# DANGEROUS WRITING:
# THE NECESSARY RISKS OF WRITING FOR "REAL"

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Faculty

of

Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

November 1996

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ISBN 0-612-16960-X

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**Dangerous Writing: The Necessary Risks of Writing for "Real"**

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Nov. 27/96

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# ABSTRACT

Writing is a location for exploring, encountering and creating thought, meaning, self. Through writing we may unfold and imagine possibilities for ourselves and our worlds. Such is writing as art, and as a hermeneutic endeavour; "real" writing. But, one never knows on the "way in" to writing what one will "find out." This inquiry, and my writing of it, has been a process of discovery, of revealing what was hidden, of coming to know writing in a new way through writing.

In schools, writing has been commonly approached as if it were a linear sequence of skills or components to be taught, based on positivist principles and methods. If, instead, we consider writing as art, and as a philosophic, meaning-making activity, we must reconceptualize what happens in writing classrooms and in schools. In attempting to envision some new possibilities for writing pedagogy, I have examined the work of teachers, writers, and my own classroom practice, focussing on the difference between "real writing" and writing as it tends to take place in schools.

In writing about and interpreting my experiences as a teacher and writer--writing about the students with whom I shared a year and a classroom, their stories and the events and relationships within that context--I discovered that boundaries between fact and fiction, data and interpretation do not exist as I previously conceptualized them. I found fiction, data, method and interpretation to be fluid, co-mingling, and co-evolving.

The work I am presenting is all-at-once research, fiction and autobiography. In a sense, the students and I are recreated as fictional identities or characters in what is a story about writing.

*for Anna and the others--who will teach us if we let them*

The act of writing, itself, is an evolution; from the Latin, *Volvere, volvi, volutum,* to roll. The unrolling of the secret scroll, the thing suspected but not realized until present.

*Jeanette Winterson*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No one writes or knows alone. All learning and writing are enmeshed in a world of relation. I would like to thank and acknowledge these most necessary relationships.

I am indebted to the students who shared their stories with me and who continue to teach me, through their stories, what is important in teaching, learning and writing. I would like to thank the following people for their conversations, questions, and correspondence about writing: Dawne Ferguson, Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Sue McNay, Dorothy Mills, Paula Salvio, Juliana Saxton, and Laurie Scholefield.

I am also grateful to Maureen Dockendorf for reading, challenging, questioning and supporting my writing, for providing me with an enormously helpful "virtual" thesis experience by sharing her own work, and for her excellent wine suggestions.

My deep thanks to Dennis Sumara for encouraging me to take the risks necessary to engage in dangerous writing, for challenging my thinking and writing, supporting my work, suggesting many good books, and being kind.

And finally, I would like to recognize Jessie Whitehouse, who was considerate in waiting until after the final revisions were completed to begin her journey into the world.

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# I
# THE STORY BEGINS

*Disclaimer*
*This is a work of fiction. And it is not a work of fiction. Although its form is that of a thesis, it may not actually be one. Space, time, data and theory have been rearranged to suit the convenience of this particular work, and, any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author's. If, indeed, the author exists.*[1]

Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories.

*Mary Catherine Bateson*[2]

I shall begin with a story of practice and travel toward theory, though, according to Foucault, theory and practice are intertwined and not so easily separated.[3] Neither, I suggest, are story and theory unconnected, when one writes to interpret and create metaphors for one's experiences. Stories emerged and intermingled as I inquired into story and writing in my kindergarten classroom. The processes and acts of research and writing did not result in the predictable and "tidy" perspective on writing and story that I had envisioned when entering into this project. Often as not, "every route

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[1] Disclaimer adapted from the one which appears in Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (Toronto: Seal Books, McClelland-Bantam, 1988). And, of course, I am playing with Foucault's notion of the "death of the author," that a singular concept of author is mistaken; all written works are "filled" with the work of others. In *Language, counter-memory, practice,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[2]Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral visions: Learning along the way* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 11.

[3]Michel Foucault, *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[seemed to be] a detour,"[4]--sometimes the work felt messy and uncertain, the landscape unfamiliar. At times the writing seemed risky, too autobiographical, too revealing. As Bonnie Friedman writes,

> We are afraid of writing, even those of us who love it. And there are parts of it we hate. The necessary mess, the loss of control, its ability to betray us...[5]

I struggled to find new models and metaphors for teaching writing and for working with children's stories, ways of working which were more consistent with my own experiences as a writer. I struggled to name what I was coming to know as a teacher. I still do not "have all the words," but as I have travelled through story, both my own stories and those belonging to the children, I have gradually found my way. It is, however, important to say that the pursuit has not ended in the production of this document, in a presentation of "findings."

This document does not find the definitive answer, "the Answer," the theoretically correct response within the following pages. But I travel through those pages with discovery in mind; a long line of words takes me there. There will be something, I promise, if not the "paint-by-number" picture which is so often the case in works addressing matters of curriculum, at least one interpretation of what it means to write "for real," to write ourselves through our stories.

The story begins...

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[4]Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter milk: Women and teaching* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachussetts Press, 1988) or it may be in "Bodyreading," in *Contemporary curriculum discourses*, ed. William F. Pinar (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1988). The quotation is definitely within one of the two--but alas, the page number seems to have disappeared. And one must never allow such a minor detail to prevent the use of a good quote, I think.

[5]Bonnie Friedman, *Writing past dark: Envy, fear, distraction, and other dilemmas in the writer's life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 15. Friedman's book includes a quotation which continues to inspire me in my growth as a writer, but I lacked a place to include it in the body of the text--so here it is: "There are a hundred reasons not to write what you most want to. Fuck that. Write it anyway." (60)

•

She begins with a child. It is, after all, a story about children, with children at its centre. She wonders if there is a child somewhere in all our stories, at least the stories told about schools. Do we tell our stories with children in mind?

She begins with a child. But which child, which story? Each child tells a different tale of her as the teacher. There are so many stories, so many kinds of teacher she seems to have been. Who will she write? Who will be written? In choosing to write one child's story she does not write a hundred other stories. She chooses the story which is a puzzle, the story she still does not understand, the story which seems to be a piece of something larger. She resists writing this story; she knows how it comes out, at the end. But then again, maybe it doesn't, after all. Maybe it's still being written. Maybe it's still writing (her).

She begins with a child. She will call her Anna. She will change the details. But it will be a story about Anna, and, at the same time, it will be a story about a fictive child; a classroom which is both invented and real; a teacher who exists and does not. That way she will feel safer. She just might be able to write it that way.

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Anna is the kind of child who is never quite sure of her place in the world. "I'm a good girl, aren't I?" she often asks the teacher. "Do you like me? Am I your friend? Can I come to your party?" she asks the other

children in her kindergarten class. She asks because she needs to be sure of them. Early in the year she begins an exchange of telephone numbers. Anna needs to make contact--both inside and outside the walls of the classroom. Her teacher can never figure out how these kindergarten children can read the seven digit hieroglyphic scribbles, but they do, and begin to extend their friendships. The web of connection grows beyond the spaces of school.

Anna is always the first one to greet visitors to the room, to notice when a child is hurt or crying and offer a hug. She's a hugger, a toucher--there always seems to be at least one in every kindergarten room. Anna likes to be helpful, to water the plants, to deliver a message to the office, to wipe off the tables.

Anna often makes drawings for all the other girls in the class, and for the teacher. She works hard to be noticed. She doesn't like to be left out. She needs to be in the middle of things, a small brown-eyed whirlwind of social activity. She wants to be "centre stage," though she does not demand this place--she just always seems to find a way to be right in the middle.

Sometimes Anna has a hard time staying focussed, paying attention. In the middle of shared reading she interrupts with, "Oh, I just can't wait till Valentine's Day!" or, "I'm hungry now. I'm tired. When IS IT going to be RECESS?!" Anna expresses her thoughts and opinions openly, she hasn't yet learned the social "rules," the things you don't say at school. "This is s-o-o-o boring!" she exclaims loudly in the middle of a class activity, rolling her eyes dramatically.

She is sometimes naughty, secretive, willful. One day the teacher finds Anna and Galya hiding in the cloakroom devouring the contents of a bag of candy belonging to another child. They look at her, fearful and guilty, and Anna immediately bursts into tears, wailing loudly. The teacher has a hard

time remaining serious while she gives the requisite lecture on "taking things that do not belong to you."

Anna excavates conversations with her teacher, digging for personal details. "I have a little bed, and my mom has a waterbed. What kinda bed do you sleep on, teacher?" "Do you have any kids?" "Do you have a boyfriend? *I* have a boyfriend!" Like many kindergartners she shares the daily details of her life, the stories from home, enhanced and elaborated upon with a flair for drama and excitement in mind. Sometimes the stories are true and sometimes they are not--most are somewhere in between. "It was my birthday again, I had a big, big party and even the teacher came, right?" she says grinning slyly. "And even my little baby brother came, but he doesn't live with me, he lives with my dad." As the year continues, the teacher becomes less able to distinguish between the fictional and the "real." Anna leads an interesting life.

She is a child who loves stories. "I like the ones you read best," Anna confides to the teacher. But she also has her own stories to tell. At the beginning of the year she has no real sense of what a story is, though she loves to talk into the tape recorder or see her words appear on the computer screen. "Read it again! Can I listen to my story again?" she would ask. Her first stories are disjointed accounts of events and characters. "It's about a bear," she says of the bunny story she has told. But Anna is always the first to announce, "I have a story today!" or to request that the teacher write down her words. Her teacher suspects that what Anna likes best about telling stories is the contact: the opportunity to "cuddle in" and have a moment of undivided, focussed attention--to be the special one for a while.

As time passes, Anna's stories change, become integrated, more interesting and detailed, stories which express a particular "Anna" style of

storytelling. Anna's stories are funny, touching, and sometimes reveal her worries, her hopes, and her dreams. The teacher wonders what has produced Anna's noticeable progress. Is it simply the practice? Or is it listening and responding to the books they've read together in the classroom? Or perhaps it was Anna's own development? Maybe it's having an audience who cares? Could it be something the teacher has been doing? It's hard to know. There are so many possibilities.

There is so much of Anna in her stories, a part of her that is not so visible in her actions and behaviour in the classroom. Sometimes a certain wistfulness, a sense of longing, an unvoiced sadness. Then again, the teacher wonders if she is simply reading more into Anna's stories than is actually there. After all, they are just stories.

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It was an ordinary rainy morning with no indication that time had now shifted, a moment stretched into forever. This was a mistake, a disruption, a transgression of the way things were supposed to be. The world did not appear to have changed. And yet it had. It seemed odd to her how the walls remained standing, how the florescent lights continued to flicker, how the smell of disinfectant, old lunches, gym shoes and stale coffee continued to penetrate the air. In looking back she sees events take place in a manner which is strangely flat. It seems no one knows what to do, and so nothing is done, nothing happens. She waits in a state of timelessness--minutes or hours, she doesn't know--for the confirmation, which she knows will come. She has heard the news, and now the phone call confirms it. Now it is true. There has been an accident. Anna will not be back. Ever.

That first day there are people--counsellors. The children must be told. The parents need to know. The children are puzzled. They want to know more; they want an explanation. What happened to Anna? How did it happen? Where is she now? Where did she go? Where do you go when you die? Why couldn't they make her better? Where is her body? Do you think she can see us? There is sadness and some tears, but mostly there is confusion. Now what do we do? Jennifer, a wise six-year-old who has been dealing with her own serious health concerns says thoughtfully, "You know...Anna's the first person I ever knew that died." She has a look of wonderment. "So this is what it is like...to have someone you know die."

Small things become coloured by emotion. Everywhere, the reminders. We read what remains. The objects speak loudly, telling a story of absence. Shoes. Black rubber-soled gym shoes. The kind that slip on, size 11, lined up neatly in Anna's cubby. She was an orderly child, which always surprised her teacher. Anna liked things in their place. Predictable. Those shoes now seem achingly lonely, somehow vulnerable, waiting for the child who will not return. Later, the children make a discovery, in her gym bag: Anna's secret. It is curious, they would have laughed if they were not still sad. In the cloth bag is a cache of hidden recess snacks, ones that, presumably, she hadn't much liked. She used to ask for someone to share with her, say that her mother had forgotten to pack her a snack. Now they know this secret, a secret they might never have known. Anna still has a trick for them.

The children find things that belonged to her. They touch. They trace her name on the wall, on lists, in her "mail box." They write her name everywhere. They need to write it, as if the magic of writing will cause her return or help them to understand. They find her magnetic name tag--the children put their names up on the wall when they arrive every morning--

Aisha says slowly, realizing, "Anna is going to be away every day now... " The name tag becomes a sacred object, they find a special place for it, and for Anna's writing and drawings. It seems they need to confirm that Anna was once with them before they will accept that she is gone.

It is as if the ties connecting them to anything else--to school, to the world--the ropes which held them secure in their mooring, have been cut and they have been set adrift, together. There is no chart for where they are going; the teacher is uncertain. This is a place she has not been before, a place she has never imagined going, a place never described in the many curriculum guides upon her shelf. She feels shaken, unglued, unconnected. It would be so much easier just to carry on as if nothing had happened, to put everything away, to remove all the reminders of Anna, not talk about it, or do anything other than choke back the feelings, the words, the memories. They are at school, after all. Things must be done, routines should be followed. But is school so much apart from life? She wonders... And what of Anna? Do we erase her, pretend she never existed? There is so much to consider. And it seems as if it will be an alone journey. At least, for now.

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In some ways it is easier than she thought, this process of saying good-bye to Anna. And in many ways it is harder. The kindergarten children are so sensible, so wise, so smart. For they do not know that the loss of a child is supposed to be a terrible thing, not to be mentioned, not to be discussed, not to be faced. They continue to share information, to reminisce, and to ask questions. Every day the questions get harder. They still want to know where Anna has gone, and what it might be like there. The teacher has no answers

and tells them that she doesn't know, really, asking, what do they think? They won't fall for it. "But Teacher, where do you *think* she might be?" She's the teacher, the voice of kindergarten authority. She should know, shouldn't she? It becomes a complicated dance; to allow for the many possibilities, and yet still honor a variety of religious persuasions: fundamentalist Christian, Sikh, Muslim, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witness, agnostic, atheist, and everyone else.

Though the teacher never directly instructs them to do so, some children begin to tell stories about Anna, and begin to create writing and drawings with Anna as a central character. The children have been telling stories, writing, and drawing all year. Many of them have worked at the little round table, a marker, a pencil, a crayon in hand, creating the pictures which often become a starting point for a story. Sometimes. At other times children simply had a story in mind and asked for the teacher's help to get it down. And sometimes she asked children to tell her a story. Most of them, at one time or another, had worked at the little round table with Anna. Their memories were full of writing with her, sharing stories, drawing, writing phone numbers, playing letter games. It seemed somehow appropriate that they would choose to write about Anna, to remember through drawing and telling stories.

The teacher noticed something different about these stories. Before, most of the stories were fictions, fantasy tales about animals, fairy tale characters, the "everychild" version of little girls and little boys, an occasional brief recounting of an event from memory. Often these stories were detailed, playful, humorous, creative, expressive. But the Anna stories stood out, somehow. They were different from the other stories. They spoke loudly and poignantly. They were more real, in a way that was difficult to pinpoint,

exactly, even the stories which were obviously fictional "Anna stories." The stories were all different--some showed a struggle to make sense of things, some traced over events and memories, and some reflected and expressed feelings.

Everywhere there were puddles of Anna stories. The Anna stories would appear, and then for a time there would be no more. Then several children would write or tell stories about Anna once again. Or children who had never told stories about Anna would begin to do so.

The teacher becomes aware that, in a way, another child has been created through the stories. There was, of course, the "real" Anna--the child who had shared in their classroom life. And now there was the imagined and remembered Anna who seemed to be developing a life of her own as the children created new experiences for her and predicted what she would have done in any given situation. In the act of remembering (and creating) Anna the children seem to be coming to terms with their past experience with her. They were saying good-bye, perhaps. Understanding when something is permanent. Understanding there are questions that adults may not be able to answer. Knowing that when "bad things" happen, there may be sadness and confusion but we can continue. And we do.

And then there is the piece of Anna that remains, still. Her "unfinished" memoir, her many stories. The teacher sees that Anna has been one of the most prolific storytellers of all of the children. Perhaps she needed to be. The teacher is glad that she decided to focus on stories and writing that year--to spend time with each child, eliciting and capturing their stories. She is glad that she has something real and important to give to Anna's family, something that "speaks" Anna and not just the language of school. She

recalls a quote she once heard, "Writing so as not to die."[6] It is true, there is something of Anna that remains through her stories. A voice that speaks out, captured in words on the page; the friendly, mischievous, wistful child who was Anna. Who *is* Anna.

Anna's mother, when she arrives to collect more of Anna's things, mentions Anna's stories. "She was a good story teller," she said. "We were surprised. We didn't know that about her. We are glad to have them. Thank you."

She begins with a child. And the story is not over, yet.

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The story. Some questions. I wonder... The questions were present all along, I begin to realize. The story, I know, is an unusual event--a rare occurrence, thankfully, in the life of a classroom, in the practice of teaching. The questions would have been similar had the course of events been different. Only now they seem more significant; now that they are laid out thickly upon the page, carved deeply into my mind, my skin--for experience always touches the body in some way. The questions were quiet, before. Now they speak loudly. It has taken time to understand, how my questions and this experience--the loss of a child--and our stories and writing come together. I am still understanding. I am still writing. I am still wondering.

What if we were to teach children as if everything mattered? What if we taught them that *they* mattered and their words mattered? What if we focussed upon valuing who they are in the classroom in *this* moment, rather

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[6]Maurice Blanchot, quoted in Michel Foucault, *Language, counter-memory, practice,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 53.

than placing the emphasis on what they could be: If only they learned *this* new thing, or could do *this* a little bit better. What if we were to work with children as if they all might die, as if their words, their stories, were important, as if they had something important to say. And they do, I think.

Sometimes I wonder about schools. I feel a bit like the title of a book by Oliver Sacks, "An Anthropologist on Mars,"[7] having lived in schools for most of my life--as student, life skills counsellor, student-teacher, teacher--but rarely finding myself entirely "at home" there. Always there has been a sense of "apartness," of "other," of peering through the windows from outside. Sometimes I wonder about schools. I wonder "what schools are about," the reasons for "schooling." I wonder about how we learn things, and how we learn things in school; like writing, for example.

You may have noticed that I write. I write, and I am still learning to write. I am a slow learner--it has taken me a long time to learn to write, in a way that is not just getting the words down; to write in a way that writing captures (incompletely, for it can never be complete) my thinking, my feelings, my ideas. Though I learned quite a few things in school, I did not learn very much about writing. I think this is quite sad, considering the number of years I spent in school. I want other people to find a way to meaningful writing a little earlier than I did, especially the children with whom I share classrooms.

As someone who writes, there were questions which drove my inquiry, or perhaps, questions which pulled me along to interpret my experiences, observations, and reflections as a teacher and a writer. There were questions such as: What is "real" writing? What is the difference between writing that is "real," and the writing that tends to happen in

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[7]Oliver Sacks, *An anthropologist on Mars* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1995).

schools? How can we make "school writing" more "real," more meaningful? Is it even possible? How is it that "real writers" learn to do what they do? Many writers-by-profession teach writing, though often not in schools, and not in the usual ways that schools teach writing. How is this teaching different from established writing pedagogy? How was I, in my classroom, able (and not able) to elicit real writing, real stories? How did I (or not) discover children's stories, and what did their stories, and the process of creating them, mean?

I also wondered about the connection between writing and identity. As Grumet suggests,

> The art of teaching invites teachers to have children participate in the construction of their identities in classrooms."[8]

Could writing and "storying," within the context of school, be locations for exploring and constructing identities?

In approaching an investigation of writing and story as meaningful, meaning-making acts and processes, I found myself in a place which echoed, reflected, and folded back upon itself: writing and story were all-at-once topic, inquiry, data, method, procedure. Using my own classroom eliminated any possible sense of cold, analytic distance--in this action research I lived, and lived with, the stories, and the complexity of being teacher, researcher, writer. My own writing and stories became complicit in reproducing and mirroring the very processes, theories, and experiences I wanted to examine. So this, too, has been a self-inquiry.

And yet, I also created a fiction, purely by happenstance.[9] When beginning to write about "the research" I was unable to write, or include, any

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[8]Madeleine R. Grumet, "The play of meanings in the art of teaching," *Theory into Practice* 32, no. 4 (1993), 206.

[9]Dennis Sumara refers to such happenstance circumstances as "haps," stating:

of the stories weaving into what had been a significant event in our classroom--the sudden and tragic death of a child who had played a central role in my research, the stories we created together as a class, and the events which followed her death. I wondered what it meant, after all, to be teaching and working together in a classroom. I made attempts, and tossed them away, I could not write this story. But despite my inability to write, the gaps remained, the missing pieces were visible, the unsaid still spoke loudly. How could I do this? My background in drama-in-education rescued me as I struggled to begin this story. I remembered drama workshops with Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Juliana Saxton where I had taken on roles, responded "as if," engaging in a world imagined. Anything might be possible while "playing a role"--it was "not me." There was safety in the "fictive," in a created identity which removed me until the danger passed. And so, I began to write pieces of our story as a fiction. I did this to protect identities and circumstances of particular children, and I did it to protect myself, in writing from what seemed at the time to be a difficult, "dangerous" story.

