University of Alberta

Learning to Love the Mess:
An Autobiography of a Writing Teacher

by

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of teaching, writing, and living in, among, and across the lines and structures of teaching. In it, I explore autobiographically my own struggles to attend to, live, and bring forth life in the presence of demands for control, perfection, and efficiency in our schools and our world. I question and contemplate the structures placed around students, teachers, and writing in our schools. This research is coloured by hermeneutic, critical and feminist theorists, structuralism and post-structuralism, and ultimately takes on the hermeneutic imperative of researching toward solidarity and healing (Gadamer, 1975). Through this inquiry, I have come to realize the importance of seeing the world in new ways. Ultimately, it has become clear through this work that real life is filled with surprises, liminalities, frustrations, pains, darkness, and great light, and that to embrace (rather than contain) these things, is to embrace life itself.

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Finally, my parents, who taught me how to write, teach, and live; who love me, messy as I am.

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Introduction

Beginnings

Writing, Writers, The Writing Life – if this last is not an oxymoron. Is this subject like the many-headed Hydra, which grows two other subtexts as soon as you demolish one? Or is it more like Jacob's nameless angel, with whom you must wrestle until he blesses you? Or is it like Proteus who must be firmly grasped through all his changes? Hard to get hold of, certainly. Where to start? At the end called Writing, or the end called The Writer? With the gerund or the noun, the activity or the one performing it? And where exactly does one stop and the other begin?

- Margaret Atwood

I begin with a quotation from Margaret Atwood (2002) who wonders about lines: where should one start and where should one end when all is so wrapped up in all other things? I begin with this quotation because as I sit to introduce and structure this thesis, I wonder the same things:

Teaching, Teachers, The Teaching Life. Writing, Writers, the Writing Life. Where to begin? With the writing or the teaching? The teacher or the writer? The life or the living?

Or somewhere else entirely?

How I came to write this

When I was seventeen years old, I wrote in my yearbook that my future plan was to run a business and wear a suit. This had been my goal ever since I had abandoned my little girl's dream of being a marine biologist, and, as such, I went to university and began taking the courses necessary for a degree in business. However, quickly into the program and into my time as a part-time employee at a sales company, I realized that a program that was focused on bottom lines, quotas, and deadlines made me feel cold and hungry for more. I knew very quickly that I needed to be in a profession in which people--not pace, profit, and productivity--were central.

Soon after, I enrolled in the education program at the University of Alberta and was thrilled at the prospect of becoming part of a profession at whose core is the care and service of others. The classes on humanism and social justice planted a seed of hope within me and, unlike my experience in business, I felt warmed by the idea that my primary focus would be to help others and make a difference through my ability to interact and engage with others. I came away from the program armed with a degree and a passion to serve the children entrusted to my care. The school districts for which I interviewed echoed the voices of my University instructors and reiterated my duty as a teacher to individualize, differentiate, and provide for the unique needs of the students. As a young, idealistic teacher, I was thrilled by the apparent harmony between the theories in university, the values of the districts I hoped to work for, and my own values and beliefs as a human being, I felt warmed and satisfied that I had chosen the right

path.

However, throughout my work at school in university, I held tight to my previous self--a self that was focused on perfection, loved step-by-step instructions, and dwelt in a linear frame of mind. Each year, I strove to improve, struggling to maintain a perfect 4.0 GPA. While excited by and deeply committed to the teaching profession and the humanity that lives and breathes through it, my focus was once again on products and perfection, both terribly non-human things.

Once in the school system, I defined myself on my professionalism, my ability to follow each of the steps laid out for me by the government. I wrote down curricular objectives on each lesson plan; I did all that I was told to do in school and by the evaluation documents. I taught as if "good teaching" could be measured on a checklist. I spent three years in the classroom attempting to make teaching as clean as possible. I had perfect plans, clear expectations of behaviour--both students' and my own.

While this desire to make things look like they "should" manifested itself in many ways, as I reflect, I see it most clearly in my writing pedagogy. Like those who had taught me, I instructed my students to write clearly, purposefully, and according to a strict plan. I had them 1) brainstorm, 2) outline, 3) write, 4) revise, and 5) rewrite and 6) hand in. This, I understood, to be a process-based writing pedagogy--one focused not on the product, but on the steps leading up to the product. And yet, much of my time was spent checking that each paragraph in the final product had a clear topic sentence, a well-constructed thesis sentence, and use of the present tense. I assessed their writing as if a checklist could capture

all that makes "good writing." I encouraged the students to avoid the terrible "I" that too often sneaks its way into "academic writing." Writing like this should be clean, I told them. Objective. Clear. To the point (a point that is not *you* or *I*--a point that is the text and/or the theme).

So much of my teaching, then, taught students to ignore themselves, to never speak of themselves, to never really express themselves. It is no wonder their writing felt stale, formulaic, mechanical. It is no wonder they hated writing. No wonder they hated my class.

I hated teaching. I hated life. I hated myself. It all seemed so stale. Stagnant. Mechanical. Empty.

I felt afraid, worthless, lonely, and even deceived. It had become clear to me very early on that schools were much more like businesses than I could have ever imagined. With their constant focus on the future and emphasis on "performance and achievement…as a way of cultivating competitiveness between schools and districts" (Smith, 2009, p. 371), I knew deep down that the schools that I hoped would bring forth life (>L. *educare*) were driven not by belief in children, but rather by accountability, pace, and results. Strangely enough, I seemed aware even as a little girl that the business world had more cultural currency than nature when I abandoned my dream of studying the whales and the tides in favor of having schedules and a suit. Was I wise, or was I a victim at ten when I realized it was better to play the game and fall into industrial time than try to listen to the tides?

