down the creaky steps of the old building that housed the English office, I felt as if I had just been aroused from a deep sleep. I felt rejuvenated. I now had a direction for my paper and Rick was encouraging me simply to write about something that I enjoyed (working with students) in a way that came naturally to me. Also, he hadn’t commented on one of those typing errors or awkward sentences or how poorly I had articulated that theory. He even mentioned writing something that might help other TA’s. I really liked that idea!

I went straight home; I was ready to write.

The first thing I did when I got home was clear my desk of all the books and articles on response theory. Then I pulled out an empty folder, labeled it “Response Theory” and stashed all those fifteen seemingly useless pages away—“maybe for good, maybe for later.”

I pulled from under my desk a pile of portfolios I was about to hand back. One by one, I searched through them, looking at the comments I had made in margins and at the end of the papers. I tried to remember what I had said to each student in conferences.

After about twenty minutes, I picked up Kay's folder. I loved working with Kay. Not a complete sentence in two typed pages. But I remembered that her first draft had only been ten lines long. Had I said anything that might have enabled her to lengthen it? Yes, there it was at the end of her second draft:

Kay: Oh, now I understand. You're describing your messy husband in the morning. What a great topic. This must be fun to write about. You ought to put a copy of this on the bathroom mirror for him to read. I'd love to know more about what he does with his clothes. Are they anywhere besides the foot of the bed? And his eating habits, (para. 4) are they as messy as his other habits? Since I don't know him, I need as much of a written picture of him as possible. Good luck, call me if you get stuck."

My explanation for how I responded was simple. Since Kay's content was so weak, I simply ignored any sentence, mechanical or spelling errors and concentrated on getting her to explain and describe her topic. If she had the time and motivation, she could work on the sentence, mechanics and spelling later. For now, she needed content.

"Got to jot all this stuff down," I articulated aloud. "Didn't I read somewhere that teachers should look at content first? I'll have to check that out later."

With a clean sheet of paper before me I wrote:

"Draft I

Kay: When I work with Kay . . ."

I spent hours with Kay's papers, sorting through my comments and thinking through our conferences together. By the time I was done I had six pages of notes.

After a short break and a long cup of coffee, I came back to my desk and looked for Steve's folder. "Now, Steve's a different case," I thought. After only one month of classes, I already knew he was one of the most sensitive writers I had ever worked with, sensitive in the sense that the slightest negative comment completely discouraged him. I remember that he told me after

our first conference that he really didn't want to continue the class. "I don't like people reading my stuff." The only thing that kept him coming was the fact that the course was a requirement.

How had I responded to someone who took any and every comment as a criticism? I pulled out one paper and looked at the marginal comments.

"Yes, I have found this to be very true when meeting new people."

"I never thought of it this way. I wonder if age or sex accounts for the difference. What an interesting point."

"What I'd like to know is how his music helped you relate to those people more effectively. Can you explain that in writing?"

Again, it was so simple: I simply gave my honest reactions to his writing and told him what I needed to know more about in order to understand his ideas. No great suggestions, no criticisms—just some non-judgmental comments and questions.

I spent the next week and a half writing about my responses to Kay and Steve and others. As I analyzed my responses, I unexpectedly realized that I had begun to internalize the theory I had been studying and trying to write about. My examples were actually explaining the theory much more succinctly than the fifteen pages of explanations I had tried to put together.

When I finished the stories of how I had responded to my students, I again looked at the pile of papers stashed away under "response theory." I took it up again, but with new insight. The theory was no longer some vague, abstract combination of ideas; now it was the specific and coherent basis upon which I responded to my students, the realities about which I had just spent a couple of weeks writing. I decided to include a section of my paper on theory, but a section that synthesized aspects I found most useful and helpful to me as a teacher.

The following month I again stepped into Rick's office for a conference. This time my palms were dry and I felt confident. I actually liked the paper and couldn't wait to get some feedback.

As I waited for him to finish up in another meeting, I thought about the last time I had sat there. I had felt defeated as a person and as a writer. "How is it that Rick dispelled my confusion and gave me a reason to write again?" I wondered. As I thought about this, I realized that Rick had helped me articulate what I actually

did with students and how I thought about what I did. In so doing, he made it clear that the confusion of the paper did not represent me—it represented only the working through of ideas—a necessary and natural process of learning. Rick seemed to have had confidence in my ability to work through my confusion in a style that suited me as an individual.

“So, how are your classes going?” Rick asked as he walked in, plopped himself in his chair and leaned forward, pushing aside the piles of books and papers that had accumulated (the small cleared space had long since vanished).

“Fine, my students seems to be working hard on their papers, and I think this draft explaining how I’m working with them is coming along.”

“So, let’s have at it.”

Rick picked up my draft and read; the chair was creaking and Rick was nodding. “Great story about Kay . . . your reaction here is just perfect . . . What do you mean by ‘Tom was shocked?’ Give an example here.”

“You know,” he said as he finished. “These anecdotes and personal reactions really make the piece. I hear you talking in this paper and hear your excitement about what you do. And your responses are exactly what Graves and Sommers and those guys talk about.”

“Are you sure I didn’t use too many ‘I did this’ and ‘I said that’ or too many stories? It seems so wrong to be so informal in a paper. I mean, what if other people besides you and me read this?”

“Of course,” he laughed. “That’s just the point. People write and read textbooks all the time. But how excited do you get about the way textbook material is presented?”

I just laughed. He definitely had me on that one.

“And speaking of someone other than you and I reading this, how about sending this in to *English Journal* or *Journal of Teaching Writing*? This is great stuff and it’s sure to get published somewhere.”

My shock and horror must have shown.

“What’s the matter?” he asked as he leaned forward.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I demanded. “I mean, people who write all the time publish. You know, Writers!!!”

With that sly grin spreading across his face, Rick simply leaned back in his chair and said, “Yep, that’s what real writers do.”

“God,” I thought, “GO PUBLIC?”

Suddenly I was faced with the reality of myself as a writer. But that reality was due to more than just going public . . . It slowly began to dawn on me that being a writer was everything I had gone through in the last two months.

I began to feel like a writer just awakened, awakened after years of formal instruction, lifeless papers, and boring topics, written for no one and no purpose.

Over the next couple of months I worried about what my awakening would mean in terms of my teaching. However, I found that the process I had gone through (and continue to go through today) made me very sensitive to my students’ needs and developmental stages. Now, when I enter a classroom, I find myself looking for students who need to be awakened. Often, I see those who are fast asleep, while others are just barely rousing. And sometimes I’ll spot a hard working but addled looking student over in the corner, needing only that final, this? You don’t talk like this”

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