I realize, as well that any interpretation one might create has both the "fictional" and the "researched" as integral. As "subjective" beings we write from particular, unique perspectives. And through writing part of my research as fiction, I began to realize that in any research our "subjects" also become characters, especially when they are viewed through the eyes and the words of the particular individual who "writes" them. Yet we may find

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> The hap...is what remains after method; it is what occurs beyond what we predict; it is what exists beyond our willing and doing. The hap may be understood as all the moment-to-moment unpredictable experiences that contribute to our remembered, lived, and projected experiences.

In *Private readings in public: Schooling the literary imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 176.

"truths" of a sort, in the interpretations of the particular, as we also find "truths" in novels, in fiction.

My research, and the interpretations which I present, have been informed by multiple perspectives and readings, some which have "argued with each other" and with me, in the course of my writing. I struggled to create meanings for myself with readings in hermeneutics, phenomenology, curriculum theory, literary and writing theory, feminism, philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and postmodernism. I also found myself in the familiar worlds of writers, poets, novelists, and playwrights. Writer Jack Hodgins believes, "the only theory worth having is the one you work out for yourself in a manner that is consistent with the way you see the world--even if, in the process, your view of the world may be altered."[10] I began by looking to theory for support for my views, and along the way found my understandings changing. My inquiry reflects a bricolage, a pastiche, which has become my own interpretation of how these theories are located within the experiences of writing, storying, and teaching.

My study was also influenced, affected, and informed by the particularity of the situation, the children, the classroom, the context, the school. I hope that you, the reader, will come to know these children, our classroom, in the telling of the stories, however interpretive my writing will be. But I will not assume; I will be more explicit about "who they are" in this place for introductions. The children who inspired my fictional retellings, the "characters" in our story were five and six-year old kindergarten children. They numbered "around twenty" as new students joined us and others left our class community over the duration of the year. About half of the children were second generation Canadians born to parents who had

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[10]Jack Hodgins, *The natural storyteller* (Toronto: Douglas Gibson, 1993), 17.

immigrated. Several families were members of the nearby Hare Krishna temple. One child who joined our group later in the year carried with him assorted "professional pseudonyms"[11] such as "severe behaviour" and "neurological impairment." As this child joined our community, so too did another adult with her own professional pseudonym: special education assistant. But to the children and me, she was another adult in our room, a most fortunate and (sadly) rare situation.

A wide socio-economic range was reflected in my classroom, and about one third of the children lived in what might be considered the "traditional" nuclear family. Others lived within blended and extended family situations, with a single parent, or within the Hare Krishna religious community. Children came from both rural and suburban neighbourhoods.

The chapters which follow, though they may appear somewhat linear and sequential, represent more accurately what are "puddles"[12] of the thinking and experiences which gathered around emerging themes in my reading, writing, and thinking. And like real puddles in a rainstorm merge and blend, the "puddles" that became my chapters have areas where they touch and sometimes join together. Though this text presents itself as a "whole," single text, it contains several perspectives and voices, interpreted by one "author." One's identity, in writing, however, is a multiple identity--which I hope I have demonstrated through my text.

This beginning chapter attempts to introduce my story and research perspectives, to provide a location, an orientation for what follows. Chapter two examines some historical and current perspectives and approaches in

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[11]See Patricia Clifford, Sharon Friesen and David W. Jardine, "Whatever happens to him happens to us: Reading Coyote reading the world," (paper presented at the National Reading Conference, New Orleans, LA, November 1995) who introduced this term to me.
[12]I am indebted to Rebecca Luce-Kapler for this term which I have "made my own" throughout this text.

writing pedagogy, and explores the problematic in teaching writing from these orientations. Here, I introduce some alternative visions for the writing classroom, informed by the work of practicing writers.

In chapter three I consider autobiographical, reconceptualist, and phenomenological/hermeneutic theories of curriculum as presenting possibilities for a philosophical view on the teaching of writing; writing as meaning-making, interpretive, transformative; writing as a way we come to know possible selves.

Chapter four investigates connections between writing, story, and identity, by examining hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, feminist, post structural and post modern theories of the construction of identities, and by reinterpreting the story of one student, Jennifer, as seen through a lens of these interpretive frameworks.

In chapter five I suggest that writing and story, as I have presented them, are inherently "dangerous" activities, particularly when they are located within schools, and it is here that I propose some possibilities for addressing "the necessary risks of writing for real." I return to the "dangerous story" which evolved in our classroom, and examine the risks of my own writing.

Chapter six argues for the need to recompose and reconceptualize schooled writing practices, and extends and re-interprets concepts introduced in the preceding chapters.

This inquiry into writing began as a "gathering of stories"--listening, scribing, recording, writing--I did not know where the stories would take me and what I might find there. I did not know that the journey would be scary or dangerous, I simply followed the path. I had some ideas and opinions

about writing and about teaching. I watched, I waited, I remembered, and I wrote. Theory joined me as I ventured along.

Annie Dillard, a writer whose words continue to sustain me, notes,

> The writing has changed, in your hand, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. The new place interests you because it is not clear. You attend. In your humility, you lay down the words carefully, watching all the angles.... Process is nothing; erase your tracks. The path is not the work.[13]

The story continues...

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[13] Annie Dillard, *The writing life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 3-4.

# II
# WRITING MATTERS: WRITING PEDAGOGY PAST, PRESENT, POSSIBLE

I have been reading books about writing for a number of years now; books which have been writing teachers for me. They are good company on days when words do not come easily, or when writing seems to be an "alone journey."[1] They celebrate my own feelings about writing and what writing means to me:

> There are a lot of us, some published, some not, who think the literary life is the loveliest one possible, this life of reading and writing and corresponding. We think this life is nearly ideal. It is spiritually invigorating says a friend who converted at eighteen from Christianity to poetry.
>
> *Anne Lamott*

> This is your life. You are a Seminole alligator wrestler. Half naked, with your two bare hands, you hold and fight a sentence's head while its tail tries to knock you over...
> At best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. You search, you break your heart, your back, your brain, and then--and only then --is it handed to you.
>
> *Annie Dillard*

> We have lived; our moments are important. This is what it is to be a writer; to be the carriers of details that make up history, to care about the orange booths in the coffee shop in Owatonna.
>
> *Natalie Goldberg*

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[1]Natalie Goldberg, somewhere, though I have not managed to specifically locate this phrase.

> Anything can be said. Want the poetry of a raggedy, hewn, and situational character, with one criterion: that it has caused pleasure in the making. Pleasure in the writing and intransigence in the space for doing writing, and that is it. My only interest: in making objects that give me pleasures; they may also be interesting enough to sustain and renew whatever regard, look, or reflection is by chance cast upon them. That is it. Period.
>
> *Rachel Blau DuPlessis*[2]

I wonder what the "writing classroom" would look like if it were designed by these writers? I suspect the classroom "landscape" would be significantly different from what presently exists. Before considering some possibilities and alternatives, I will examine some perspectives and practices which have contributed to the ways in which writing instruction often occurs in schools.

**Writing Pedagogy: Past and Present**

Much of the existing research which addresses the teaching of writing to primary students is concerned with what David Booth calls "transcription skills," referring to the development of the skills of orthography, handwriting, punctuation, and grammar.[3] Bissex, Chomsky, and Clay[4] are only a few of the researchers who have examined how young children learn

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[2]The writers' quotes are from: Anne Lamott, *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 232; Annie Dillard, *The writing life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 74-75; Natalie Goldberg, *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 44; Rachel Blau Duplessis, *The pink guitar: Writing as feminist practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 144.

[3]David Booth, *Classroom voices: Language-based learning in the elementary school* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

[4]Glenda L. Bissex, *GYNS at WRK: A child learns to read and write* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); C. Chomsky, "Approaching reading through invented spelling," in L. B. Resnick and P. A. Weaver, eds., *Theory and practice of early reading* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1979); Marie Clay, *What did I write?* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1975).

to "get the words down," generally focussing upon stages of writing development and the strategies commonly used by young children in their beginning attempts at writing. This research has been valuable in changing conceptions of how young children learn to write, and thus modifying teaching practices to encourage writing activities which are more developmentally appropriate.[5] Previously, what John Mayher labels "commonsense" approaches, based on behavioural/positivist principles and methodology, conceptualized learners as passive "empty vessels," deficient in knowledge and needing to acquire reading and writing abilities which are then to be "transmitted" by the teacher, often in a "skills-and-drills" or "workbook" approach to learning.[6]

Currently (when not superceded by "back-to-basics" instruction) writing practices in the classroom are often influenced by a writer's workshop approach, informed by the methods of writing teachers such as Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Nancie Atwell.[7] Though Graves, Calkins, and Atwell vary somewhat in their methods and elaborate these more fully in their books than I intend to here, essentially they propose a format for "the writer's workshop" where students are provided with time and freedom to write and develop their own topics. Children are encouraged to "draft" initially rather than immediately focussing on matters of transcription, confer

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[5]See Dorothy S. Strickland and Joan T. Feeley, "Development in the elementary school years," in James Flood, Julie M. Jensen, Diane Lapp, and James R. Squire, eds., *Handbook of research on teaching in the English Language Arts* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1991).
[6]For further discussion of "commonsense" and "uncommonsense" teaching and learning, see John S. Mayher, *Uncommon sense: Theoretical practice in language education* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1990)
[7]For example, Donald H. Graves, *Writing: Teachers and children at work* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983) and *Discover your own literacy* (Toronto: Irwin, 1990); Lucy McCormick Calkins, *Lessons from a child* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983),*The art of teaching writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986), and *Living between the lines* (Toronto: Irwin, 1991); Nancie Atwell, *In the middle: Writing, reading and learning with adolescents* (Toronto: Heinemann, 1985) and *Side by side: Essays on teaching to learn* (Concord, ON: Irwin, 1991).

with their teacher and/or peers about their writing, and edit, revise, and eventually "publish" some of their work by sharing it with a wider audience such as reading the final version of their "piece" to the class or displaying it in the school library. The writer's workshop counters traditional methods of writing pedagogy where young children would not likely be expected to engage in writing until after they are "taught" reading and where "teaching writing" might be approached by providing opportunities for copying words.[8]

Though the writer's workshop approach has changed, at least on the surface, how writing is taught in school, recent challenges have emerged, such as Timothy Lensmire's *When Children Write: Critical Re-Visions of the Writing Workshop*. Lensmire views the representations of children and writing created by the "writing workshop advocates" as coming from an essentially Romantic perspective, maintaining that writing teachers such as Graves, Calkins, and Donald Murray generally tell success stories where "everything, in the end, is for the best."[9] Lensmire questions the "contents and ends" of what he labels the writer's workshop system, though he remains sympathetic to "process writing" and a belief in meaning-making as central to literacy work with children. Indeed, some of the "writer's workshop" teachers themselves have voiced questions regarding how their work is being used and interpreted:

> Donald Graves himself is concerned that his ideas have become an inflexible orthodoxy handed down from on high, on tablets of stone.[10]

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[8] Strickland and Feeley, "Development in the elementary school years."

[9] Timothy J. Lensmire, *When children write: Critical re-visions of the writing workshop* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 2.

[10] Mem Fox, *Radical reflections: Passionate opinions on teaching, learning, and living* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991), 40.

And, Nanci Atwell worries that *In the Middle,* might be "read as a cookbook." She suggests that she may have unintentionally encouraged an understanding that teachers could simply follow her methods to produce the same kind of readers and writers as those presented in her book. She reflects:

> In concentrating on the story of my teaching and the methods I developed, I did not reflect sufficiently on who I had become in that classroom.[11]

In my own classroom, over a number of years and across grade levels, I have used or incorporated many structures and strategies taken from the workshop approach to writing, and must acknowledge the work of these writing teachers in contributing to my growth as a teacher of writing. However, it seems that, though the writer's workshop is an improvement on previous approaches to writing instruction, this approach tends to become "systematized" to a certain extent when transported into the context of the classroom. Certainly, this was my experience. The emphases tended to be misplaced upon the forms, structures, and procedures rather than on the actual writing, and processes of writing. I felt I never could get it quite right when I attempted to recreate the structures of the writer's workshop; always it seemed that too many rules were required. The emphasis seemed to be placed upon "the procedures"; I often felt like an enforcer. "No, the draft copies go here. Stamp them, first." "Underline all the words you're not certain about." I felt guilty but changed the strategies, then finally resigned myself to the fact that the procedures of "writer's workshop" simply were not working for me and my students. Instead, I attended to what was happening in our writing classroom; we created writing rituals and practices that worked for *those* particular children in *that* particular context. Returning to a

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[11]Nancie Atwell, *Side by side: Essays on teaching to learn* (Concord, ON: Irwin, 1991), 104.

kindergarten classroom was also helpful in moving away from what was becoming rigidity in the writing workshop since, at the beginning of the school year kindergarten children are not usually able to independently "get the words down." If I wanted students to experience "creating stories" I needed to develop other ways to enable them to do this--the writing folders, notebooks, journals, and other writing workshop structures were not adequate in and of themselves.

Also important in writing and telling stories, and often overlooked to a certain extent within the workshop approach is the way in which the writing is received. Who is the audience for writing, and how does this happen? In a traditional, hierarchical teaching model, the child writes for the teacher's eyes only. Though Graves does articulate procedures for having students share with one another and work collaboratively, these seem to be artificial and contrived, with narrow and limiting possibilities:

> The work shared is no longer than a three-to four-minute selection. The child shares an early draft, or a paragraph, and the other children receive the piece by responding to the information they hear in it. The very process of responding to the details of the piece also reminds children of topics they can write about.[12]

Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine present the following description which typifies, often, how children's work is approached when the response to the work is "systematized":

> ...her story could simply have disappeared, mis-read, beneath the weight of the everyday crush of events in a busy school. "That's nice, Sinead. Thank you for sharing your story with us", someone might have said as they plunked her into Author's

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[12]Graves, *Writing: Teachers and children at work*, 28.

> Chair (Calkins, 1986) and unleashed a barrage of profound illiteracies:
> "How long did it take you to write?"
> "Where did you get your ideas from?"
> "I like the part with the howling. What part did *you* like best?"[13]

I reluctantly admit that I, too, have relied upon structures such as "share time" or "Author's Chair" and after far too many repetitions of "I like your drawing," "I like your story," I gave up in defeat. One problem with such "procedures" is that they become focussed upon moving the "writing product" through the next stage, as though in an assembly line. There is little examination or interpretation of the child's writing; a true sense of connection to "anything else in the world" is unlikely to take place.

What appears to be problematic with the writer's workshop approach is that writing is presented as steps to follow, "things" to use, and these forms and procedures begin to dictate the writing process. Teachers can focus upon a set of directions, which is much easier than critically examining what lies beyond external "forms": issues of thinking, making-meaning. The question of why we are asking children to write is neglected. Are children simply being required to demonstrate skills, knowledge, and proficiency in "basic" literacy? Literacy "skills" are important, but hardly enough when we might extend further possibilities for children, through their writing. Might we also envision writing as a process of meaning-making, what Berthoff labels a "philosophical enterprise?" Berthoff calls what many students learn as writing in schools "anticomposing" rather than writing, due, in part, to leaving "what we mean by 'writing'" unexamined. She understands writing to be "a nonlinear dialectical process in which the writer continually circles

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[13]Patricia Clifford, Sharon Friesen and David W. Jardine, "Whatever happens to him happens to us: Reading Coyote reading the world," (paper presented at the National Reading Conference, New Orleans, LA, November 1995), 17.

back,"[14] and asserts that beginning with a theory of composition, or writing, is important in informing pedagogical practice. Madeleine Grumet, too, in a discussion about writing suggests that teachers should "have some clear reason as to why [students] are producing something."[15] Within the writer's workshop I fear we have merely changed the forms and formats for writing without also reconceptualizing our intentions. Is there still a "drill-and-skill" agenda lurking below the surface of the writing classroom? I wonder...

Current trends toward the development of "national standards" may likewise contribute to the view of writing as based upon specific skills and processes to be mastered. Patrick Shannon views the American "standards movement" in education as part of a corporate agenda (fallaciously, according to Shannon) linking economic decline to a lack of business principles in schools, and notes that "English language arts standards were always politically motivated."[16] Though Shannon's work refers specifically to the American context, the "standards movement" appears to be alive and well in Canada, as evidenced by the development of "benchmarks" in Ontario, and in British Columbia. The following statement makes the B.C. Ministry's position on standards exceedingly clear:

> Evaluation of student performance is based on standards. Standards are realistic expectations of what students need to know and are able to do as a result of their education. In British Columbia, provincially mandated curriculum guides express these standards as expected learning outcomes. They outline what schools are expected to teach and what students are expected to learn..."[17]

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[14]Ann E. Berthoff, *The making of meaning: Metaphors, models, and maxims for writing teachers* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981). All quotes come from page 3.
[15]Madeleine R. Grumet, in a guest lecture at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, July 1995.
[16]Patrick Shannon, "Mad as Hell," *Language Arts* 73 (January 1996), 17.
[17]Ministry of Education, *Guidelines for student reporting* (Victoria, BC: Queen's Printer, 1995), 13.

Lately, I have been hearing (and reading), within my role as teacher, such words as "standards," "learning outcomes," "performance scales," "criterion referencing"--it should be no surprise that in "teaching writing in schools" it becomes easier to focus upon structures and procedures, which one can then translate into a language of pieces, compartments, controls. Ranking and sorting is still ranking and sorting even if the words are changed. Words like "meaning-making," "philosophical enterprise," "imagination," "interpretation" speak a different language, reflect a different way of thinking about writing. Poet and critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis, referring to writing, states: "The page is never blank."[18] And neither is the context for teaching writing--one does not write or teach in a vacuum; one "writes over" what exists presently.

Is it possible to shift the paradigm for writing in schools? Is it possible to risk the ambiguities which are "the hinges of thought"?[19] Writer's workshop teachers have provided beginnings of a new conceptualization of writing in schools. Primary students *are* engaging in "actual" writing rather than simply filling in blanks or copying the words supplied by the teacher.

Graves, Calkins, and Atwell propose that writing teachers engage in the practice of writing,[20] challenging previous assumptions about teaching and learning. The teacher has something to learn through the experience of engaging in writing. One may learn through the doing of it, and perhaps begin to question one's previously held assumptions about writing, and teaching writing. Calkins herself has adapted some of her methods after discovering inconsistencies between what she does as a writer and what she had been suggesting as procedures for students to follow.

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[18]DuPlessis, *The pink guitar*, 42.
[19]I. A. Richards, quoted in Berthoff, *The making of meaning.*
[20]Graves, *Discover your own literacy;* Calkins, *Living between the lines;* Atwell, *Side by side.*

The previously described approaches to teaching writing have been researched and developed by educators who happen to be teachers of writing. Do writers "by profession" have something different to contribute to the pedagogical writing landscape? How might a new perspective on writing instruction, without the complications and politics of what comprises "writing in schools" contribute to theories of learning to write? I will now explore some possibilities for what "writers by profession" might offer to the writing classroom.

**On the Ordinary Magic of Writing: Writers Speak**

Each child is born a poet and every poet is a child.

*Piri Thomas*[21]

The man is lost from home. He wanted to find his place. He was lost and he was tired and there was rain. He watched for cars and he was freezing.... And he was lost and he was wet. It was nine o'clock in the night. He forgot to go to bed. He was tired and he was supposed to brush his teeth. His hat was wet. His shoes were tired. His fingers were freezing. His feet were shaking. And he was lost in this city. He wanted to go home with his mother. He was lost in the rain...

*José, Kindergarten*

[21] Piri Thomas, quoted in Susan G. Wooldridge, *poemcrazy: Freeing your life with words* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1996), 132.

Poet Susan Wooldridge suggests that "poems arrive." Quoting Allen Ginsberg, she refers to the writing of poetry as "ordinary magic." Wooldridge writes:

> I've learned that in a safe, free setting anyone of any age can gather words, play with language and write poems...[22]

Her words affirm what seems to be a common perspective from the view of many writers: Writing is an act not just limited or beneficial to those people who call themselves poets, authors, or playwrights:

> We can write and make discoveries about who we are and who we might become whether or not we truly commit ourselves to becoming poets.[23]

According to the writers I will bring together in this chapter, anyone can write, and improve upon one's writing. Now, I am aware that writers themselves are not unbiased about writing. Nonwriters do not generally produce many books, and particularly books about writing. But then, this is not an experimentally-based random sample writing inquiry, so I will not apologize for presenting such limitations and biases.

Writers are, for the most part, quite removed from the daily events of life in schools and classrooms. They live, they observe, they write. As Lamott comments,

> Writing is about learning to pay attention and to communicate what is going on....
> The writer is a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in "The Farmer in the Dell" standing alone but deciding to take a few notes.[24]

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[22]Wooldridge, *poemcrazy*, xii.
[23]Ibid.
[24]Lamott, *Bird by bird*, 97.

Writers' perspectives on writing provide insights into writing viewed as an art, writing experienced as a way to communicate meaning. For the writer, complications such as marks and evaluation, issues of control and discipline (of students) are not present, or lurking in the background of their books. Reading these books, for me, feels like coming home to an old friend--at last, someone who understands what it is, to write.

In rereading the work of familiar and favourite writers, I am aware of the difficulty of synthesizing what writers say about their work. It is difficult to make generalizations. Unlike those who write about issues of curriculum, writers cannot be so easily compartmentalized, labelled, or sorted. Though, I suppose, I could sort them into genres or rank them according to their productivity, or how much I like their books. Ranking and sorting seems rather meaningless and silly at times, does it not? I struggle with my own desire to create something simple to follow, a sequence of directions guaranteed to be successful. I am used to this; it is the language and structure of most books which address writing with teachers in mind. It is tempting to order and organize something that appears, without a doubt, to be an answer. To pull back a corner and, with a flourish, magically reveal "the secrets of writing: 10 easy steps." But the "ordinary magic" of learning to write does not work like that; the process of writing, and learning to write, can be messy and ambiguous. Steps and procedures may appeal to us because there is comfort in the structures. However, writing is more complex than we are led to believe by the "how-to" books, and than we generally lead children to believe, in schools. Goldberg notes:

> Learning to write is not a linear process. There is no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer. One neat truth about writing cannot answer it all. There are many truths.[25]

What stands out upon a close reading of the "writing by writers about writing" is the multiplicity of perspectives and the variation in their views of strategies and practices which help them in their work. Each writer regards her own writing in a singular manner. What writing means and becomes to each person is unique. Through the process and practice of writing, each writer seems to find her own truth about her work, and about herself as a writer. The continual fluidity, the ebb and flow of the work of writing is something that becomes apparent when reading the thoughts of writers. As Junker reflects:

> [W]riting is a process, often an arduous, mysterious one.... [I]t is a process that can be followed along many different paths.[26]

And, Goldberg comments:

> Some techniques are appropriate at some times and some for other times. Every moment is different. Different things work. One isn't wrong and the other right.[27]

Compare the previous statements to the "one-size-fits-all" approaches which are commonly the case for teaching writing in school. "This is what a draft should look like. This is how to revise. A story *must* include..." Teachers often teach specific forms of writing as if they were the only way to write, as if there were one definitive true and correct way, instead of pointing out (even if we *do* require the practice of a certain form) that there are alternatives, possibilities, ambiguities that may be addressed. "How to write a

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[25]Goldberg *Writing down the bones,* 3.
[26]Howard Junker, ed., *The writer's notebook* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 4.
[27]Goldberg *Writing down the bones,* 4.

story" is sometimes taught as if the "traditional" form (rising action to climax to resolution) were the *only* form for writing a story. Lefer remarks:

> Hmmm, say the feminist literary critics. Sounds suspiciously like male sexual response.[28]

There are other alternatives. There are many shapes to a story.[29] There are many kinds of poetry. One only has to look at the nearest fiction bookshelf to see numerous possibilities.

It is not my intention to present a "step-by-step" scope and sequence approach to writing, gleaned from the wise sayings of writers speaking one seamless truth about their art. Instead, I will examine and consider some common threads coming from writers' reflections on their work. This, I believe, may help to create environments where writing might be nurtured and enhanced at school. What issues must teachers face, in order to develop a "way in" to meaningful writing in the classroom?

### Writing as Practice

> Once there was two teeny tiny eggs. And they had a terrible enemy because the robot liked to eat eggs. But they had to do something. One night they decided they had to go outside. They went in the grass but a terrible shadow waved on them. It was the monster. He came to eat some eggs...
>
> *Anton, Kindergarten*

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[28]Diane Lefer, "Breaking the 'rules' of story structure," in *The best writing on writing*, ed. Jack Heffron (Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1994), 12.

[29]See Jack Hodgins, *A passion for narrative: A guide for writing fiction* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), particularly Chapter 7, "Structure: The architecture of fiction" for a variety of examples.

Writer Natalie Goldberg and others[30] view having ample opportunities for practice, experimentation, and the "working out" of ideas as essential to developing one's abilities as a writer. These writers speak of writing as an ongoing learning process; as one continues to write one continues to get better at writing:

> We learn writing by doing it. That simple.
>
> *Natalie Goldberg*

> There is so much about the process of writing that is mysterious to me, but this is the one thing I've found to be true: writing begets writing.
>
> *Dorianne Laux*[31]

Annie Dillard describes writing, for her, as being divided between days of writing and days of throwing away, observing that writing is a gradual and tenuous process, and it is in continuing to work at writing that one discovers what one needs to write.[32] But writing "practice" need not be arduous and taxing; it can be exploratory, experimental, playful. As Atwood explains:

> The thing about writers that people don't realize is that a lot of what they do is play. You know, playing around with. That doesn't mean that it isn't serious or that it doesn't have a serious meaning or a serious intention.[33]

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[30]See Goldberg, *Writing down the bones; Wild mind: Living the writer's life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990); *Long quiet highway: Waking up in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993); Robin Behn and Chase Twichell, eds., *The practice of poetry* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992); Lamott, *Bird by bird*; Dillard, *The writing life*; Fox, *Radical reflections*; Dorianne Laux, in Junker, *The writer's notebook,* to name just a few examples.
[31]Goldberg, *Writing down the bones,* 30; Laux, in Junker, *The writer's notebook,* 169.
[32]Dillard, *The writing life.*
[33]Sophy Burnham, *For writers only* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 22.

The idea that practice is required to become proficient at writing, and that it is this "practice of writing" which contributes to one's development as a writer seems self-evident. But how often at school do we focus more upon the end-product, "the published copy," the "good" copy, than on the journey of discovery, the practice, the play with words? And how often do we provide an uninterrupted continuous block of time for children to write? Writing takes time.

Goldberg also presents a second notion of "writing as practice"; practice as noun rather than verb. As a student of Zen Buddhism, Goldberg makes writing her "practice," as one might pursue meditation. For her, writing as practice means "going deeper," "pushing further," "touching down onto something real"[34] through her writing. Writing as practice implies a certain rigor. It requires moving beyond the expectation that if you simply provide paper, pencils, and time, that writing will happen, and that children will want to write and will believe they can do it. A practice requires focus, concentrated effort, ritual, and a respect for one's actions and processes as one engages in the task.

Goldberg and other writers such as Behn and Twichell also propose a third notion of "writing practice," suggesting specific writing "practices," or exercises (such as timed writings), which have the intended purpose of helping one find a "way in" to writing, and developing and challenging the writing that is produced.[35] Goldberg suggests:

> Writing practice can set you in the right direction, then you go off on your own journey.[36]

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[34]Goldberg, *Writing down the bones*, 103.
[35]Goldberg, *Writing down the bones; Long quiet highway;* Behn and Twichell, *The practice of poetry*.
[36]Goldberg, *Wild mind*, 9.

while Behn and Twichell note, on their collection of poetry "practices":

> A good exercise serves as a scaffold--it eventually falls away, leaving behind something new in the language, language that now belongs to the writer.[37]

To illustrate the notion of a writing "practice," here are a few brief examples of some directions which might be provided:

- write for three minutes, beginning with the phrase "I remember..." or "I wish..."
- make a list of things that scare you. You can lie.
- list 10 words you like the sound of; using only those words, create a poem. Now add 10 more words of your own choosing to create a new poem.
- write a memory you have about a pair of shoes

What is important to understand about writing "practices" is that the focus is not so much on "following the rules" or keeping to the structures, but on accessing new thought, combining ideas in new ways. Writing practices may provide a beginning place, an access "to the words," or a common link between writing created by members within a group, such as in a classroom. But the point of these practices is to follow one's own mind rather than rigidly adhering to "the rules."

**Trusting the Process/Trusting Oneself**

> Once there was a girl who writed a story with a witch in it. But one day when she was reading her story, the witch was not there. So she looked for her black crayon, but it wasn't there. The witch had stolen it...
>
> *Sasha, Kindergarten*

[37]Behn and Twichell, *The practice of poetry*, xiii.

> Everything I say as a teacher is ultimately aimed at people trusting their own voice and writing from it.
>
> *Natalie Goldberg*

> ...the page, which you cover slowly with the crabbed thread of your gut; the page in the purity of its possibilities; the page of your death, against which you pit such flawed excellences as you can muster with all your life's strength: that page will teach you to write.
>
> *Annie Dillard*[38]

It is difficult, I believe, to write anything of significance unless one has a sense of trust in the process of writing and a trust in oneself to engage in that process. It is important to know that somehow in the writing or story one will have something to say worth taking the risk involved in the telling. For writing and telling one's stories can be risky endeavours. Both Goldberg and Dillard, in the quotations at the beginning of this section, address the importance of trusting one's own voice, the page, and the writing process.

The largest hurdle I needed to overcome in learning to write, was to learn to trust in my own voice. Even now as I write, I want outside confirmation that what I am saying has some connection to someone else, that it "makes sense." My sense of trust in my own writing voice is sometimes tenuous and shaky. I await some external "proof" that what I have to say means something to another person. There is always a little fear of critique or censure. Half of the resistance I encounter in beginning to write is facing my own unwillingness to risk, yet again. A friend who is working

[38]Goldberg, *Writing down the bones*; 155; Dillard, *The writing life*; 59.

on a thesis recounted to me a story of getting "bad marks" on writing she completed in elementary school:

> Not until grade seven did anyone ever seem to understand anything I wrote. I think I am still afraid I will get it back with a comment that indicates that the reader didn't understand it.[39]

I, too, remember marks and comments in schools and universities which caused me to doubt my own abilities in writing, as well as my perceptions of my capabilities: the focus always seemed to be on what was missing, absent, inadequate, or "wrong," even with work that received what I considered to be relatively "good marks." Natalie Goldberg also speaks of the role schooling played in squelching her "writer's voice." It was not until she left school that she found the freedom she needed to write:

> There was no great answer outside ourselves that would get us an A in school anymore. It was the very beginning of learning to trust my own mind.[40]

As teachers we need to respond carefully and thoughtfully to student work. Can we make a space for all children, as much as possible, to write their own minds? (Rather than writing something which attempts to read the teacher's mind...) Can we regard children's words with respect and consideration? Can we withhold impulses to correct and instruct, at least some of the time? Can we make the classroom a safe place for exploring ideas, thoughts, and writing techniques? The issue of evaluation can be problematic in its relationship to "trusting one's voice," particularly if, in what we tell children about their work (whether it be "C+," "outstanding," "9 out of 10," or "Stephanie is working below widely-held expectations for

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[39]Laurie Scholefield, E-mail correspondance, July 1996.
[40]Goldberg, *Writing down the bones*, 2.

children of her age in written communication") we make them unsure of their abilities or unwilling to take the risks that writing requires. Is there a place for providing opportunities for writing that are free from evaluation of the writing "product," so that we may also free voices and encourage trust? I think that we can do all these things--though our actions will likely stand out against trends to break down the processes and products of writing into a series of steps, "criteria," or components which can be easily evaluated.

It has been interesting to me, in working with kindergarten children and early primary students, to see a general willingness to express thoughts and ideas beyond what I would typically see in a classroom of older students. "Anybody can make a story," says one kindergarten child, "People just like to make stories." However, at some point during the process of schooling, students begin to believe that they are not writers, and that the risks of expressing oneself or sharing one's stories are simply not worth attempting. Can we motivate and challenge student writing and thinking while at the same time communicate an appreciation of children as writers?

### Writing with a Purpose

> One time my dad sunk his boat down on an island. Then we had to get him out, so he had to paddle underwater. and when he got home he had to dry off...
>
> *Jarod, Kindergarten*

Because writers choose to write, they have a relationship with their work that is different from "schooled" writing. They write with purpose, though these purposes may be diverse (and likely include "making a living").

Children's author, Mem Fox, challenges Donald Graves' supposition that one writes "to be published," based on her own experience as a writer. She states, "it's the response to the work that matters."[41] Fox reflects that her writing "nearly always has the socially interactive purpose of either creating relationships or ensuring that established relationships continue."[42] She suggests, as well, that children need to be writing about things that matter to them, and that they should be able to write about topics they care deeply about.

Other writers also refer to response, interconnection, and a sense of community as providing reasons for writing. Goldberg observes, "Writing is about community, even if you write alone."[43] She suggests that it is important to be heard, and that the relationships surrounding one's writing are central to the process. DuPlessis comments that we write to be heard, to be "read" and interpreted:

> Because writing IS reading. And there is a sacred triangle: writing (saying); listening (eliciting); reading (interpreting is another form of listening).[44]

Anne Lamott tells of writing books as presents for people she knew and loved, and for others she imagined would appreciate the unique perspective presented by her work. "Risk freeing someone else," she advises.[45] Dillard also refers to the significance of responses to her writing, and relates moments of doubt when she fears her work is too obscure to reach more than a limited and select group of people.[46]

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[41]Fox, *Radical reflections*; 11.
[42]Ibid., 8.
[43]Goldberg, *Wild mind*, 42.
[44]DuPlessis, *The pink guitar*, 94.
[45]Lamott, *Bird by bird*,199.
[46]Dillard, *The writing life*.

Within the kindergarten classroom the importance of the response and how "the work" is received by others was also perceived to be significant by these children, when they were asked why people write books and "make stories":

> People make stories for their moms to be happy. Like for me.
>
> Authors write books because there's lots of children around. And children like books a lot.
>
> Writers think a lot about little kids and how much the little kids will enjoy their stories.

None of the children spoke of "being published" or "to get a good report card" or as a way to learn skills such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Though their purposes for writing may be varied, "real" writers write for "real" reasons. In the classroom we might encourage children to explore their own reasons for writing, and reasons people write, providing opportunities for writing which makes students, to use Fox's words, "ache with caring."[47] Some "real reasons for writing" will be explored further in the section which follows, and in later chapters.

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[47]Fox, *Radical reflections.*

**Writing as Meaning-making**

> One time there was a giraffe that did not know how to have a baby. So he asked the hippopotamus who lived next door. And then, the hippopotamus said, "I don't know either, Why don't you ask the rhinoceros who lives next door?" The rhinoceros said, "Go ask the chicken." And the chicken said, "I am a chicken, how do you expect me to know what to do? Go ask the horse who lives down the lane because he must know, of course..."
>
> *Michelle, Kindergarten*

Berthoff views writing as essentially philosophical, as a process of meaning-making rather than simply a skill to be acquired.[48] One finds additional support for the perspective of writing as a meaning-making endeavour from a number of writers:

> Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavour, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives...
>
> *Anne Lamott*

> Writing projects have shown us that the process of composition is very different from the ways that it has been conceived and taught in the school curriculum. Writing does not record preaccomplished thought; the act of writing constitutes thought.
>
> *Madeleine Grumet*

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[48]Berthoff, *The making of meaning*.

> I am looking not for objective truth but for emotional truth. I am looking for the way...
>
> *Bonnie Friedman*[49]

The notion of writing as an interpretive journey, as a means to create meaning and make sense of the world, may begin to answer questions of why we might ask children to write, and why, indeed, writing is an activity and process which might enrich childrens' lives. Can we move beyond requiring students to write simply to acquire an ability to "get the words down" and, instead, envision larger possibilities?

Drama educator Dorothy Heathcote[50] has stated that "drama is man in a mess," and that essential to drama (and most art) is the working through of challenges and struggles in our existence. And so it is with writing, I believe, though viewing writing as a search, an inquiry, a travelling towards rather than a "final destination" challenges much of the existing writing pedagogy. Although qualitative research theorists may acknowledge writing as a process of discovery, this is not a commonly-held perspective in the writing classroom. Judith Meloy reflects, "Our writing can expose the possibilities of experiencing, suggest possible frameworks for interpreting experience..."[51] Laurel Richardson considers writing to be a "method of discovery" and a "way of knowing":

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[49]Lamott, *Bird by bird*, 97; Madeleine R. Grumet, "Bodyreading," in *Contemporary curriculum discourses*, ed. William F. Pinar (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1988); Bonnie Friedman, "Your mother's passions, your sister's woes: Writing about the living," in *The best writing on writing*, ed. Jack Heffron (Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1994). Grumet is not a writer of fiction, like the other writers I have included in this section; she writes curriculum theory. However, I thought this quote was too good to pass by just to achieve a "neat" fit.

[50]In a conference sponsored by the Association of British Columbia Drama Educators, Vancouver, B.C., March 1983. I do believe she was referring to all people, not just men.

[51]Judith Meloy, "Problems of writing and representation in qualitative inquiry," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 6, no. 4 (1993), 320.

By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it.[52]

This is what I have observed happening in the writing and stories I have seen in my primary classrooms. Children often return to the same story, theme, or topic (if provided with the option) in what appears to be a need to make sense of issues in their lives. Divorce. Issues of separation and loss. Love, sex, and sorting out "how babies are made." Fears.

In my own writing, although I may write for a number of different purposes, "making sense of things" is often at the root of my work, even if I do not begin with the overt intention of discovering something new about myself or the world. Along the way I find something new, understand differently, encounter a hidden thought, idea, feeling.

## Teacher as Writer

Although I had been engaging in writing previous to my entry into teaching, somehow I managed to keep my own writing experiences separate and compartmentalized from what I was doing in the writing classroom. What I did as a teacher of writing was, for the most part, informed by my experiences as a student writing in schools and universities, the methods of writing instruction I learned as a pre-service teacher, through workshops and in-service sessions I attended, and the "how to teach writing" books that I read. Teaching writing at school seemed so definite: there was *definitely* a right way and a wrong way to be teaching children to write; the methods and structures were important. And no one mentioned what was inside those

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[52]Laurel Richardson, "Writing: A method of inquiry," in *Handbook of qualitative research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (London: Sage, 1994), 515.

structures or led me to question why, in fact, we were asking children to write. It was a subject to cover, a literacy skill. Much of my critique of the teaching of writing, in this and other chapters, is also a critique of what I have done in my own practice as a writing teacher. I simply did not know that writing at school could be any different, though all along I had subtle, nagging questions about the difference between what I was teaching at school and what I needed to be able to engage in my own practice of writing. As a teacher I still struggle to overcome an emphasis on structures and procedures and my own fears of questioning existing pedagogical practice, of looking deeper at what we are doing when we teach writing at school. Teaching writing as a philosophical enterprise feels risky at times; it is not nearly so predictable and comfortable and safe as following a particular, and definable "approach" or curriculum. Changing what I do in the writing classroom has been a gradual process, and it has been linked to my own growth as a writer. Immersing myself in writing and allowing myself to question and consider what happens during writing has provided the greatest learning for my teaching practices.

Engaging in writing as practice, learning to trust my own voice, finding reasons for writing, and finding meaning through writing have all contributed to a different way of viewing writing and understanding what happens when I write, as well as changing my perceptions and thoughts about writing pedagogy. Rather than seeing writing as merely "a subject to teach" I now consider writing as a location for interpretation and meaning-making; writing as thinking; writing as interconnected with others, contexts and events. In reconceptualizing my views about writing, envisioning other possibilities which differ from "positivist" and "commonsense" notions of writing, I encounter "reconceptualist" curriculum theory and see that my experience in the writing classroom fits into a larger context, into other

alternatives for understanding teaching and learning. The following chapter will examine and explore the relationship between story, writing and curriculum theory.

# III
# WRITING AS A WAY OF KNOWING

> Years ago when I was living very briefly with a stockbroker who had a good cellar, I asked him how I could learn about wine. 'Drink it' he said.
>
> *Jeanette Winterson*[1]

She sits in her favourite writing café, which is, in fact, also a bookstore. She holds a comfortable pen, hoping for inspiration, or if not inspiration, some "good enough" words to spill out of her mind and onto the page. She sits in the café which hums with the steamy sounds of expresso machines and casual conversation and smells of freshly-ground coffee, hot milk, new books, and rain. She sits in the café but she is not in the café; she has travelled backwards to a remembered classroom. Each time she writes and remembers it is a different location, depending on the window of her view, depending on how she gazes and what she is searching for. A kind of truth, perhaps.

This classroom is such a real place to her, even in memory; these children so vivid. Now it is easy to look back and see things she might have done differently. There are mild regrets for unrealized possibilities, words not spoken, selves unwritten. Sometimes she'd like to rewrite the past. Sometimes she does. Still, this classroom of her memory is a familiar and comfortable place--especially now when she feels she is drowning in an ocean of unfamiliar and uncomfortable words and theories. She's been writing about ideas, theories. She is not certain she understands them completely. The red crayon, the scribbled picture, the story about the bear who was lost

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[1]Jeanette Winterson, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1995), 16

from home, the child who comes close with a story--these things she knows. But the words, the books, the academic papers--how could they be a frame around her picture, her rememberings? Will they change the view? Or change what she means? She doesn't know what will emerge, what magic might happen on the page. She is unsure of where the long line of words may take her. To an unknown place perhaps; to a different and changing view of her world. Writing is such a brave, dangerous, wonderful thing. And the scenery keeps changing whether or not she writes in the same café.

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In the preceding chapter, I suggested that writing (and "creating stories") might be viewed as a process of meaning-making, as a philosophical endeavour, and as a means to discovery. An interpretive location for writing, rather than one where writing is viewed as a linear sequence of skills to be acquired, calls into question widely held "commonsense" theories of pedagogy. According to John Mayher, "uncommonsense" theories reconceptualize ideas of teaching and learning and support the notion that we continue to construct ourselves and our meanings through all of our experiences:

> Uncommonsense theory celebrates that reality rather than trying to conceal or deny it, and finds in narrative modes of thinking and the experience of telling (or writing) and listening to (or reading) stories one of the primary modes of placing the student at the center of the learning process as meaning maker, not only as a meaning receiver.[2]

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[2]John S. Mayher, *Uncommon sense: Theoretical practice in language education* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990), 103.

In viewing writing and stories as a way to create meaning and interpret one's experiences, I find a ground in theories of curriculum, particular lenses through which it is possible to view the activity of writing as it takes place as a reflective, interpretive process.

## Writing and Autobiographical Curriculum Theory

> Language can lead us somewhere else, to the place where we live, to the world, and to the world as it might be...
>
> *Madeleine Grumet*[3]

> All writing is in a sense autobiographical...
>
> *David G. Smith*[4]

"All writers, at some level, want to be known," states writer Natalie Goldberg.[5] In the primary classroom children tend to include their lives and experiences in their writing, issues which have personal meaning to them, even if they are choosing to write or tell fantasy stories or other fictions. Although I might query whether or not children always *want* to be known when they write at school, I suggest that as teachers we can know students through their writing, and that most writing is autobiographical at some level. The autobiographical nature of writing also means that it is possible to interpret "who we are" in this writing, and through the writing. I look back to a past journal entry, and find confirmation:

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[3]Madeleine R. Grumet, "Bodyreading," in *Contemporary curriculum discourses,* ed. William F. Pinar (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1988), 456.
[4]David G. Smith, "Hermeneutic inquiry: The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text," in *Forms of curriculum inquiry,* ed. E. Short (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 202.
[5]Natalie Goldberg, *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 145.

> In writing I find I'm recreating, reinterpreting my experiences in teaching and in writing. I understand differently than I did at the beginning of this process. I'm not the same person I was, conceptually. Who will I be at the end?

The notion that student writing has an autobiographical character has been elaborated in work by both Calkins and Lensmire in discussions of the writing classroom.[6] Within a larger pedagogical framework, the view of curriculum as autobiographical text has also been explored and developed by a number of curriculum theorists, including Pinar, Grumet, Salvio, Meath-Lang, Miller, Reiniger, and Connelly and Clandinin.[7] William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet include the concept of *currere* as central to autobiographical method and the understanding of curriculum as autobiographical text. *Currere,* the Latin infinitive for curriculum, means "to run the course" and is

> a strategy devised to disclose experience, so that we may see more of it and see more clearly. With such seeing can come deepened understanding of the running...[8]

Pinar asserts that, "stated simply, currere seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one's understanding of his or her life."[9]

In his examination of currere and "reconceptualist" work in curriculum, Sumara maintains:

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[6]See Lucy McCormick Calkins, with Shelley Harwayne, *Living between the lines* (Toronto: Irwin, 1991) and Timothy J. Lensmire, *When children write: Critical re-visions of the writing workshop* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).
[7]Referred to in *Understanding curriculum,* ed. William F. Pinar, William M. Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter M. Taubman (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).
[8]William F. Pinar and Madeleine R. Grumet, cited in Pinar et al., *Understanding curriculum,* 518.
[9]William F. Pinar, cited in Pinar et al., *Understanding curriculum,* 520.

> Currere signaled an understanding of curriculum as the relationship between the individual and her or his world as it is contained in educational settings.

He observes that the view of curriculum as currere was a move towards regarding curriculum as "the way individuals live a life that includes the experience of schooling."[10] The method of currere recognizes that "schooling and other lived experiences" are necessarily intertwined, and this has influenced the curriculum field through the recognition of approaches such as the narrative and autobiographical, phenomenological, and hermeneutic.[11]

Viewed within the context of currere writing can be seen as a process and method which works towards further understanding and interpretation of lived experience. In her work with preservice teachers, Salvio sees autobiographical writing as a way to provide threads of connection between students. In the reading aloud of their own stories "they begin to link their stories with the stories of others,"[12] even those experiences which might be viewed as forbidden, or taboo. She cites Felman, who states:

> The critical suggestion I am making...is that people tell their stories (which they do not know and cannot speak) through other's stories.[13]

Children's writing and stories, too, may reflect and reveal life experiences and change understanding if this writing is addressed. Lensmire comments that we should

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[10]Both quotations are from Dennis J. Sumara, *Private readings in public: Schooling the literary imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 173.
[11]Sumara, *Private readings in public*.
[12]Paula M. Salvio, "On the forbidden pleasures and hidden dangers of covert reading," *English Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (spring 1995), 10.
[13]Shoshana Felman, quoted in Salvio, "On the forbidden pleasures..." 10.

> recognize that children's stories have content, that children's texts represent more than just vehicles for discussions of process...that children work with material from their experiences...[14]

and he cautions teachers not to regard such material lightly.

Grumet suggests that through the study of written autobiographical accounts of our experience we are seeking to find that which has "diminished us," and to "recover our own possibilities." Through such autobiographical work we can bridge the divide "presently separating our public and private worlds."[15] She points out that women who teach pass between public and private worlds every day, and "that is also what we teach children to do."[16] Writing, too, may provide "public" access to our "private worlds," and we may also find our own private worlds reflected in the words of others, made public through writing. Grumet views the work with autobiographical texts as a hermeneutic activity, requiring interpretation and also inviting problems of interpretation: that is, the relation between what is revealed and what is hidden or distorted might be addressed in such autobiographical work.

David Schaafsma, researcher and co-director with the "Write for Your Life" writing project, working with students in New York, also addresses autobiographical writing and stories, exploring issues which can be problematic. Though Schaafsma maintains that as teachers we "must ourselves speak our truths as we see them, and some classrooms must exist as one place for this kind of activity to exist for our students," he also believes that there are some "stories we cannot tell," that some stories may be

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[14]Lensmire, *When children write,* 19.
[15]Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter milk: Women and teaching* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachussetts Press, 1988), xv.
[16]Ibid.

problematic for either "personal or institutional reasons."[17] These stories which *cannot be told* (and particularly within the context of school), are, in fact, sometimes revealed within contexts which feel safe for the teller, such as within the "Write for Your Life" project. Schaafsma echoes Felman and Laub, pointing out that at the same time, there may be a commitment to telling stories as well as "a problematizing...of uses." He states:

> In my teaching I alternately, and even simultaneously, call and interrupt my call to tell stories of lived experience.[18]

Using our stories, suggests Schaafma, is representative of postmodern teaching, and that is

> to teach without certainty, with irony, without the traditional assurances that our knowledge is unshakable. We cannot hope to know precisely what is "best" for all of our students, given the sometimes radically different perspectives present in our classrooms.[19]

Though Salvio, Grumet, and Schaafsma all advocate the use of autobiographical methods, and they individually present arguments for revealing what has been hidden, or covert, through stories, each explores the notion that stories may be problematic in themselves, or address problematic issues. In reflecting on work with young children, I am acutely aware of this problematic. Content in the stories has sometimes resulted in required calls to social service agencies or consultation with counsellors. But legal issues aside, addressing the work of young children can be problematic because of children's lack of power and privacy, particularly in situations where stories

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[17]David Schaafsma, "Things we cannot say: 'Writing for Your Life' and stories in English education," *Theory into Practice*, 35, no. 2 (spring 1996), 110.
[18]Ibid., 112. Schaafsma refers to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
[19]Ibid., 115.

may point to events or truths that parents or other adults may wish would remain hidden. Sometimes it is the children who are truly silenced who need to tell their stories most, who need to speak them most loudly. As teachers, we must be prepared and we must remain cognizant of the implications involved in telling stories.

Schaafsma asks, "But is the classroom a place to create the possibility for them to be shared?"[20] His answer, and mine, is, "it depends." We must be aware, I think, of issues of safety for the teller, and ask permission when we share children's stories. We must not assume that all stories will be warmly welcomed by all receivers, or that all children will want to share their stories either within or outside of the classroom. If we require the sharing of stories I think that we need to articulate this before we engage children in the practice of writing or telling.

I now turn to the particular: two children, their stories, the autobiographical nature of those stories, and some implications for revealing what may be hidden.

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Her first memory of Marissa is a visit to the child's home. This is what kindergarten teachers often do at the beginning of the school year--they visit homes and families. Funny how this practice does not continue as children get older, she thinks.

Marissa is confident, exuberant, and is excited by the visit. She and her younger brother take the teacher on a whirlwind tour of the house, their rooms, their toys, their clothing--and the family underwear. Marissa is

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[20]Ibid.

careful and precise in pointing out the location of the underwear in each respective bedroom. The teacher supposes that when you are five underwear is significant, already carrying a sense of mystique, of "the hidden." She responds to the showing of the underwear in the same manner as she has responded to the books and the toys and the showing of the dress Marissa will wear on her first day of school. "Mmm. You have everything you need in your room." Or some other neutral comment. It is important to respect and accept what is offered, even if it *is* underwear. Or the fifteenth cup of tea. The teacher sees in meeting Marissa's parents that this is a well-loved child who is encouraged to have her own voice and to express her thoughts. She senses she has been warmly welcomed into Marissa's life.

In the early days of the school year, Marissa is not quite as confident and energetic as she is in her own home. It takes her a few weeks to lose that unblinking round-eyed look particular to many kindergarten students, students who arrive from other countries, and tourists lost in the middle of downtown Vancouver. School can be a foreign land to some. By October Marissa is more at ease and more like the child the teacher met at home. Marissa tells many stories, for the teacher to write down, and to the class when she wants to share her "real life" experiences. In the stories she tells the teacher, Marissa often mentions school:

> Once upon a time there was a little girl. Her name was Katy. She had no friends because she didn't go to school...
>
> There was a little girl who didn't know anything. She didn't know what was up in the sky. And she didn't know anything because she was just a little girl. She was three years old and she went to preschool but she didn't get anything to eat. And when she went to preschool, this time she learned something...

It appears to the teacher that in these stories Marissa is showing what school and going to school means to her: It is a place for meeting friends, as well as a place for "learning something." The teacher thinks it is somewhat curious that the girls in these stories are incomplete in some way before they attend school, or even "preschool." School brings friends, knowledge, and a happy ending.

As the year proceeds, Marissa continues to tell stories, most of which seem to be fantasy stories or Marissa's versions of fairy tales or books the teacher has read to the class. Repeatedly Marissa includes the theme of "moving" in her stories, characters who are sad and lonely until they move to new houses and live happily ever after. The teacher learns from Marissa (and this is confirmed by Marissa's father), after discussing one such story, that Marissa herself has moved from a rather remote house in the country to where she lives presently in a more populated suburban neighbourhood.

One day Marissa's father visits the classroom and reads some of Marissa's stories. He is intrigued with the following story:

> Once upon a time there was three fishes. They lived in a tiny house. The father had no job. He found a job for working. And then they had lots of money for his whole family to share. And then they ran out of money. He had to go back to work again. And then he had enough money for his whole family to share again. And then they didn't sell their money this time, they were very happy.

Marissa's father tells the teacher that, some time ago he had been laid off and the family had experienced "some hard times." He is surprised at Marissa's interpretation of events, thinly-disguised in the story. "It must have left an impression with her," he says. "There are no secrets in her stories," he adds, looking thoughtfully at the collection of Marissa's work. At the end of the year Marissa's parents tell the teacher how much they have enjoyed reading

the stories Marissa has shared with them, and how they notice that Marissa seems to work out concerns and issues through telling these stories. They are encouraging Marissa and her younger brother to tell stories at home now, too.

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She also remembers Nathan, a child in her grade one class a number of years ago. Nathan seemed to be an unhappy, angry child, though he was not prone to outbursts or dramatic behaviour. He was a quiet boy who followed "the rules" carefully. But there was a clench to his jaw, and a controlled restraint in his actions. He did not smile very often and when he laughed it seemed more a release of tension than an expression of joy. She was surprised to find Nathan's devotion for writing and telling stories, though perhaps she should not have been. The stories seemed to release him, to burst out of him. Nathan did not often choose to share his stories with the class. He seemed reluctant to be the focus of attention. Most of Nathan's stories were about his father and their life before "the divorce." In his collection of stories was a memoir of the life he'd had and lost, and seemed to be missing still. In his writing he often expressed the wish to see both of his parents every day, "with no fighting." After the days he spent with his father Nathan would carefully recount the details of their time together, recording events and conversations. Later in the year, Nathan's teacher sends some of Nathan's work home with him, several stories and a journal. And finds them, the next day, back in the classroom. She asks Nathan about this, who says emphatically, "I want to keep them <u>here</u>." He gives no other explanation, and she does not press him, noticing the glint of tears and realizing that there is perhaps another story, one he does not wish to tell. She

learns to ask before she sends his writing home. She also reflects on how she has addressed the stories and the writing of younger children. Sharing work without asking the writer or storyteller, without even thinking to ask. Treating these stories as if they are "owned" equally by the parent, rather than belonging to the child. She seems to have forgotten that what has been told or written at school has been shared within a particular context, and that there may be invisible boundaries of which she is unaware. She hasn't discussed notions of private and public work with these children. Yet she used to do this when she worked with older students--she was careful about respecting privacy. And certainly, she expects her own writing not to be flung about carelessly. How is it that she has slid into a less respecting position, one where perhaps she herself has contributed to silencing? Is it because these are little children, and she forgot that they, too, have rights to privacy? She has neglected to give these children choices about what to share. She has neglected to ask them about whom they would like to share their work. She has forgotten to ask, or inform. And they rarely challenged her--perhaps only in the papers she finds crumpled into a ball, the hidden books she discovers at the end of June, or sometimes the stories which are given to her, "For you."

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For the two children in these fictional accounts, the writing and stories are often autobiographical, and function as a means for understanding experiences and "speaking truths." The classroom is a place where it is safe to write or tell these stories, even if it is not always safe (in Nathan's case) to share these stories publicly. Though I advocate the telling of such stories, and view them as one way for children to make meaning of their lives, grow in

understanding, and gain awareness of themselves, I think it is important for teachers to be aware of the contexts in which these stories may be viewed, and to be sensitive to situations where writing may cross unseen boundaries. Children, as well as adults, can engage in "dangerous writing," writing which crosses or challenges invisible (or visible) protocols. This notion will be explored further, in chapter five.

Marissa, who feels entirely comfortable "showing the family underwear," is encouraged to share interpretations of her lived experiences, even those which may have been painful for her family. For her, stories add to the development of a sense of confidence in her own voice, the knowledge that she has something to say in the world, that she matters.

For Nathan, whose circumstances indicate that his stories may not always be welcomed or encouraged,[21] I suggest that the classroom may sometimes be the safest place for the telling. If teachers make such a place available, the opportunity to tell one's stories at school may be the only chance some children will have to tell *some* stories. I am not, however, suggesting, that there is one right way to address the problematic issues such as those encountered in the story of Nathan. Sometimes it may be appropriate to explore a point of resistance, or to meet with a parent and share a concern. And sometimes it may not be. "It depends." But I do think we should ask more, and tell less. I realize that this stance challenges a number of commonly held assumptions about young children and their rights. (That they do not have any, except in issues of criminal or negligent behaviour.) But when is the right time to begin asking, to begin listening? I think we

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[21]For any of a variety of reasons. As Nancy Mairs notes, "Our stories utter one another." A child's stories can invoke pain or painful memories, just as other readings can. Quoted in Salvio, "On the forbidden pleasures...," originating in Nancy Mairs, *Remembering the bone house: An erotics of place and space* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

begin at the beginning. And listen carefully, beyond the words. As teachers we must listen carefully to children's stories so we might know children better, and understand their worlds. We have much to learn, as they "write themselves."

## Matters of Interpretation

> For one thing, learning to write and learning to teach writing are, I think, unspeakably boring activities unless they are thought about philosophically.
>
> *Ann Berthoff*[22]

Examining writing as autobiographical text, as a way to interpret and understand our own and student experience, and acknowledging the claim by Pinar and Grumet that as such, autobiographical work is hermeneutic,[23] prompts a number of questions. What do hermeneutic theories have to contribute to the conversation about meaningful and meaning-making writing and stories? Is it possible (or sensible?) to connect theories of research and philosophy to the writing that may occur in classrooms? How might such theories enlarge our thinking about the writing that takes place at school?

Max van Manen presents a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to research. Though he specifically addresses writing as both method and product of inquiry, I believe many of his assertions about research and writing could apply to other forms of writing, including the writing of children.

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[22]In Ann E. Berthoff, ed., *Reclaiming the imagination: Philosophical perspectives for writers and teachers of writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1984), x.
[23]See Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter milk.*

"Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science which studies persons," states van Manen.[24] And, according to van Manen (and others such as David G. Smith and Dennis Sumara[25] ) this approach has a philosophical orientation. Though hermeneutic phenomenology may appear to be a relatively recent addition to research methodology, it has deep historical roots:

> This project is both new and old. It is new in the sense that modern thinking and scholarship is so caught up in theoretical and technological thought that the program of a phenomenological human science may strike an individual as a breakthrough and a liberation. It is old in the sense that, over the ages, human beings have invented artistic, philosophic, communal, mimetic and poetic languages that have sought to (re)unite them with the ground of their lived experience.[26]

My own inquiry into writing and stories is located in the neighbourhood of hermeneutic phenomenological research, for it is research which "is the curriculum of being and becoming."[27] It is dialogic and questioning rather than didactic and empirical. van Manen characterizes hermeneutic phenomenological research as

> fundamentally a writing activity. Research and writing are aspects of one process.[28]

He presents the notion that writing mediates reflection and action; that is, writing transforms consciousness, "fixes thought on paper"[29] where it becomes visible and may be acted upon. He maintains that "[t]o write is to

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[24]Max van Manen, *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (London, ON: The Althouse Press, 1990), 6.
[25]See Sumara, *Private readings in public*, and Smith, "Hermeneutic inquiry..."
[26]van Manen, *Researching lived experience*, 9.
[27]Ibid., 7.
[28]Ibid.
[29]Ibid., 124.

exercise self-consciousness"[30] and that we may be changed by the new vision we gain through writing.

Although van Manen sees the writing involved in "human science" and the writing of literature or poetry as similar in many ways, he differentiates between them in their beginning and end points, and their different aims:

> phenomenology aims at *making explicit* and *seeking universal meaning* where poetry and literature remain implicit and particular.[31]

He defines phenomenology as "pure description of lived experience" and hermeneutics as "interpretation of experience via some "text" or via some symbolic form."[32] Although van Manen sees human science writing and literary writing as different in ends and intentions, I suggest there is a middle ground, a place in between. These boundaries are blurry at best and not so clearly and easily defined. After all, if literature were truly "implicit and particular" it would likely be of little interest for any reader besides the author, except in a voyeuristic sense. I do not think we are very much interested in reading work which has no connection outside the world of the writer. The power of reading and writing literature lies within the interconnection, the bridge *between* the particular and the universal, the path between our private and public worlds. Events encountered in texts relate to our lives and experiences, "the "fictional" and the "real" [are] united."[33]

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[30]Ibid., 129.
[31]Ibid., 19. Italics within orginal text cited.
[32]Ibid., 25.
[33]Sumara, *Private readings in public*, 3.

Making sense of the world and interpreting lived experience, I suggest, is not located solely within the realm of research or the world of Great Literary Figures; it is something which can occur even within primary classrooms, in the work of children such as Nathan and Marissa. As Sumara indicates, "the contemporary project of hermeneutics can be described as the ongoing need to understand that what we know, what we do, and who we are must always be interpreted."[34]

In her introduction to a collection of essays, *Reclaiming the Imagination: Philosophical Perspectives for Writers and Teachers of Writing,* Ann Berthoff echoes discussions of hermeneutics. She presents the notion that these essays about writing, and writing itself is

> about knowing, about how we make sense of our experience of the world.[35]

This is a perspective on writing which has more in common with art, science, and philosophy than with "teacher-proof" instruction texts and standards-based curriculum guides.

David Smith suggests that "whenever we are engaged in the activity of interpreting our lives and the world around us, we are engaging in what the Greeks called 'practical philosophy,'"[36] or, hermeneutic inquiry. I believe that children's stories and writing, when they take place in the ways I have been suggesting, may be found within a location similar to that of my own research and writing. Hermeneutic. Phenomenological. Interpretive. Though I am not about to ask children to attempt to pronounce these rather long multi-syllabic words, I would suggest that telling stories and writing, in "real" ways illustrate these forms of inquiry.

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[34]Ibid., 118.
[35]Berthoff, *Reclaiming the imagination,* vi.
[36]Smith, "Hermeneutic inquiry...," 187.

In terms of educational research, Smith observes that "the hermeneutic imagination throws open the challenge to inquire into what we mean when we use words like curriculum, research, pedagogy."[37] Additionally, he suggests that "the meaning and place of children in our lives is the most important consideration to be taken up in education today."[38] Hermeneutic inquiry requires that the researcher must "be prepared to deepen her or his own self-understanding in the course of the research," a "finding oneself in relation to others."[39] Questions of meaning and being are to be considered.

Within this larger research picture I can see the classroom, where issues of inquiring into meaning, children's voices, self-understanding reverberate. It may be ambitious, I will admit, to be concerned with issues of consciousness, knowing and being, interpreting and understanding within a writing classroom, but I believe these to be both necessary and appropriate endeavours. I agree with Smith's assertion that

> the real work of our time may be defined by an ability to mediate meaning across boundaries and differences, whether those boundaries and differences be concerned with gender, race, or ideas.[40]

Smith views the "hermeneutic imagination" as having a significant part to play in this task, the mediation of meaning, and he announces, rather portentously:

> And whether there will be a future indeed depends on the full power of creative interpretation. Hermeneutics for everyone?[41]

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[37]Ibid., 188.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Ibid., 198.
[40]Ibid., 203.
[41]Ibid.

Indeed. Hermeneutics for everyone. If, as Sumara asserts, "Schools must become places to know the unknown and say the unsayable," hermeneutics may be part of the "poking, prodding and piercing of the familiar during events of schooling," a part of what Sumara names "curriculum unskinning."[42] Hermeneutic work in the classroom is not so far-fetched. Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine describe such work taking place in a Calgary primary classroom, in stories (and their readings) which "reveal layers of the living world." They call these "edgy readings," where boundaries "between text and the world g[i]ve way,"[43] where children might bring together the fictional and the real in their own interpretation of story and experience:

> The "real" world of the Christmas concert is no longer a mere actuality. It opens up into the ephemeral temporality of "in-between"; into a world constituted by *possibilities of interpretation*, a world that could, therefore, be read other-wise than the protocols of everyday life might allow."[44]

They also note, regarding the writing of interpretive Coyote stories in the classroom:

> We never asked the children to do this; never required or even suggested that they take up Coyote for themselves. They just did it anyway...[45]

This may be a time to speak briefly, once again, of my research and teaching method. I too, in the course of my inquiry, did not assign or require children

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[42]Both quotations are from Sumara, *Private readings in public*, 232.
[43]Patricia Clifford, Sharon Friesen and David W. Jardine, "Whatever happens to him happens to us: Reading Coyote reading the world," (paper presented at the National Reading Conference, New Orleans, LA, November 1995), 12-13.
[44]Ibid., 14.
[45]Ibid., 9. The class had been reading and listening to stories about the native trickster figure, Coyote.

to write or tell the stories which I gathered in any particular manner. Instead, I offered many opportunities for writing and storytelling (and sometimes asked them to tell stories or write) and together we shared many books and stories. There were daily conversations about books, topics of interest, ideas. I wondered aloud, asked questions (not "tell me the right answer sort of questions" but rather questions which reflected what I would like to know or understand), shared observations, thoughts and opinions. Hermeneutic inquiry requires that an environment be established where children are able to express thoughts and questions and to tell the stories that need to be spoken. Interpretive work is not predictable (or even "assignable," I think) because one does not know the stories and topics that may present or what "lurks" within.[46]

I am not suggesting that there are not times to ask or direct children to write or tell a certain form of story (such as poem, fairy tale, letter), to discuss a specified topic, or begin with a particular writing "practice." These things also happen within my writing classroom. I am suggesting that autobiographical and interpretive work emerges when children have freedom to write or tell about those things which are most important in their lives, and when thinking is provoked and encouraged. This is when "untamed" and perhaps surprising acts of meaning can occur.

Clifford, Friesen, and Jardine, though detailing the interpretive work of one child in their classroom, do not elaborate upon how this work was addressed within the classroom context (if in fact it was). When I examine the stories and writings I have collected in the course of my inquiry I see stories which weave together fictional and real experiences, interpretive readings/writings of life, events, interactions and stories which occurred

[46]Hillman, referred to in Clifford et al., "Whatever happens to him..."

within and outside the classroom. Sometimes these were shared; sometimes they were not. Often other children listened to the tellings of these stories and added a thread of their own questions and commentary. But the dilemma is, I think, to learn how to provide opportunities where readings do not result in banal and "unthoughtful" responses evoked by "response structures."[47]

One way to approach response is to encourage students to discuss the work at hand as they would other texts shared in the classroom, responding directly to the work, rather than addressing responses to the child writer. What do they think the writing/story is "about?" What theme(s) do they notice? What comes to mind as they listen to or view the work? Are there "threads" which link together collections of writing/stories? If teachers discontinue the practice of setting up the sharing of student work as if it were a quiz show or award ceremony for the student writer (or a formal evaluation process) and begin to reflect on meaning(s), they may finally receive responses that are qualitatively different from: "I like your story." "You're good at writing big words." "Where did you get your idea from?"

Through reflecting and re-thinking my own classroom experiences and finding little discussion of ways that interpretive work of children might be addressed, I realize that my interpretive journey is just beginning, and that I need to further examine meaningful and thoughtful ways of evoking, sharing and responding. In my own writing I know that thoughtful responses have urged me to continue, incited further projects, and have informed me when my work moves beyond the boundaries of my own

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[47]Such as "author's chair" and "share time." See Lucy McCormick Calkins, *The art of teaching writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986), and Donald H. Graves, *Writing: Teachers and children at work* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983).

"stubborn particularity"[48] and speaks to the experience of others. It is not enough simply to interpret my own experiences. Some of these interpretations must be shared--the call and the response. I wish to know that my experiences make sense to someone else and that they matter.[49]

**Autobiography, Hermeneutics, Interpretation, and Self**

> As hermeneutics teaches us, we are always already at the intersection of remembered, lived, and projected experiences.
>
> *Dennis Sumara*[50]

In this chapter I have suggested that writing "for real" and teaching writing can be informed by autobiographical and hermeneutic forms of curriculum inquiry. In so doing, the acts and processes of "writing at school" might, too, be (re)interpreted, (re)formed, and (re)visioned as interpretive and philosophical; as ways of knowing, being, and becoming. As we write in such ways we "write ourselves." As van Manen suggests, writing becomes a transformative process where

> The writer produces text, and she or he produces more than text. The writer produces him or herself.... The writer is the product of his own product.[51]

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[48]David W. Jardine, "The stubborn particulars of grace," in *Experience and the curriculum: Principles and programs,* ed. B. Horwood (Toronto: Kendall/Hunt, 1995).
[49]See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub for further discussions and analyses of the need to have another "bear witness" to the call of our stories in their book, *Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
[50]Sumara, *Private readings in public,* 233.
[51]van Manen, *Researching lived experience,* 126.

I have written a chapter which is, in itself, an interpretation that is based, in part, on remembered lived experiences. I have written someone who understands differently than she did at the beginning. She looks around and sees the scenery has changed; the view is different, now. She is changed, changing. Writing produces a new writer.

> A person sits in the middle of her life. She is writing. It is a praxis. There was not enough to read, before. The self is produced by being written in just that way.
>
> *Rachel Blau DuPlessis*[52]

Writing identity. Writing/reading an identity. Composing ourselves. The following chapter further explores issues of writing and identity. Who do we write? What sorts of identities might be constructed through acts of writing? And, how might these identities be (in)formed by the context and location for writing, when one writes in school?

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[52]Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The pink guitar: Writing as feminist practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 115.

# IV
# FINDING REAL LIVES: WRITING AND IDENTITY

> Against daily insignificance art recalls to us possible sublimity. It cannot do this if it is merely a reflection of actual life. Our real lives are elsewhere. Art finds them....
>
> Are real people fictions? We mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others. The so-called facts of our individual worlds are highly coloured and arbitrary, facts that fit whatever fiction we have chosen to believe in.
>
> *Jeanette Winterson*[1]

The two quotations, from Jeanette Winterson's *Art Objects* refer to writing as an art. As art. Through the art of writing we are able to find "our real lives." "Who we are," according to Winterson, becomes defined by stories, those created by ourselves and those told to us by others.

In previous chapters I suggested that writing can take place as an interpretive, philosophical practice. I have presented the view that "writing in school" might itself be (re)interpreted in ways which encourage and support writing as a hermeneutic activity. As we interpret the world around us through writing we also engage in the process of interpreting ourselves and our lives. In this chapter I will examine the notion that writing, when understood as a philosophical and artistic practice, might make a more explicit contribution to the process of "identity-making." What do children produce *beyond the text* ? Do writers produce themselves? How might

[1]Jeanette Winterson, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1995), 59.

writers find other "real" lives through writing? Is having students engage in writing for self-understanding an *appropriate* undertaking within the context of schooling?

In considering writing as the "re-ordering of identity,"[2] I revisit my own writing, texts gathered from assorted commonplace books[3] and find a connection between writing and identity.

> Somehow she has to write it, this writing she has been avoiding. This is the tension: she needs to write, but it's like peeling back her skin. Who knows what will be discovered underneath?
>
> The blank page. (The page is never blank says DuPlessis) What will I write? How do I write it? Could be difficult, could be dangerous. I might write myself into someone else.
>
> The words are unspoken, unwritten, the text of who I am unstructured yet by language. I must utter the unspoken, perhaps the unspeakable--once uttered, incomplete, once uttered it is changed.

As a person who writes quite a lot, writing has become a part of me, and part of how I am sometimes identified by others. Sometimes "who I am" in writing is surprising to those who have not known me embodied in a written text. Sometimes who I discover in my writing is surprising to me, too. But then, we do not always have the opportunity to see the thinking of others (or ourselves) which we might do through reading our own written texts. Grumet suggests, "[w]riting does not record preaccomplished thought, the act of writing constitutes thought."[4] Writing, then, is an act of thinking.

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[2]Ibid., 58.

[3]Dennis J. Sumara, in *Private readings in public: Schooling the literary imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996) defines the commonplace book as a "collecting place" for writing, for ideas; one which is "an extension of [one's] sense of self-identity." (48) It is a collecting place for "our sense of self." (72) For further description of the commonplace book and its uses, see also Dennis, J. Sumara, "Using commonplace books in curriculum studies," *JCT: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Curriculum Studies* 12, no. 1 (spring 1996): 45-48.

[4]Madeleine R. Grumet, "Bodyreading," in *Contemporary curriculum discourses,* ed. William F. Pinar (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1988), 466.

When I write I discover more about myself. I do not really know what I know until I write it. Of course, there are gaps, elisions, inconsistencies in my writing.[5] There are lies and fictions when I do not wish to reveal, for "personal or institutional reasons."[6] I may subsequently "change my mind"[7] about something I have written. Identity is fluid and ever changing, existing within a complex web of relations and events.[8] Indeed, completely knowing or defining "identity" or "self" is quite impossible. Michel Foucault equates the self with the soul, and in referring to himself states:

> I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning...

Foucault also asserts that writing and speaking are ways "to constitute, positively, a new self."[9]

Writing might be viewed as a reflective and *reflexive* activity, whereby we "re-order" or recreate ourselves. van Manen see this reflexivity as a process of identity-making:

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[5]See Grumet's comments regarding the incompleteness of one's own texts:
Think of the repugnance one often feels for a text that is recently completed. There, clinging to all the lines, are shreds of the ideas that never quite made it to expression, fragments of the negative example, the other possibility, that the sentence, the chapter, the ideology, the deadline, the habit, the defense mechanism, just could not admit. Only time and forgetfulness smooth these rough edges so that we no longer remember what has been left behind... Ibid., 467.
[6]David Schaafsma, "Things we cannot say: 'Writing for Your Life' and stories in English education," *Theory into Practice* 35, no. 2 (spring 1996), 110.
[7]This idiomatic expression has taken on new meaning for me as I have come to understand identity as evolving rather than static.
[8]See Anthony Kerby, *Narrative and the self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) referred to in Sumara, *Private readings in public.*
[9]Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the self," in *Technologies of the self*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). Both quotations in this section come from page 9.

> Writing is a reflexive activity that involves the totality of our physical and mental being. To write means to write myself, not in a narcissistic sense but in a deep collective sense.[10]

Psychoanalytic approaches to literary theory can also be examined in light of what they may tell us about self-reflection and self-understanding through writing, as writing and reading are inextricably linked. Shoshana Felman embraces the notion that "reading is an access route to a discovery," to the development of insight. Though some insights may be gained through conscious awareness, she suggests that

> Insight is always partially unconscious, partially partaking of a practice. And since there can never be a simultaneous, full coincidence between practice and awareness, what one understands in doing and through doing appears in retrospect.[11]

As we read our own writing or perhaps have others read our writing back to us we may encounter new self-perceptions, and new insights. Writing, then, may be viewed as an act of mirroring, a reflexive activity, "something which turns back upon itself."[12] The result of writing, the writing itself, is the mirror. Jacques Lacan sees the "mode of reflexivity" as an asymmetrical and paradoxical process, where the "self departed from" in the act of reflection is different from the "self returned to." There is a reflexive dialogue between the two "selves" in which they "inform each other of what they do not know."[13]

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[10]Max van Manen, *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (London, ON: The Althouse Press, 1990), 132.
[11]Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the adventure of insight: Psychoanalysis in contemporary culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987). Both quotations are from page 15.
[12]Ibid., 60.
[13]Ibid.

What is reflected through "the mirror" of our writing is not an exact replica, an unchanged self. It is also affected and effected by 'others'--what Lacan calls "the intermixture of the subjects" where individuals are

> neither entirely distinguished, separate from each other...rather, interfering from within and in one another.[14]

Foucault also explores ideas of language and mirroring, asserting that the power of all language is in "giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits." He believes that we use language "in the form of visible and permanent signs" to attain permanence (and thus avoid death) and this becomes an endless process of self-representation:

> Before the imminence of death, language rushes forth, but it also starts again, tells of itself, discovers the story of the story and the possibility that this interpenetration might never end.[15]

I would suggest that as a part of this "mirroring" process writing transforms us. That is, our writing (and our "reading" of it) may change us, and change our vision of ourselves. But before further consideration of the interplay and relationships between writing, story, and the formation of identitie(s) I will turn to the identities "produced" (or perhaps, "assigned" in part) in schools. What are the stories we tell children about themselves in school?

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[14]Ibid., 61.
[15]Foucault, *Language, counter-memory, practice.* All quotations in this paragraph are from pages 54-55.

> "She is very neat and particular in her written work...a very satisfactory pupil."
>
> "Improvement needed in applying spelling skills in written work...her marks in her written work have dropped..."
>
> "Her handwriting needs improvement...Linda must be careful not to let her writing become spoiled by silly statements."

The preceding comments are phrases I have rediscovered in my old elementary school report cards, each one the comments of a different teacher, from a different year. They form part of a portrait of "who I was," as a writing student or, rather, who I was perceived to be, within the particular lens of the forms of evaluation which were current at that time. The "schooled identity" was formed by the "stories" told *to* me and *about* me, and by the role expectations for being "a child in school"--a child in school, who by seventh grade was learning that it was not deemed acceptable for girl children to make "silly statements." For schools also convey notions of gendered identities.[16]

Stories were told about me and to me in report cards, red ink on my returned assignments, words and messages from teachers and also the responses and reactions I received from peers. Just as there was a "ranking and sorting" in the classroom so is there a "ranking and sorting" on the playground and the baseball field. The child "I was" at school was a different identity than the child "I was" at home; there was a different role, another mask and impersonation,[17] though, of course, there were intersections and

[16]For further discussion and challenge to the notion of fixed gender identities see Judith Butler's *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). *Language, Gender and Childhood*, ed. Carolyn Steedman, Cathy Urwin and Valerie Walkerdine (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) also addresses how women and children have been "historically constucted."
[17]For a discussion of "impersonation" see *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation*, ed. Jane Gallop (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

gray areas in between. As a classroom teacher, I, too, have told stories to and about children, though I would hope that my stories have spoken "some sort of truth" about children and not focussed solely on a narrow range of specific skills. And I would hope that children's *own* stories would also speak for them, that the important stories do not only come from the teacher.

Identity and the identities formed in schools have been explored from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Deborah Britzman writes about identity from a poststructural stance and is "concerned with tracing identity as subjected to the constraints of social structure and to the practices of discourse."[18] According to Britzman, the meanings that we create, through and mediated by language, within particular communities, form our identities:

> Identity always requires one's consent, gained through social negotiation.... Identity is constantly affected by the relations between objective and subjective conditions and in dialogue with others.[19]

Magda Lewis, in a discussion of identity from a critical/feminist perspective, notes that schools play a significant role in forming our identities. She writes, "Our social identities are cross cut not only by who we are but, as well, by the ceaseless reinforcement of who we are not."[20] Lewis believes that a "contained agenda" about who we are as defined by class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality is communicated through our schooling experiences.

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[18]Richard Beach, referring to Britzman in *A teacher's introduction to reader-response theories* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993), 41.
[19]Deborah P. Britzman, *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 25.
[20]Magda Lewis, "Power and education: Who decides the forms schools have taken, and who should decide?" in *Thirteen questions: Reframing education's conversation*, 2nd ed., ed. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 37.

Sumara and Davis view identification and identity as "the principal matters of curriculum," and interpret matters of identity as "also matters of unskinning--of simultaneously removing and imposing boundaries." They see "personal identity" as bound together with communal or collective identities, such as within a school community:

> Our sense of who we are alters as our social relations and situations vary. Furthermore, our sense of identity always emerges from the fusing of previous, current, and anticipated experience. The memories we have of past selves can never really be fixed; as these become interrogated in relation to new experiences, they change.[21]

Identities in schools, then, are informed and acted upon by the "stories" told about and to children, by the social negotiations which take place, and by children's experiences and memories. As teachers, we must recognize our own complicity in the identities formed in schools, and be aware of our own "contained agendas." Who do we tell our students they are? And how do we allow children to write other selves?

### Finding Our Way Through Writing

> One can look deeply for meaning or
> one can invent it.
>
> *Anne Michaels, Fugitive Pieces*[22]

The previously described perspectives on identity as it may be interpreted within schools challenge modernist concepts of identity as static

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[21]Dennis J. Sumara and Brent Davis, "Unskinning curriculum," in *Curriculum: New identities in the field*, ed. William F. Pinar (New York: Garland, in press), correct page numbers unknown at this time.

[22]Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1996), 136.

and separate from "the worlds we inhabit." It is important for teachers to understand that identities occur and change within sets of conditions and contexts, within communities. Senses of self identity are not separate from everything else in the world.

Paradoxically, writing *is* something which can be perceived to be "outside the self." Writing is a created product: it is a cultural object.[23] It is historical, archaeological. It is a "thing" which remains, when we, ourselves, no longer exist, such as the collection of stories which Anna produced. Writing may be examined and interpreted in a way that I, as an entire person, may not be. Yet we also have writing as "process," something which happens. Writing is both noun and verb.

Writing, when viewed apart from schooling and issues of "schooled identities," itself remains entangled in a mesh of identity and identification, which may be seen as sometimes problematic. Heilbrun, in *Writing a Woman's Life,* discusses the problem of women's biography and autobiography, and which stories can be told within the existing discourses, generally reflecting a "male" perspective, structure, and bias.[24] Ursula Le Guin would call this dominant discourse "the father tongue":

> Our schools and colleges...generally teach us to listen to people in power, men or women speaking the father tongue; and so they teach us not to listen to the mother tongue, to what the powerless say, poor men, women, children: not to hear that as valid discourse.[25]

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[23]For further discussion of "cultural objects" and their interpretation see Dennis J. Sumara, "Challenging the 'I' that we are: Creating liberating constraints with reader response practices," in *Reader response theories and practices for the classroom,* ed. Margaret Hunsberger and George Labarcane (Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, in press).
[24]Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a woman's life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988).
[25]Ursula Le Guin, "Bryn Mawr commencement address," in *Dancing at the edge of the world,* ed. Ursula Le Guin (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 151.

Other writers, such as Mary Ann Cain and Rachel Blau DuPlessis also explore the contradictions faced by women writers, and examine the culturally sanctioned conventions which must be addressed as women writers "construct their identities as writers and women."[26] Cain refers to a poem written by Le Guin which addresses the multiple identities she experiences as a writer "deeply enmeshed in many other social and mythic identities,"

> The writer at her work
> is odd, is peculiar, is particular,
> certainly but not, I think
> singular.
> She tends to the plural.[27]

If women writers struggle within the confines of language systems based upon "the father tongue," it also follows that the writing of children is most certainly a discourse which has not been culturally or socially validated. Children's writing and stories are often viewed with patronizing adult indulgence. "The trial and error involved in children's writing"[28] evokes amusement and delight. "How cute," we might think, neglecting to look for the meaning within. Certain topics are deemed "inappropriate" for children's stories and writing. As teachers we often suggest safe (and boring) topics which will not evoke forbidden responses. I have frequently observed confrontation or challenge when children include such topics as violence, sex, or death in their stories or narratives written or told at school. And, I admit that I, too, have sometimes questioned such writing.

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[26]Mary Ann Cain, *Revisioning writers' talk: Gender and culture in acts of composing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 43; Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The pink guitar: Writing as feminist practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[27]Ursula Le Guin, in *The writer on her work, vol. II: New essays in new territory*, ed. Janet Sternburg (New York: Norton, 1991), 217, quoted in Cain, *Revisioning writers' talk*, 43.
[28]Carolyn Steedman, *The tidy house: Little girls writing* (London, UK: Virago, 1982), 27.

Identity as it is interpreted within the contexts of schooling and writing in a post modern world, then, is complex and messy as we encounter it from multiple views and perspectives. It seems as though I have opened a Pandora's box of issues in contemplating and suggesting writing to develop self-understanding and further self-knowledge within the institution of "the school." As David Smith notes, identity is currently referred to in many different ways. He states:

> The topics of self and subjectivity, with their complementary labor of (auto)biography, story and narration are driven by the belief that one's identity is somehow knowable in itself if only one could find the right way to it.[29]

Smith proposes an alternative "frame" for identity which is suggested by Eastern notions of self and philosophy, where "self and other" are not the focus, but rather, are constituted by

> a simple openness to that which meets us at every turn, in every thing, every thought, feeling, idea, person. Everything is a reminder of who and what we are, a kind of calling back to a more essential truth. Becoming awake to what sustains us is a form of realization of what it is we already are.

Smith sees the issue of identity as a process of becoming awake, and he understands teaching within this frame as conceptualized differently:

> The interest of the teacher is not to teach, in the usual sense of imparting well formulated epistemologies, but to protect the conditions under which each student in their own way can find their way.

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[29]David G. Smith, *"Identity, self and other in the conduct of pedagogical action: A West/East inquiry,"* in *Action research as a living practice*, ed. Terrance R. Carson and Dennis J. Sumara (New York: Peter Lang, in press), page numbers unknown at this time. All quotations from Smith in this section are from this paper.

What are the conditions where children might "in their own way... find their own way"? Perhaps sometimes through avenues of exploration, such as art, talk, stories, writing--the sort of stories and writing where children might ask or explore their own questions, not only the ones we ask for them, or of them. If we then envision personal identity as complex, bound with events, communities, and involved in a process of becoming "someone else that you were not in the beginning," we are also speaking of learning, and issues of pedagogical importance. We will also be speaking the languages of philosophy and art, of making meaning.

But these languages and visions are complex and complicit[30]; they do not fit neatly into a model where teacher is the "knower," where evaluation is based upon comparison with others and with externally referenced "norms," rather than "actual capacities of individual children"[31] ; or where there are standards based on curricula which may have more to do with political and corporate agendas than the needs of children. My vision for writing is sometimes problematic within the existing "systems" of education. This is not to say that writing and the telling of stories cannot be envisioned/ revisioned in the ways which I am suggesting. They can be, I think. But one may become more aware of those systems and discourses that exist, which one may challenge, however quietly, by working with children in this way, and in regarding children as having something to say which is valid.

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[30]I am using the terms *complex* and *complicit* in the sense that Sumara and Davis suggest in "Enlarging the space of the possible: Complexity, complicity, and action research practice," in *Action research as a living practice,* ed. Terrance R. Carson and Dennis J. Sumara (New York: Peter Lang, in press). In brief, complex systems have "an integrity that transcends their component systems" and is more than the sum of its parts," while complicity refers to systems which interact "in ways that change both of them," where, for example, both teacher and student are changed through an experience (page numbers unknown at this time).
[31]Carolyn Steedman, *The tidy house,* 6. She suggests that the tradition for assessment in schools is based on comparisons, which provides "an accessible and convenient way of seeing large groups of children and understanding the differences between them." (5) She notes that assessment, when used in this way matches closely with social class divisions.

Sometimes, I think, that as teachers and adults, we are afraid of children's questions and the stories which come from within. These are stories which often address important issues for children, such as life, death, love, sex, fear, as children attempt to make their own meanings of the world. Sylvia Ashton-Warner has observed, in her work with Maori children, that children's "inner visions" centre on "fear and sex," which, more specifically include such topics as violence, love, "kissing," and monsters, and she sees this writing as a child's "own affair." Though her book was published more than thirty years ago her words still carry meaning for teachers today:

> You've got no right at all to criticize the content of another's mind. A child doesn't make his own mind. It's just there. Your job is to see what's in it. Your only allowable comment is one of natural interest in what he's writing. As in conversation.... The thing is for them to write what is on their minds...[32]

In *The Tidy House* , Carolyn Steedman presents and explores a collaborative story written by three British eight-year-old working class girls. Through their story these girls investigate such issues as "romantic love, marriage and sexual relations," the relationships between children and their mothers, and the social worlds which children inhabit.[33] Steedman views children's writing as coming from the sorts of social circumstances in which they live, and suggests that their stories can be an active engagement in finding meaning:

> In short, 'The Tidy House' is valuable evidence of the fact that children are not the passive subjects of their socialization, but active, thoughtful and frequently resentful participants in the process...the children were manipulating real beliefs and theories that were an actual feature of their daily life and...their attempt to understand them was serious and purposeful.[34]

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[32]Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *Teacher* (New York: Bantam, 1963), 53.
[33]Carolyn Steedman, *The Tidy House*, 1.
[34]Ibid., 31 -32.

As Brian Sutton-Smith reflects, children's stories deal with issues of socialization in their culture and the resulting "normative conflicts." Sutton-Smith links children's stories to cultural mythologies:

> According to some authorities, this is where mythologies are born. They develop out of narrative. We like to think, therefore, that in collecting children's stories, we are dealing with the underbelly of living mythology.[35]

I would suggest that it is through mythology, through stories, that we begin to understand our world and who we are in the world.

**From the Theoretical to the Particular: A Story of Jennifer**

> Friends
>
> Once there lived a little deer. It had a dream. The dream was: He wished he had some friends. Then the wish came true. He wished at the North Star. His dream came true.
>
> *Jennifer, Kindergarten*

In considering issues of identity and writing, I now turn to a story, another fictionalized account based on data collected in my classroom. I choose an example which is also problematic in light of some of the preceding discussions in this chapter, which, the more I reflect on it, tells a number of contradictory stories, issues of identity and implication. Yet it is also the story of a child who is struggling to find her own way within the particularity of the classroom. The classroom I am describing is a complex system, and I am complicit as the teacher. Thus, the story I am about to tell will leave much

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[35]Brian Sutton-Smith, "The importance of the story taker," *Urban Review* 8, no. 2 (summer 1975): 85-95, quoted in Steedman, *The Tidy House*, 15.

unsaid, as one story does not tell all possible stories, and there are questions which remained unasked and unanswered because I did not know to ask them at the time. It is always in retrospect, after writing and thought, that experiences become clearer. Such is interpretation. I have told this story before, in other places. It is partly a retelling, and partly it is not: each time I tell it it is a somewhat different story. I, too, am finding my own way.

The story is an example which initially troubled me, a flat spot in my data. I wanted to ignore it and focus on more wonderful stories, paint rosy portraits of children who had grown remarkably, independently, in the ability to tell stories and to write. I wanted to write about children who had blossomed within the context of my kindergarten writing classroom.[36] But this story kept returning.

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Jennifer was bright, articulate, and a leader. She had quite remarkable skills as a classroom organizer. When, upon occasion, the teacher was delayed in returning to the room after recess, Jennifer would ensure that "the routine" was followed: the children would be sitting in a quiet circle, reading, under Jennifer's direction. It was occasionally necessary to remind Jennifer to be tolerant of those children who were less capable than she was, and "not to boss" other children, but she was a quick study, Jennifer had "school," "the classroom," and "the teacher" soon figured out. (Though possibly not her peers, as this story will reveal.)

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[36]The Author wishes to say, however, that there *were* many such children in her classroom. It is important to her that you, the reader, know this. She may eventually wish to publish the ultimate "how to" manual for writing teachers and offer expensive workshops.

It was puzzling, then, to Jennifer's teacher, what happened during writing. Jennifer rarely took risks in her stories and writing. She seemed to need the approval of a particular clique of kindergarten girls, to tell stories that "fit" with the stories the others were telling, writing, or drawing. The teacher interviews her and it soon becomes a game of "guessing what the teacher wants to hear." The teacher asks, "Why do you think people write stories?"

Jennifer responds with, "Cause it helps you learn to read."

Bobby, a child who is younger and less articulate, is also present during the interview and Jennifer coaches him on what she thinks will be the "correct" answers, at one point taking over as "interviewer." Her response to questions requiring her own speculation (such as "What could we do at school to help kids tell stories?" or "What helps you tell stories?") is a flat, matter-of-fact "I don't know." This child who always had an answer in any other circumstance, who otherwise never appeared to be at a loss for words evades these questions. But her reaction to telling stories and writing (or reflecting on the process) is strangely contradictory. It is a puzzle, and it takes the teacher some time to solve it, to find the way.

Jennifer does tell some stories. The teacher learns that although Jennifer likes to be challenged in other areas, it is necessary to be careful, gentle with her when they work at the stories.

Jennifer has trouble getting started. The teacher can see that she wants her stories to be good. She has high expectations of herself and this prevents her from beginning at times. Often they begin with a conversation about the picture that Jennifer has drawn: pictures of beautiful girls dressed in elaborate gowns, or drawings of animals and flowers. Jennifer talks about the picture and the teacher asks tentative questions. The story is pulled out slowly.

Jennifer's stories are often about making friends, about the desire to belong, and the fear of being excluded. The stories seem to reveal a part of her that the teacher wouldn't have recognized from Jennifer's confident demeanor in the classroom. (Jennifer is also a child who has a medical condition which often sets her apart in ways she finds difficult.) She doesn't want to be different, even when some of her choices to "fit in" (like sharing her snack) might be hazardous to her health. "Fitting in" and being accepted are important to her. Through working at the little round table, "making stories" with other children Jennifer begins to form friendships with a particular group of girls.

As the year continues, Jennifer and the group of kindergarten girls strengthen the bonds of their friendship. They often speak about their "club" and school is the focal point to their relationships. During the times the children work on writing, their stories gradually became more and more similar, defined by some narrow group parameter. The teacher begins to view Jennifer's writing by her group identification and less as something unique to Jennifer. But she does not think to ask Jennifer (or the other girls) about this, perhaps she does not see what is happening, consciously. Not until later. Perhaps because Jennifer was still meeting "the requirements," or "pleasing the teacher." After all, she was telling stories, growing in "ability to get the words down" and developing in written literacy "skills."

And perhaps, as well, the teacher does not notice because of her own buried identification, her own history, and a reluctance to seeing it played out in her "post modern/feminist" classroom. How could this happen? How could it be that this classroom, for Jennifer and a group of five and six-year-old girls, had become a place of conformity, rather than one of diversity and acceptance, where everyone's stories could be told?

Even though Jennifer's stories have been written with careful consultation with her group of friends, and contain the same sorts of pictures and topics that the group is writing about, her stories continue to express something of Jennifer's personality and style of expression. The themes of friendship, inclusion, acceptance, dreams are still frequent, though now Jennifer also includes the theme of overcoming harm and evil. And, Jennifer is eager to write and draw and tell stories when it means working with her friends. So, despite the teacher's concerns about group conformity and the lack of individual voices: a group which did not live up to her own vision of "the post modern classroom," Jennifer has carefully negotiated a way for herself. She has achieved inclusion and acceptance in a desired group, and has still managed to tell stories which seem to be about finding friendship and acceptance.

> November: Once upon a time there was a bear. He hadn't had any friends a lot. So he took a walk down by the old grave yard...
>
> April: Once upon a time there was a beautiful girl on the island. She helps the others. She was a beautiful girl and a friendly girl. Everybody liked her. But not the evil queen she lived with. It was her grandmother. She was cast a spell from the evil witch from the North. But she didn't even mind.

Jennifer's later stories communicate a sense of hopefulness which was not present in the stories she created earlier in the year. Even witches who cast spells, it seems, no longer bother her. In the classroom it appears, also, that Jennifer is a happier child, more tolerant of others and more accepting of herself. In reading the collection of Jennifer's stories, the teacher finds a tracing of Jennifer's "quest" for acceptance, for friends. As she finds herself

included in a desired peer group, the characters in her stories become popular, happy: "Everyone liked her." Perhaps the group relationships were necessary in drawing out Jennifer's stories, and were not the problem the teacher had originally perceived them to be. But is this really "the happy ending?" Will Jennifer manage to develop confidence in her own voice and write stories for herself (and not only for her peer group), to ask her own questions? There are so many pieces to this puzzle, including the teacher's own interpretation of the relationships in this classroom and the stories meshed in between.

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In Jennifer's story I have described a classroom "situation" which occurred alongside Jennifer's stories. In this fictionalized account I have left out some details which may (or may not) change one's interpretation of this particular story. It is a story "in essence," not completely fleshed out; I have included what seem to be the "necessary details." But now I will complicate things a little. What if I were to tell you that Jennifer is a child of mixed heritage, a minority child, and her family lives in modest circumstances--and the girls she wishes to emulate are upper middle class white girls? What if I said that Jennifer generally seems embarrassed to share any details of her own cultural background or to reveal her diabetes. Or if I told you that she shows much insight about social situations in the classroom, and often makes precise comments which describe the classroom context and the relationships therein, though she never discusses herself in making these comments. Do these things make a difference? Perhaps they are a larger story. But still, Jennifer's stories tell something about her. She has made meaning for herself through her stories. And she has communicated to me, the teacher, her

concerns and the issues which matter to her, if I am able and willing to do a close reading. Jennifer's own mythology is present if we stop to consider, if we take the time to read and to ask a few questions. Is Jennifer finding her way through her stories? I do not have a complete answer, "an answer" may not be possible. "Something" appears to have happened through her stories, which Jennifer never otherwise articulated, possibly because she was not able. Such is art.

## Writing Through the Looking Glass: Seeing the Possible

The mirror turns out to be a through looking glass, and beyond are places I have never reached.

*Jeanette Winterson*[37]

...how nice it would be if we could only get through into looking-glass house!

*Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*

How much can we imagine?
The artist is an imaginer.

*Jeanette Winterson*[38]

I attempt to gather up the edges, the assorted threads of identity and writing, the problematics of writing within the social structure of school, and the discourses often contained there. School, where who we are, our stories and our writing, and the collective identities within this context are

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[37]Winterson, *Art objects*, 112.
[38]Ibid., 116.

interconnected and touch upon one another. "Thread" is an inaccurate metaphor: none of these "categories" are truly separate from each other, nor do they occur in a linear, cause-and-effect manner. A better metaphor, and one more appropriate to my time in a kindergarten classroom, might be one of gathering up different coloured pieces of plasticene which will become part of a sculpture, pieces which change as they touch upon the other "parts." But this metaphor, too, has its own inaccuracies, when we are dealing with living, breathing children, and relationships and identities which shift and change. The term "allatonceness" is one which Berthoff uses to describe what happens in writing (the impossibility of breaking down acts of mind as we are writing), and which Sumara adapts to describe "the complex interaction of lived curricular relations,"[39] a term which also seems apt in describing the relationships between writing, school, and searching for ourselves. Art, in the location of school is complicated and complex, an "allatonceness."

Through the looking-glass of writing (or other art), which may also be "a through looking-glass," Winterson suggests our "possibilities" may emerge. As we write and tell our stories we imagine and compose possible selves and possible worlds. Both art and, I believe, a true education are about possibility. As Emily Dickinson writes, "I dwell in possibility."[40] These possibilities do not occur in isolation from others. As Winterson observes:

> Art is not a private nightmare, not even a private dream, it is a shared human connection that traces the possibilities of past and future in the whorl of now.[41]

[39]Sumara, *Private readings in public*, 174. Sumara also cites Berthoff's use of "allatonceness" in his own adaptation of the term.
[40]A Dickinson quote on the cover of my favourite writing journal, too good to omit for lack of a more specific reference.
[41]Winterson, *Art objects*, 117.

The writing and stories which trace these possibilities, addressing "who we are," and who we might "come to be," is art which moves us beyond known boundaries, edges us away from the safety and predictability of the "fill-in-the-blank" exercise. It is an exploration of "dangerous writing," which I turn to now, and the necessary risks involved when we write "for real."

# V
# DANGEROUS WRITING, SCARY STORIES: THE NECESSARY RISKS OF WRITING FOR REAL

Art is for us a reality beyond now.... The reality of art is the reality of the imagination.

Art is dangerous.

*Jeanette Winterson*[1]

A fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and it will change you.

...I think art remains centrally important in any age, the best or the worst, because it doesn't lie. The hope it offers is not a false hope.

A good learner will finally learn the hardest thing: how to see one's world, how to speak one's own words.

*Ursula Le Guin*[2]

As I reread transcripts which document a typical kindergarten "writing" session, sitting in the uninterrupted calm of a neighbourhood Starbucks, I see it is no wonder that I can no longer write where it is completely quiet. Quiet has not been a part of my life as a teacher; not in *my* classroom. You might, as you read my stories "from school," imagine a tranquil and orderly scenario, my undivided rapt attention given to each

[1]Jeanette Winterson, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1995), 148 and 139.
[2]Ursula Le Guin, *The language of the night* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 90, 117, and 91.

child as I transcribed their words. That there was all the time in the world for these events... Sometimes, in reflection, I can imagine it taking place that way. Sometimes I believe, also, that everything happened exactly as I had planned it, and that the children themselves were predictable; that there were no crises or disputes or tears to contend with. But this is a fantasy, a comfortable fiction of forgetting. Sometimes as teachers we need these sorts of fictions, the stories that, in retrospect, all make sense in the end. There's always a little fear when looking in the mirror, whether it be a mirror of art, or the mirror of research. Or both. I think, as Le Guin writes, that this *is* the hardest thing, seeing one's world and speaking of it. Art *is* dangerous. Seeing/ feeling/ remembering is dangerous. And teaching is dangerous when it is about all those things. It is especially so if we teach with an openness to possibility, awake to those moments when students need to "find their way," and where we become aware of our own complicity, as teachers.

I reread the transcripts and my fantasies of the tranquil classroom where everything always happens exactly as planned is denied, however much I would like it to have been that serene classroom of my imagining. (Perhaps some people have classrooms like this, but I never seem to...) This kindergarten classroom is a busy place. Yes, *now* I remember. There are layers of conversations ("My mom gots a king size bed. Which kinda bed do you got?"), interruptions ("Lookit my picture. I did a story too." "Look what I'm wearing, Ms. Laidlaw!"), the voice of THE TEACHER maintaining some kind of order ("Hey guys, settle down with the puppets. You can make a puppet show, but *please* don't throw them!"); these things all touch upon and intersect the stories, as do the events in the classroom and in our lives. As I sit in the near silence of this café I wonder how it was that I listened to and transcribed more than a hundred stories in that active kindergarten

room. There is so much life in a classroom, in those children who waited patiently (and sometimes NOT so patiently) for their turn to speak in spite of all the regular interruptions, nestling in close to listen to the stories of their classmates. There are so many stories to be told if we are only brave enough to listen, if we let ourselves see, and imagine.

I read the transcripts, all those stories children have told me, I listen once more to the tapes, some which now tell a more poignant story than I had planned as part of this researched fiction of mine. I listened to so many stories that year, and other years before. Perhaps this is the real job of teaching. Listening to the stories. And hearing them. In all of these "data" it strikes me suddenly how much children need to be heard, noticed, recognized, listened to.

**Dangerous Writing: Some Theory...**

> If you want to be a writer, somewhere along the line you're going to have to hurt somebody.
>
> *Charles McGrath*

> The taboo has primal origins. It is, to some extent, implicit in being civilized. As we learn to talk we learn not to say what we see if it might cause hurt. Do not stare darling. Do not point.... We have learned to say nothing, even to ourselves.
>
> *Bonnie Friedman*[3]

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[3]Both quotations are from Bonnie Friedman, "Your mother's passions, your sister's woes: Writing about the living," in *The best writing on writing,* ed. Jack Heffron (Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1994), McGrath is quoted on page 40 and Friedman on pages 40-41.

> Dangerous writing. Risky writing. Edgy writing. (Come away from the edge, they said.) Writing that risks much, changes history, tells truths that others do not want to hear. Words on a page reveal what was hidden, what you never knew, before. And there it is.... Dangerous writing. Any real writing is dangerous because it points things out, it might change the fabric of the future, of our relationships; it has revealed who I am.

I am half-joking, of course. There is no "established" body of knowledge, no series of authorized texts which you might find during an internet subject search of any library under the topic of "dangerous writing," as you would if you searched under "hermeneutics" or "phenomenology."[4] But. Certainly others before me have discussed the dangerousness of writing. So, before travelling into the particularity of dangerous writing as it relates to children, as enacted in the classroom, I will explore some interpretations of what "dangerous writing" might be and why writing can be a risky venture.

Writing, as I have previously presented it, can be a location for exploring thought, meaning(s), identities. Writing, whether one intends it to be or not, is nearly always a hermeneutic, reflexive activity. As we interpret, we are represented by both the words we choose and those we omit. We choose what to reveal, what to conceal, whether we are "writing the forbidden" or writing a letter to a friend. But sometimes our words may jump out at us: sometimes we reveal in spite of our intentions otherwise; sometimes there are consequences to be faced by releasing our words. DuPlessis writes,

> Writing as praxis. Ongoing. Curious. Situated. Rapid. Rabid. Marked with one's markings. Not uniform. An exposure. Incomplete. Unsafe...[5]

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[4]Well...until now, that is.

[5]Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The pink guitar: Writing as feminist practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 61.

We may be "exposed" through our writing or, as Grumet explains, "with words I am disrobed and articulated"[6]; one may be "re-presented" as text, through text. Yes, dangerous writing can be about "getting naked" in print. Or, it may be peeling back the layers and revealing or "unskinning," situations, relations, events. Perhaps pointing to the "unclothed emperor." Sumara and Davis refer to unskinning/unskinned curriculum as feeling

> risky, dangerous, forbidden--for within it we are unable to imitate nothing but who we are...[7]

This is curriculum which both removes and imposes boundaries, blurs known categories, re-interprets and transforms what we know. Writing dangerously is curriculum unskinned.

Dangerous writing, too, may force the gaze where we have not dared to look. There may be a sense of taboo, the forbidden, the "telling of tales out of school." Writing is dangerous when it reveals secrets, selves, or what was previously hidden. Bonnie Friedman observes:

> [T]he secrets we most want to understand are not secrets at all; they are nothing hidden so much as not yet discovered. They are what has been there all along, not furtively denied so much as never consciously noticed.[8]

While Lamott suggests,

> We write to expose the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through, you must.[9]

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[6]Madeleine R. Grumet, "*Scholae personae*: Masks for meaning," in *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation*, ed. Jane Gallop (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 44.
[7]Dennis J. Sumara and Brent Davis, "Unskinning curriculum," in *Curriculum: New identities in the field*, ed. William F. Pinar (New York: Garland, in press), correct page numbers unknown at this time.
[8]Bonnie Friedman, "Your mother's passions...," 42.
[9]Anne Lamott, *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 198.

Through writing and story (both our own and those of others) we may discover what is hidden or unrecognized. As Adrienne Rich notes, "...poems are like dreams, In them you put what you don't know you know."[10]

"Hidden thought" and a sense of danger are something many writers see as essential, as critical to their work.[11] Annie Dillard refers to the "dangerous edge" of writing: "Where is an edge," she writes, "--a dangerous edge--and where is the trail to the edge and the strength to climb it?"[12] And Goldberg comments on the need to "Go further than you think you can," even when "It's getting too scary."[13] She observes,

> When you write, you tap the core of your wildness, you have to be prepared to let that live inside you and not destroy it.[14]

As elaborated in the preceding chapter, through our writing we may gain new insights to ourselves, insights which might change us. As Felman notes:

> [I]nsight is never purely cognitive; it is to some extent always performative (incorporated in an act, or doing)...[15]

The "act" of writing, then, may be an act of insight, discovery. But, the prospect of insight and change can be scary. New discoveries can feel dangerous. The known is safer.

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[10]Adrienne Rich, quoted in Shoshana Felman, *What does a woman want? Reading and sexual difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 135.
[11]Annie Dillard, Bonnie Friedman, Natalie Goldberg, and Anne Lamott are only a few writers who have elaborated upon the element of "danger" which is crucial to their work.
[12]Annie Dillard, *The writing life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 47.
[13]Natalie Goldberg, *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 103-104.
[14]Natalie Goldberg, *Wild mind: Living the writer's life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990)
[15]Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the adventure of insight: Psychoanalysis in contemporary culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 15.

Faced with the prospect of viewing ourselves in the visible black and white of the page, with the possibility of "exposure," or a new interpretation of who we might be, we may avoid, delay, resist. Resistance to writing, and the frequently mentioned topic (in books by writers about writing)[16] of "writer's block" provide evidence of the difficulty and the danger implicit in the process of writing. Early in the beginning stages of *this* writing, I wrote:

> I am engaged in a battle with my own resistance. I do not want to write. I think I hate writing at the moment and I am feeling very sorry for myself indeed. This resistance occurs every time I write anything that someone else will see.... I look at a chapter I have previously written and I can hardly bear to read it.

Felman examines this "self-resistance" in both reading and writing, and explores the connection between psychoanalytic theory and autobiography. She explains that women, as writers and readers, "bear witness" to the "testimony" of an autobiography of the self as "other," and she describes the "hesitations" of writers Adrienne Rich and Simone de Beauvoir as "self-resistance." She states:

> But through this self-resistance...the female autobiography is implicitly presented from the start as profoundly problematic. The female speaker speaks from an autobiographical position that is defined as what cannot be simply named, or what can be named only as, precisely, nameless, missing..."[17]

In our writing, then, we may be both revealed, and at the same time find we lack the words or language to articulate ourselves. DuPlessis comments, regarding her own autobiographical work:

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[16]See Sophy Burnham, *For writers only* (New York: Ballantine, 1994); Lamott, *Bird by bird;* and Dillard, *The writing life,* for just a few examples of writers discussing "writer's block."
[17]Shoshana Felman, *What does a woman want? Reading and sexual difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 142.

> I am not writing the personal.... I am not finding a voice,
> I am losing one.[18]

Felman is also concerned with audience, suggesting "we do not always know who is the *real addressee* of the text of our desire and of the writing of our life."[19] Though our writing may be intended, at least outwardly, for a particular audience, in a particular form, the "text of our desire" may be addressed elsewhere. An example I have seen at school is the child who writes or tells a story "for the teacher" or "for the class," yet the story is about a person or a relationship beyond the classroom: the father who lives "away," the mother who is in hospital or absent from home, a special moment shared with a grandparent. The writing process may become complicated when we are unaware of who the "real addressee" might be, or when, perhaps, we are unable to speak our words to those persons. This, too, may be risky writing.

Resistance and "hesitation" in encounters with writing can be seen in classrooms, as well: it is not solely an experience belonging to adult, women writers.[20] I have memories of children who dissolved into tears of anxiety and frustration and reacted as though I was subjecting them to some horrific, perverse form of torture when I insisted, however gently, that they write. In a poetry workshop with a classroom of nine and ten year olds I see the same worried looks, and hear the questions: "Is this okay?" "Is this right?" "Could this be a poem, do you think?" And by now there are some who will not dare to take the risks required of writing, those who mask their fears with avoidance, distraction, or anger. In schools (as well in universities...) there is

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[18]DuPlessis, *The pink guitar,* 172.
[19]Felman, *What does a woman want?* 132.
[20]I do not believe that resistance or "hesitation" in writing is completely particular to writers who are women, children or "other"--though perhaps issues of resistance may be made more complex by the circumstances of speaking within a dominant discourse which is not one's own. And I wonder, too, if "father tongue" is really a discourse belonging to anyone...

an external form and process for evaluation: it is tangible, visible, evident--there are comparisons, numbers, letters, comments on papers, report cards, transcripts of marks. Perhaps these also become seeds of our writing anxieties and resistances--our fears of censure, exposure, and critique.

I continue to experience my own writing fears each time I write "for publication." There is a part of me which always hopes that no one will read or "bear witness" to my writing. Or rather, no one who actually knows me. I want to believe that somehow it will pass through entirely anonymous hands, belonging to faceless people, finally coming to rest silently and invisibly on an unknown library shelf, hidden undisturbed under a heavy layer of dust. Friedman expresses well my own sentiments:

> Obscurity would swallow these stories, I thought.... If I published them, they would be in journals no one had heard of, under a name that did not yet exist.[21]

But, paradoxically, I also want *everyone* to read my writing, finding it fascinating, meaningful, and well-written. The fear is thus double-edged: the fear of being read, and not being read.

In this work you are now reading, I have created some interpretations of children and their teacher in a classroom, and provided a glimpse into my thinking on writing in schools. It is autobiographical, fictional, and researched. But is my story believable? Is there a "truth of sorts" within? I have recordings, transcripts, documents, a file labelled "research" which contains children's drawings and stories--there's proof that "something happened." I was present, I remember. But this collection of stories acquires a life of its own. Something is being created in the space between the "evidence" and my words, my connections to "Theory." A story spins out of

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[21]Bonnie Friedman, "Your mother's passions...," 52.

me, dangerously, gathering its own momentum. And there are moments when it seems that it is the story, not the writer, which takes control. Is this Academic Research? I can imagine the wagging fingers now, the stern looks of disapproval, hear the questions which I may be unable to answer. I dream about it. My elementary school teachers return to haunt me, and my mother, the parents of every child I have ever taught, and the teacher next door. "That's not how it was at all," they say. "She always was a liar," they say. The risks of interpretation, of writing dangerously, and not, perhaps, following "The Rules."

## Subversive, Untamed Truth

"Art cannot be tamed," Winterson announces, pointing out that it is school which conditions our responses in "the half-baked sterility of the classroom."[22] She writes of the difficulty of truth in art:

> If art, all art, is concerned with truth, then a society in denial will not find much use for it.[23]

Lamott also speaks of truth, of the necessity of writing into "the emotional centre of things," which may be personally risky for the writer, of telling the truth as one understands it:

> And it is a revolutionary act---truth is always subversive.[24]

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[22]Winterson, *Art objects*, 15.
[23]Ibid., 11.
[24]Lamott, *Bird by bird*, 226.

Writer Cynthia Ozick defines writing "essentially as an act of courage."[25] Perhaps the dangerous possibility of writing is that we might tell the truth. And that's what scares us.

In writing it seems I must always explore situations, events, experiences "close to the edge," examining questions which haunt me, memories which lurk just below the surface of conscious thought or awareness. It is scary because, even if I have created fictional details, I am trying to write something that, at the heart of it, is truthful. I am trying to find a way to some sort of truth within, despite my own resistance. Le Guin writes,

> Artists are people who are not at all interested in the facts--only in the truth. You get the facts from outside. The truth you get from inside."[26]

In school, I think, we are often neglectful of "The truth you get from inside" because we focus on the visible, the tangible, the known, "the facts." We do not allow enough space for the messy, scary, struggle of finding a way to the "truths within." It is easier (and safer) to address "the known"--the structure of a sentence, the framework of a story, how words are spelled. And we forget about what children are saying, or trying to say, about their own search for truth and meaning.

When I interviewed kindergarten children, asking why they thought people write and tell stories (which, someone informed me, was a question far too difficult to be asking young children...) none of them mentioned the

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[25]Cynthia Ozick, quoted in Sophy Burnham, *For writers only* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 18.
[26]Le Guin, *The language of the night* ,198.

development of "skills" or acquiring particular knowledge.[27] Instead, this is what they said:

> I *like* telling stories...
>
> I like that they're imaginary things and you can do lots of things with them...
>
> Anybody can do them...
>
> People make stories for their moms to be happy.
>
> So the little kids can enjoy their lives.
>
> They just like to tell stories...
> Yeah, they just feel like doing it.
>
> Well, I *like* to...
>
> Because it's just a fun thing to do, make up your own stories...

And, inevitably, most of the "interviews" evolved into story telling sessions despite my attempts to "control" the process. It seemed, after speaking of stories, they discovered another one that they just needed to tell. Even the questions themselves sometimes evoked a story:

> me: What if somebody came from another planet and didn't know what stories were, what would you tell them?
>
> L: Another *planet* ? Like, *aliens* ?
>
> me: yeah...
>
> L: I would just tell him, "Well, you know, alien, I used to draw...and if he asked me, "What's drawing?" I'd just show him. And then.... What if he gets scared?
>
> me: Oh, then what would you do?
>
> L: I would just send him back... [the story continues...]

[27]Though one child did mention learning how to read by writing--her story is addressed in the previous chapter.

The children's words about story are full of possibility, curiosity, imagination, and desire. Stories bubble up from them, sometimes wild, dangerous stories. But at five children do not so much resist; they want to, they need to tell. Their words have not yet been tamed, conquered, made sterile, or put into "sentence frames." The children still know it is the story inside that counts; they have not encountered the check marks, numbers, letters, and ink which may eventually lead them away from their stories.

At five and six, before anyone has "untaught" them, the stories tell what is on their minds. There is death, destruction, discovery, fear, love, victory, transformation. Some of the stories are bluntly truthful, disclosing secrets, longings and desires. And, as previously discussed, these stories are perhaps not so dangerous for the young children who tell them (though they may become risky if we respond in an uncaring or censuring manner) but for the adults who have their own vision of what children's stories should be: uncomplicated and bland, and not the rather messy, complex, sometimes problematic representations that their stories tend to be in reality.

The children tell stories of their real lives, as they understand them, the truths they know: the parent who went away from them, the parents who fight, the family without money, the children who are naughty, the father who died. As Steedman observes in her analysis of "The Tidy House," story can be:

> a small piece of evidence, an example of how, taking the circumstances of their own life and the materials to hand, people can, without the benefit of theory or the expectations of others, critically confront the way things are and dimly imagine, out of those very circumstances, the way they might be.[28]

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[28]Carolyn Steedman, *The tidy house: Little girls writing* (London, UK: Virago, 1982), 157.

Children are able to "confront the way things are," to tell the truth as they know it, and though this may be "dangerous writing" and more messy and difficult for educators than writing which is controlled and "tamed," it is "real" writing, meaningful writing, necessary writing. It is writing that makes a difference to children's lives.

**Creating a Space for Possibility: The Writing Classroom as a "Safe" Community of Practice**

> As we study the forms of our own experience, not only are we searching for evidence of external forces that have diminished us; we are also recovering our own possibilities. We work to remember, imagine, and realize ways of knowing and being that can span the chasm presently separating our public and private worlds.
>
> *Madeleine Grumet*[29]

In her words about autobiography, Madeleine Grumet speaks of recovering possibility and bridging "public and private worlds." This, in essence, describes what I think writing can do for children. Writing can create connection and possibility, even when writing becomes a dangerous and subversive activity.

But if "real writing" or "writing for real" is dangerous, how might we approach it within a classroom where we want to promote writing that is not simply a series of empty exercises with paper and pencil? Susan Wooldridge observes in *poemcrazy*:

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[29]Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter milk: Women and teaching* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), xv.

> It's impossible to teach anyone to write a poem. But we can set up circumstances in which poems are likely to happen. We can create a field in and around us that's fertile territory for poems.[30]

Poetry and any "writing as art" is not something one can "teach" in the usual way that we think of "teaching," though it is quite possible to teach children how "to not write." This "notwriting" (Berthoff calls it "anticomposing"[31]) is often what passes for writing in school. However, we *can*, as teachers, "set up circumstances," create spaces, a "field" for writing. But can we make our writing classrooms safe places for "dangerous" thought?

In chapter two, I presented some possibilities and suggestions for (re)envisioning writing pedagogy. Writing pedagogy, as with all teaching/learning events also occurs within a context, framed with and intersected by an intricate web of relationships. As David Abram points out, "Humans are tuned for relationship."[32] Relationship, then, must extend to writing and story, and the classrooms in which these events take place. As Sumara notes:

> The classroom is the site of complex, interwoven relationships: between teacher and students, students and each other, teachers and texts, students and texts.[33]

We bring into writing and our stories our past, present, and future relationships. It is no different when writing occurs at school, or for school, in a context of learning. Lave and Wenger present learning as a process of participating and engaging in "communities of practice," suggesting that

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[30]Susan G. Wooldridge, *poemcrazy: Freeing your life with words* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1996), xii.

[31]Ann E. Berthoff, *The making of meaning: Metaphors, models, and maxims for writing teachers* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981).

[32]David Abram, *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), ix.

[33]Dennis J. Sumara, in *Private readings in public: Schooling the literary imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 6.

learning is "situated" within a relational context: "[T]here is no activity that is not situated."[34] And DuPlessis observes,

> For writing is a practice--a practice in which the author disappears into a process, into a community, into discontinuities, into a desire for discovery.[35]

If we want to nurture a "desire for discovery," to make the dangerous a little more safe, we need to pay close attention to the "community of practice" that we encourage and create, where it is safe for children to make meaning, ask questions and to recreate themselves. The relationships within the writing classroom are perhaps the most important threads in the tapestry that is learning to write in schools. As Grumet suggests:

> All of our cognitive manipulations, phonics or miscue analysis, schema presentation...are irrelevant unless we surround children with adults who care about them. What is basic to the elementary school curriculum is the space and time and presence that make these relationships possible...being known, recognized, loved.[36]

As teachers, we must work to create environments that nurture and respect children and their writing. We also need to examine our own relationships with children and the kinds of interactions and relationships children have with one another in the writing classroom. Most important, we should also be writing and sharing our own stories with our students, at least some of the time. If it is not possible, or safe for teachers to take that risk, how can children be asked to do it?

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[34]Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 33.
[35]DuPlessis, *The pink guitar*, 172.
[36]Madeleine R. Grumet, "The curriculum: What are the basics and are we teaching them?" in *Thirteen questions: Reframing education's conversation 2ed.*, ed. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 19.

It is true that when we write and tell stories at school we are working within the context of a particular social institution: we cannot guarantee that writing will always be a "safe" experience. Real writing is never completely safe. Anywhere. But we may be able work with children in a way that makes it just a little bit safer to write dangerously.

**Dangerous Writing in Practice: The Story Returns**

Having pulled back the edges to explore the idea of dangerous writing, unraveling issues of resistance, "truth," safety, and some problematics of school, I think again about my own writing and research. I think about how it became more dangerous, as I examined my experiences and "real" questions. I think about how I was caught by surprise. The writing became more "personal" than I had intended, as the journey through research and writing moved to a place where I was uncertain I wanted to venture.

One never knows on the "way in" to writing what one will "find out" or encounter during the process of writing. There may be the unexpected, the hidden surprise, the discovery of something not previously noticed. The unexpected occurs in classroom communities, also. My research in the classroom, and my writing of it did not turn out quite the way I thought it would. I didn't really think it would change me, but it did.

Part of the story, of my research, went "off the edge," going beyond anything I could have possibly imagined, as another story wrote itself in the midst of the intended story. I had not intended our story to be a story of loss. Dangerous writing. Even as I write this I have a sense that I "should not." Do not point to it. Say nothing about it. We don't want any messy feelings. Particularly mine. What does this story have to do with my research on

writing? With writing as a philosophic venture, as art, as a journey into who we are and what we might become? Perhaps nothing, but maybe it is the real story. Maybe it is the truth at the centre, the dangerous writing.

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After Anna died the classroom seemed both a sanctuary and a dangerous place, as strange as that might sound. The feeling of sanctuary had evolved over time as the children found a home for their words, their questions, concerns...their dreams. The teacher had worked to create the spaces for talk, stories, writing, the glue that held them together as a group. But it wasn't just up to her, the children had their own part to play in forming this sense of community. It was their own place as much as it was hers. There was safety enough to ask dangerous questions, to tell stories that might be dangerous--dangerous because they were talking about death, dying, a child who they knew and cared about. And in our society, death is a taboo subject, even more than sex. Do not speak of it. Don't remind us of those we have loved and lost. Don't remind us of our own mortality, that we will all die someday. Don't remind us that other people we care about will also die. Often, the teacher stumbled upon some item that had been created by or belonged to Anna, and it would strike her like a blow, again, that Anna was gone, and that they all still missed her.

So here they were together in this safe and dangerous place. It was a place of memories and questions where everything had changed, and yet was still the same. Still there were stories to be told, drawings to make, the daily routines and rituals continued... At first the teacher thought that their new stories were dangerous mostly for her. They must have been, she turned off

the tape recorders, stopped transcribing "data," decided this study was now over--due to circumstances beyond her control. She'd write about everything that happened before Anna's death. She would not use Anna's stories or her words. But a part of her watches and remembers in spite of herself. She keeps a record--she continues to write a journal. There's an underlying need to make sense of things, and it seems there is no one who can listen. It's just too dangerous for everyone, all this emotion at school. Later, in reflection, she sees that the stories were also dangerous for some children. They addressed feelings of sadness, loss, fears, feelings which touched upon other events and memories for some of them.

Some children tell stories about Anna and what happened. Some do not. The teacher never directs them, either way, but allows space, time, and provides materials. Many children are beginning to write, independently, using sounds and symbols they know in that language unique to emerging writers. They often write about Anna, or to Anna. "I LV YO ANNA." "ANNA PALD WS M ZAT I RMBR" (Anna played with me, that's what I remember). When the "Anna stories" first appear they are stories of grieving and loss--memories of events, relation:

> I'm sad because Anna's dead...
>
> When she died I cried and cried...
>
> ...once when I had a cough candy I gave one to her...
>
> ...I like to play with her.... We played tag. I liked to draw something in notebooks with Anna. Anna, I wish you were alive.

Other stories attempt to make sense of what had happened. Some children created their own explanations:

> Well, Anna was on the highway and you know it was slippery on the ground and the car just slipped into a ditch. And then Anna died and her little baby brother's in the hospital...

Gradually, though, the stories change. Anna returns, transformed. She's become a myth, an angel, a spirit, someone to watch over them and protect them from harm, it seems. She is not gone. Her name tag and the treasure box where the children place drawings for her become sacred icons. The children hide things in the box: toys, drawings, writing. The teacher discovers these much later, after school has ended for the year. There is something reverent in the actions of these young children. But topics verging on the spiritual are also dangerous at school, as well as in "educational research." So there are some stories which remain, for the present, unwritten. The stories which wait, perhaps, for later.

Lacking answers and explanations for the difficult questions they had asked the teacher: "Where did she go?" "Where is she now? The children begin to create their own possibilities: "She's here, isn't she?" "I bet she still knows all about us." "I think she likes all the nice things we said about her, when we were sad that she died." And they continue to tell stories...

The "recreation of Anna" stories are oral narratives--the teacher does not write them down. It seems somehow intrusive. It would break the spell. Perhaps, at the time, she simply could not. But there are the drawings. The drawings remain and so she remembers. These magical, hopeful, spiritual stories emerge from the other side of loss. Anna, the angel-girl who smiles and watches over them. Anna who is always happy now. Anna who went away dreaming...

It appears that the children have all come through this, that they have passed through the trouble--not unchanged, but here they are. It seems that

they have made their sense of this experience, somehow finding a way through words, drawings, stories. The teacher, too, has found a way through the words--those dangerous words, the stories which unravel out of her, revealing more than she knew before. A story has changed her.

> The writer's job, as I see it, is to tell the truth. The writer's truth.... And you never succeed. The map is never complete, or even accurate...
>
> *Ursula Le Guin*

> Writing was also important in the culture of taking care of oneself.... Taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity.
>
> *Michel Foucault*[37]

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Through the dangerous art of writing we might become connected with who we are and open ourselves to possibility. And as writer Anne Lamott observes,

> Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul.... We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.[38]

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[37] Ursula Le Guin, "Bryn Mawr commencement address," in *Dancing at the edge of the world*, ed. Ursula Le Guin (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 200-201; Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the self," in *Technologies of the self*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 27.
[38] Lamott, *Bird by bird*, 237.

# VI
# IMAGINED POSSIBILITIES AND SHARED CONNECTIONS: WRITING THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Once there was a girl and a boy. The girl was going to school, the boys were chasing. And the girl went outside. She saw a real rainbow. She wanted to catch it...

*Aisha, Kindergarten*

Anna was a good friend. I liked her when she played with me. She was really a good friend.... I liked her and I invited her to my birthday.

*Marissa, Kindergarten*

The only way to the truly collective, to the image that is alive and meaningful in all of us, seems to be through the truly personal. Not the impersonality of pure reason; not the impersonality of "the masses," but the irreducibly personal--the self. To reach the others, artists go into the self.... The farther they go into the self, the closer they come to the other.

*Ursula Le Guin*[1]

It seems a very long time ago that I first envisioned an inquiry based on writing and story as it was happening in my classroom and my own writing life. And now here I am, nearing "the end," or at least approaching a temporary stopping place. I have changed, in the process of writing, in making discoveries, in finding my way through these words, and in the conversations which inevitably take place when one is engaging in an all

[1]Ursula Le Guin, *The language of the night* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 74

embracing project of writing and study. For, as discussed earlier, all writing takes place within existing relationships, and may, as well, create new ones.

I had "imagined possibilities" for writing, and for *this* writing before beginning my inquiry, having an understanding that I would come to know writing, and the stories and writing of children in a new way through looking deeply for meaning in my own experiences and those I observed and recorded. During my study new visions and interpretations of what writing can be in schools as well as what writing "means" for me, as a writer and as a teacher emerged.

However messy and problematic conditions may be for writing in schools I remain optimistic, in part because of what I have experienced working with young children (which provides, I think, an optimistic outlook on life in general). Working within alternative models of education have shown me, too, that it *is* possible to revise models and structures in schools, to adapt pedagogy. And to make changes in how we teach.[2] Things can be different--we need not accept things "as they are." As Paulo Freire states:

> One of the tasks of the progressive educator...is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be. After all, without hope there is little we can do.[3]

It is easy to critique, to challenge, to complain, however valid one's criticisms may be, about all that is wrong with schools and "systems" of education. Certainly I have done my share of illustrating and articulating

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[2]During the mid to late 80's I worked in an alternative programme for adolescent girls and pregnant/parenting teens. The programme was one which challenged many notions inherent to "traditional" schooling, both pedagogically and in the sets of relations between students and staff. It was also where I developed many of the values I currently hold as an educator, and in looking back, probably where I learned most about the nature of teaching and learning. I also had the opportunity to participate, as a pre-service teacher, in alternative elementary programmes in Toronto.

[3]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of hope*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum, 1995), 9.

that which is problematic and difficult, and pointed to some lacunae in my examination of writing pedagogy. But teaching is, and should be, an ultimately hopeful pursuit. As educators we can have some kind of impact on the future society, by working with children in ways which enhance and create possibilities for "writing better lives." I know I would like to live in a society where thinking, writing, and art have a place of significance, where we may both share our own stories, and listen to and take part in the stories of others. As Sumara suggests:

> The stories that we tell about ourselves and our experiences reflect our history of interactions with others in the world. It is the arrangement of language into narrative forms that gives us a sense of self and allows others a point of access to that self. Telling stories, listening to them, and reading them (to oneself or to others) opens a window to other worlds, other persons, and other experiences.[4]

Though perhaps, as teachers, we may not change the world in a larger way, we *can* change the lives of a few individuals. We can make a difference to children in ways which may improve their lives. There will be, of course, obstacles to overcome. It will be hard work, no doubt. But there is always the possibility that our work may be radical and revolutionary. William Pinar, though painting a picture of current, difficult times for American schools as corporate and political agendas take hold, still maintains that the individual teacher in the classroom has the power to make a difference.[5] One can envision possibilities--for who could stop us from awakening children to themselves and the lives that writing, story, art may lead them to?

[4]Dennis J. Sumara, *Private readings in public* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 85.
[5]Lecture for Education 816, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, July 1995.

A friend once asked me if I thought it really mattered that children learn to write in meaningful, interpretive ways in schools. "After all," she said, "*You* learned to write in spite of your experiences with writing in school. Won't children who are writers do it anyway?"

It may be true that some individuals become writers despite experiences with schooling or with life, sometimes even driven by difficult circumstances. As Nehru writes,

> All my major works have been written in prison.... I would recommend prison not only to aspiring writers but to aspiring politicians, too.[6]

Adversity may sometimes evoke creativity for certain individuals and, yes, some children will likely grow up to write, or to be writers, in spite of whatever happens in their classrooms and in their lives. However, I do not think we can evade our responsibilities quite so easily.

I do not believe, either, that there is any such clear cut distinction between people who are "writers" and those who are not, unless we are speaking only of "the published" and the not (yet) published. Even then, our division of "the categories" is becoming blurry, a little less easy to define. What of someone who posts to an Internet newsgroup or forum, or sets up her own "homepage"? These look like publication to my eyes, when there may be a rather large "audience" for one's words. Even an "authoritative text" such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* addresses the ambiguity of publication, in a section on "Unpublished Material":

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[6]Jawaharlal Nehru, quoted in Sophy Burnham, *For writers only* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 74.

> The status of duplicated material is somewhat ambiguous. To the extent that it is distributed, even at no cost, it is technically published. To the extent that its distribution is limited, however, it may be said to be unpublished. In any case...[7]

In the increasingly complex, print-based societies of the post modern world, separating "the writers" from "the others" becomes like attempting to divide those who are articulate in speech from those of us who are less so. Yes, some may be more adept at writing and choose to pursue "the writing life," but we all have something to gain from writing. In writing we may express and interpret ourselves and our worlds, and find meaning(s) through our words.

In writing, as with most pursuits in our lives, the more we do it (and write with conscious intention), the better we get at doing it. This is the essence of many books on the "practice of writing."[8] We need to practice. If we want children to become better writers, we must, as educators, provide opportunities for students to write in ways that are thoughtful and meaningful. It is essential that teachers nurture the practice of real thinking which can happen during writing, not the conforming, freeze-dried artificial substitute for thought which may be evoked when children are instructed to respond to "reflection prompts," to "brainstorm," or to fill out "thinking papers." *Now we will think.*

My friend was correct. I learned how to write and to think independently, in spite of my schooling experiences, though schools provided me with more than adequate instruction in the "skills of transcription."[9] It is

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[7]*The Chicago manual of style, 14th ed.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 588.
[8]See Natalie Goldberg's books such as *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), *Wild mind: Living the writer's life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990); Susan Shaughnessy's *Walking on alligators: A book of meditations for writers* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); Sophy Burnham's, *For writers only.*
[9]In my life as a student I did encounter teachers who encouraged me to think and to write, though they were in the minority.

also true that there has always been something in me that has needed to express myself through writing. I learned to write because at some points in my life there was no viable choice other than to write--though much of that writing was not particularly wonderful. But I wrote often. I had much practice. I was also a fortunate child. I came from a home which valued, modelled, supported, and challenged both writing and thinking:

> There were the Tuesday night trips to the public library and the stacks of books we returned with. Collections of books around the house sorted into Mom's books, Dad's books, the books that belonged to me and my sister. Books we were forbidden to read, but did anyway. Conversations, debates, and raging arguments on politics, religion, and issues that were currently reflected in the media. The diaries our grandmother had written, years ago which we discovered forgotten, or perhaps hidden, in the basement. And our own journals--we knew our mother read them (through guilty admissions to the Other Sister) so we learned to write cryptically, fictionally, metaphorically. Sometimes, too, we confessed imaginary, wild transgressions knowing that these would torture Mom, who would be unable to say anything without admitting that, yes, she was reading our diaries. There were letters and notes anticipated, expected, and required. It's interesting that writing still plays a significant role in the lives of both my sister and I.

Yet there are many children whose backgrounds are dissimilar to my own. In my interviews with kindergarten children (and in my daily life as a teacher) I encounter children who tell me they have no books at home, and no materials for writing. I come to know children whose stories reflect hardship, loss, deprivation. Daily, I see children who enter school already marginalized, already labelled in a file in the office, and by the parents who talk at the door. These children may not find their way to writing as I did. A description of one such child follows.

•

Most of the time Bobby reminds his teacher of a tumbleweed, a rumpled child with the kind of life that seems to change with the direction of the wind. He arrives at school uncombed, untied, a little grubby, and always with the latest excerpt in a long series of personal and family mishaps. "I was away for such a long time cause my gramma died and we had to drive a long, long time." "We don't have a car anymore cause it got wrecked. I HATE it when that happens!" "Our dog got killed 'cause it bited someone." "I saw my real dad on the weekend. I don't like going to his house."

He always cheerfully recounts these stories to the entire class. The other children share their news of upcoming birthday parties, new toys, and visits to Science World. It is his life, the way things are, part of his story.

Books were something new for him (as were markers and paint brushes), but he'd already formed an opinion about reading. "I hate reading!" he announced happily the first time the class looked at books together. He'd had little experience with being read to. "We don't have any books at home."

Bobby couldn't draw a recognizable picture of anything, even by the generous standards of kindergarten. He would look up at the teacher and sigh, waiting passively for her assistance. "Will you help?" "I can't do it." He could not write his name or identify it in any written form. He never chose to draw or tell stories of his own volition, preferring to play with blocks, or the train, or at the sand, where his vivid imagination and sometimes irrepressible nature got the best of him. "Bobby wrecked our tower!" "Bobby sweared!" "Bobby hit me!"

But, over time, in spite of the many ups and downs in his life, and a few traumas, Bobby seems to find his way, a place that is becoming more

centre and less margin, less edgy, less volatile. The teacher fights some battles for him, confronting the people who would relegate him to a place "apart." "What if he were your child? Think for a moment about *him*!" she says, eyes flashing. But Bobby gradually "blooms" in spite of all the trouble. He learns to print a shaky version of his name, learns to get the letters the right way up, (most of the time). He discovers that, after all, he really *does* like books, especially ones about animals.

And, Bobby discovers stories. He learns that when he talks into the tape recorder the sound of his voice will come back to him, and that his words will continue to exist after the teacher types them into the computer. His words will stay, he's real, he exists. All of this impresses Bobby.

Sometimes he tells stories about school and how much he loves the teacher, how he misses her when she is absent. She finds these regular declarations of undying five-year-old devotion mildly embarrassing, but if it helps him to tell stories... Perhaps, too, it is *why* he tells the stories--basic relation. He knows there someone who cares about him, that his stories matter. "Put this on the tape 'corder," Bobby insists, yet again. "I like Ms L. and I like how she works. And I missed her when she was at the hospital."

Sometimes he talks about his interests, or his preferences--"I like eggs. Raw eggs." "I like playing trains." "And I like suns." "I like killer whales. Free Willy was nice and I went to his adventure." "I like the mouse book, but not the babies one." Often his stories end in disaster--everybody dies violently, the "bad guys" win. But, occasionally, there are glimmers of endings which are not quite so tragic: the characters go to sleep uninjured, the pets don't die in the end.

As the end of the school year draws closer, the teacher worries about what will become of Bobby.

Yes, perhaps some children will learn to write with their minds and hearts and souls despite what happens in the writing classroom. But I am concerned for the children who may not gain a sense of the power of their own voice, or the need to have one. Not all children will grow up to be "published" writers, but I would like to see more children provided with writing opportunities that help them to discover more about themselves, to make further, deeper connections with others through words. A letter, a slogan, a book can change the course of history, and so can a deep and resounding silence. We listen to those who have access to the power of words; words can empower and reveal hidden truths.

In her "Bryn Mawr Commencement Address," Ursula Le Guin addresses the issue of women's silence:

> I don't think we have any right to obedience. I think we have a responsibility to freedom.
> And especially to freedom of speech. Obedience is silent. It does not answer. It is contained....
> I am sick of the silence of women. I want to hear you speaking all the languages, offering your experience as your truth...[10]

And Adrienne Rich contends:

> In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence.[11]

In schools, I fear, we foster obedience, conformity, and silence. We often invite children to provide the answers *we* are seeking, rather than encouraging them to voice their own real questions, opinions, and thoughts.

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[10]Ursula Le Guin, "Bryn Mawr commencement address," in *Dancing at the edge of the world*, ed. Ursula Le Guin (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 159.
[11]Adrienne Rich, quoted in Sophy Burnham, *For writers only* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 164.

The children who do, in spite of us, are sometimes viewed as impertinent, "trouble-makers," "problems." bell hooks reflects on her own experiences with speaking out as a child:

> Whenever I tried in childhood to compel folks around me to do things differently, to look at the world differently, using theory as intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo, I was punished.[12]

Some children, like the young bell hooks, may eventually manage to find some way to overcome their "silencing." But what of the Bobbys and the Jennifers?[13] The Bobbys in our classrooms may be unable to articulate their thoughts, and the Jennifers may be afraid to show us unless we change the conditions of writing in school.

In books about writing, the writer often mentions a teacher who led her to the pursuit of writing:

> I was looking for another language I didn't know yet. In Mr. Mabie's class I found the woods where I needed to go to write poems.
>
> *Susan Wooldridge*

> From the beginning, she made it clear to us that it was not "right" or "wrong" answers she was after. It was thinking.
> "Don't be afraid to go out on a limb, " she'd tell some poor kid struggling...
>
> *Alice Steinbach*

> He taught us to be bold and original and to let ourselves make mistakes...
>
> *Anne Lamott*[14]

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[12]bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59-60.
[13]See chapter 4.
[14]Susan G. Wooldridge, *poemcrazy: Freeing your life with words* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1996), 7; Alice Steinbach, *The Miss Dennis school of writing, and other lessons from a woman's life* (Baltimore, MD: The Bancroft Press, 1996), 78; Anne Lamott, *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), xiii.

The relationship between teacher and student, and the kind of environment for writing and story that is nurtured, can open up a world of possibility. Equally important, as well, are the relationships which surround and touch upon the stories being created in the classroom.

## Writing and Shared Connection: A Tapestry of Interrelation

> Often what is taught would not be learned if it were not embedded in a relationship, for it may have no obvious relevance...
>
> *Mary Catherine Bateson*[15]

> Relation is basic to education. But ironically, it is relation that is most often elided when we are asked to list the basics.
>
> *Madeleine Grumet*[16]

> Each of us is like a desert, and a literary work is like a cry from the desert, or like a pigeon let loose with a message in its claws, or like a bottle thrown into the sea. The point is: to be heard--even if by one single person.
>
> François Mauriac

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[15]Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral visions: Learning along the way* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 204.

[16]Madeleine R. Grumet, "The curriculum: What are the basics and are we teaching them?" in *Thirteen questions: Reframing education's conversation, 2ed.*, ed. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 16.

In the end, all books are written for your friends.

*Gabriel Garcia Márques*

I write very personal poems but I hope that they will become the central theme to someone else's private life.

*Anne Sexton*

Only connect.

*E. M. Forster*[17]

Earlier, I have referred to the "relational" nature of writing, of the ways writing and story in the classroom are situated within complex sets of relationships and events. As Grumet and Sumara suggest,[18] when we share our stories, we provide an opportunity for creating connections between our "private and public" worlds, we open ourselves to new possibilities. Writing is relation: we write in order to connect with others. Even when we write privately, there is some imagined audience in mind, though perhaps as Felman asserts, we do not always reveal "the real addressee," even to ourselves.[19]

If writing is enmeshed in a world of relation, we sometimes forget, or ignore this in schools, except for the relationship between teacher (as "evaluator") and student (as "evaluated"). As a child, I was certainly aware of the difference between that "discourse" of "writing for school" and the writing I might have done at home. Writing at school was usually

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[17]The four quotes by writers can be found in Sophy Burnham, *For writers only*, 132, 138.
[18]Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter milk: Women and teaching* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Dennis J. Sumara, *Private readings in public.*
[19]Shoshana Felman, *What does a woman want? Reading and sexual difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

unconnected to other people or my life, except for the occasional rare times when the teacher allowed us to share our work or talk about our ideas. Sharing one's work was labelled "cheating" or "copying" back then, and was definitely suspect. Students were supposed to compete, not collaborate. Writing at home, in contrast, was all about relation and purpose--letters to the Tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, great-cousin Ruby, my penpal in Ontario, stories written to be shared with my mother, the angry notes shoved under a closed bedroom door as my sister and I worked out our conflicts.

When we acknowledge and encourage the shared connections between ourselves and children, between children and each other, as well as the many other relationships that are enfolded into our writing classrooms, these interconnections enhance and enrich the fabric of storied interpretation. They create a form to enact the recreations of who we are and who we might become through story and writing.

In observing children in my classroom I saw students creating stories and writing about, or to, the people and relationships (not always "human") that were important in their lives. There were retellings of events from memory, fabrications of the "dreamed of" fantasy, the "working out" of conflicts, absences, and unresolved issues. These "not present" relationships became a part of the intricate web that was our collective classroom identity.

Additionally, what also became visibly apparent during writing or story in kindergarten was an active engagement with each other's stories; inevitably there were the "onlookers" who would "listen in" on the periphery, as the stories came to life. The listeners would often respond and provide a thread of unsolicited commentary to the storytellers. These responses took the form of genuine questions and real thoughts, not the

empty platitudes which often emerge during a structure such as "share time."[20]

"Did that happen for real?" "Did your dad really die?" "I had a dream about a ghost, too...do you think there's such a thing as ghosts?" The listeners would move in nearer, sometimes repeating the words of the storyteller. There was a sense of awe about one another's words. Sometimes, too, the children who listened were children who were reluctant to tell their own stories. How often do we let children simply listen to one another, hearing each other's words, without interfering?

As Felman notes:

> [T]he critical suggestion I am making in this book is that people tell their stories (which they do not know or cannot speak) through others' stories...[21]

If, as Felman suggests, as a woman "I cannot write my story (I am not in possession of my own autobiography), but I can read it in the Other,"[22] there may also be children who cannot write their own stories. The listening then, may be a way into the telling, as these children find a way to their words.

Roy Schafer writes

> We are forever telling stories about ourselves.... Additionally, we are forever telling stories about others...we narrate others just as we narrate ourselves.... Consequently, telling "others" about "ourselves" is doubly narrative.[23]

There was other evidence, too, of ways that one child's story sometimes provided a way in for another child to "speak." They were, indeed, listening to one another, though it may not have been a listening of conscious

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[20]Donald H. Graves, *Writing: Teachers and children at work* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983.
[21]Felman, *What does a woman want?* 18.
[22]Ibid., 17.
[23]Quoted in Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the adventure of insight: Psychoanalysis in contemporary culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 99.

intention; it may have been peripheral, along the edges. Often their stories would echo one another--certain themes would arise and spread like gossip. Topics never discussed together as a class, such as the Egg stories.

I did not ask them to tell stories about eggs. Easter was far away in the future and, to my knowledge, none of the children were watching cartoon series revolving around egg characters. But the children began to tell stories...

> Once there was two teeny tiny eggs. And they had to do something...
>
> One time my dad was real. Then he turned into a duck. And he hatched an egg...
>
> An egg has arms and legs. It's Humpty Dumpty...
>
> There once was a little egg and he lost his mom.
>
> I like cracking eggs...

There was an intrigue with eggs, a magic, a mystery. At the time, I made no connection between this collection of stories, and another pool of stories which preceded it, where the stories began, typically, like this:

> Once upon a time there was a giraffe that did not know how to have a baby.
>
> One day there was a puppy and two other puppies. And they didn't know how to get a baby.

Eggs, questions of "the getting of babies," the "secrets and mysteries" of the beginnings of life were perhaps the real curiosities and questions which were being explored in these stories. And yet, no child ever asked me directly any of those questions, and I misread this "thread," busy as I was with the daily details of the classroom.

The egg and "facts of life" example illustrate what happens to me, too, when I am a part of a writing community, when I share my work with others

and listen, too. Our ideas begin to mix, to blend; we make connections, we pick up threads and questions of personal meaning and significance, incorporating these into our own work, in our own way. Sometimes, as well, I find myself writing phrases, lines, expressions that I think I have created and then discover that I have taken them intact from the work of another, without awareness. Somehow they have entered into memory and found a home there. The notion that our writing is solely our own is fallacious. Our words are used, "smeared with daily use."[24] They echo with the meanings of others, the particular phrasings we have heard, or read. Of course, we put our own markings on the words, and it may not be possible to excavate their histories, but we alone have not invented them, they are palimpsest.[25] As Foucault proposes, a single "author" of a particular work does not truly exist, a work may be singular, but never original, it is "filled" the work of others.[26] If, too, we are recreating ourselves in writing, we may also be creating possibilities for others.

As Grumet observes:

> No one knows alone. We speak in a world already spoken. We see in a world already seen. It is through relation that we gain human consciousness and form the figure/ground discriminations that enable us to share a meaningful world with other people.[27]

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[24]Adrienne Rich, "Someone is writing a poem," in *The best writing on writing*, ed. Jack Heffron (Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1994), 31.
[25]Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes, "Palimpsest is a surface erased, but imperfectly erased, with old words visible, perhaps readable and interpretable under the new ones." In *The pink guitar: Writing as feminist practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 111.
[26]Discussed in *Understanding curriculum*, ed. William F. Pinar, William M. Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter M. Taubman (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).
[27]Madeleine R. Grumet, "The play of meanings in the art of teaching," *Theory into Practice* 32, no. 4 (1993), 207.

She maintains that children bring to school their feelings about learning from home, learning that takes place within relationships, family. Grumet views the work in schools as necessarily "work in a community."

Writing, as with all activities which take place in schools, occurs within an intertextual fabric of relation. But how often we forget, and how little of this is mentioned or acknowledged in curriculum documents, in pre-service teacher training, in our own daily plans. We write to create connection, revealing a little of our private selves to the public world; and we write within a complex social milieu when we tell our stories in schools. I think of Jennifer, who makes stories to find belonging and acceptance with the girls whose friendship she desires, and of Anna whose sudden departure created a tear in the fabric of our relations, changing the tapestry that was our class community. And Bobby, for whom, possibly, relation may be the only way to writing and story--or what may eventually move him away to a place within the margins of school. And of course, all the other children whose stories I have not told, yet who were equally as important in our "community of practice," and whose stories weave into the larger story of our classroom, and the story I write, or which, perhaps, writes me.

In my own inquiry and writing, as well, there have been many shared connections. I have not written in isolation from the world, the classroom, or a context. There were relationships which led me to this project, and many resulting from it. The friends who invited me to witness and converse about their own writing projects, and others who corresponded with me (through letters and E-mail) about writing; the teaching colleagues who both confirmed and challenged my interpretations and observations; the parents in my classroom who shared information and stories about their daughters and sons. And, of course, the children who trusted enough to share their

stories and their lives with me over a year together in the classroom. I hope, too that my "personal" interpretation of writing will make a connection to "someone else's private life."

Writing as a creative and interpretive act can compose possibilities, open up a window to new worlds, help us to explore possible selves. The English translation of Daniel Pennac's book about the pleasure and enchantment of reading (*Comme un Roman*) reads "Better than Life."[28] Through writing we might create a "better life," even if it may be fictive. "[T]he literary life is the loveliest one possible," writes Lamott.[29] Or, as one kindergarten child insists, the reasons for writing and story may be: "So the little kids can enjoy their lives."

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[28]Daniel Pennac, *Better than life*, trans. David Homel (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994).
[29]Lamott, *Bird by bird*, 232.

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