My story, sadly, is not unusual. Indeed, O'Brien and Schillaci (2002) encouraged researchers more than ten years ago to explore what was taking place in schools to change young teachers' views from "idealism to cynicism" (p. 36). For indeed, while advertisements that promote university education programs say to us: "become a teacher, change the world," all too often, the world of the schools changes teachers. They end up feeling vulnerable (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2007) angry (Britzman, 2007), depressed (Hammerness, 2008). And soon, they lose the vision, the passion, and the energy that they brought into a system that needs it.

In these spaces--those that Smith (2009) and Giroux (2005) see as dominated by forces that directly oppose the transformative hopes that have been ignited in new teachers--new teachers face resistance from administrations (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2007), colleagues (Athanases and de Oliveira, 2007), neoliberal and neoconservative policies and practices (Giroux 2005; Smith, 2009), and students (Tikva, 2010), all of which can become barriers to the transformative potential of their visions being realized. As a result, too often new teachers end up turning their backs on the transformative strategies and pedagogical tools that the literature tells us that they hold. In the face of these walls, they respond by rationalizing the use of less-pedagogical practices (Etheridge, 1988), abandoning humanistic discipline models in favour of behaviouristic ones (Kaya, Lundeen, and Wolfgang, 2010), and dancing between acquiescence, accommodation, and their own resistance (Smagorinsky, et. al., 2002), all of which can stand in their way of enacting a transformative and lively curriculum.

It is not surprising then, to me, that so many teachers leave the system and that those who choose to stay in the system often find themselves, as Jardine et al. (2003) says, "divorce[d]…from their bodies, from their feelings and intuitions, from their experiences and from each other" (p. 103). While teachers enter the profession to give students hope, to help students discover themselves, and to make a difference in the world, so many are troubled by the disconnect between their visions of humanistic, student-centred, and socially-just curricula teaching (Agarwal, et al., 2010; Etheridge, 1988; Hammerness, 2008, 2001, 2003; Kaya, et al., 2010; Ketter & Stoffel, 2008; McElhone, et al., 2009; Smagorinsky, et al., 2002) and the realities of the classroom and they find themselves frustrated by "the lack of success in enacting their visions" (McElhone, et al., 2009, p. 152).

Perhaps most unfortunately, Hammerness's (2001) findings indicate that those with the clearest visions and most vivid visions often perceive the greatest distance between vision and reality. The implications of this are tremendous: Seidel (2007) suggests that, in these spaces, "[i]t is easy for them…to feel like they are alone, or 'flaky,' or idealists with impossible visions" (p. 74) and Hammerness (2003) says new teachers see "that they and their students are powerless to reach [their visions]" (p. 45). Even the Alberta Teachers' Association (2010) in its Beginning Teacher Handbook tells young teachers: "You will need to decide if you can live with the difference between your dream of what teaching would be and the reality of what teaching is" (p. 79). It is no wonder that Ayers (2004) sees "the biggest challenge" for teachers to be "holding on to hope" (p. 127) which "can be exceedingly difficult--especially when the

discourse surrounding teaching and schools is so unendingly pessimistic" (p. 127).

It is not surprising then, that so many new teachers lose hope and either acquiesce, accommodate, or create their own resistance (Smagorinsky, et al., 2002), abandon humanistic models (Kaya, Lundeen, and Wolfgang, 2010), or rationalize less pedagogical practices (Etheridge, 1988), or that sadly so many others (a staggering 35% (Couture, 2009)) walk away.

But this sort of pessimism, helplessness, and belief that things cannot be changed is, as Freire (1998) writes, a "hatefully fatalistic" (p. 36) way of seeing the world. And if we believe that our schools need new teachers--particularly those whose visions are strongest--to sustain and renew our schools, then these are tragic statistics indeed.

Like so many teachers, however, I too left the profession. I walked away in hopes of finding new life. But instead of once again abandoning my dream to (con)serve (marine) life, I chose not to run away from education and attend law school as planned. Instead, I entered graduate school to explore what I saw as the inherent tension that exists between the desire to serve children and life itself and the structures and weights placed upon teachers as a result of our neoliberal, Cartesian, and Aristotleian inheritances.

It wasn't until I began writing in graduate school that I began to see life anew. As I began thinking and hoping and struggling, I began to see possibilities emerge. I began to see life emerge. As I let (for the first time in my educational career) the personal enter into my writing, I began to see that lines can be crossed

and healing can occur. As I sat beside professors and talked about my life, my goals, and my writing, all of a sudden, life began to unfold for me.

I found myself drawn to writing that spoke to what it means to live and dwell in the spaces of teaching amidst the demands to "cover the curriculum," to complete and compete, to achieve and perform. I was drawn to those who found themselves struggling in these (neoliberal) spaces and the expectations imposed upon them from within. Writers like Seidel and Jardine immediately stood out to me for their work spoke to these structures and lines as they existed in the Albertan context. More importantly, however, their work spoke to the ways that they chose to live in spite of the lines.

Background

We live in a world in which so much of our time is spent categorizing, organizing, and attempting to control life and its complexities. We walk down the aisles of a grocery store and see lines and categories and labels. We look at the gridlines of our cities and see neighborhoods, each with its unique name and selling features that distinguish it from the other neighbouring "Heights." We look at our schools and see students travelling to classrooms in groups: Grade 10s, Dash-Twos, Special Needs--as if all depends upon those names. Our schools are fragmented from "the real world," our work lives are kept separate from our private lives, and the young are kept distinct from the old.

David G. Smith (1999) sees this tendency to organize, categorize, and control as a product of our Aristotleian inheritance, one that maintains that understanding means sorting life into categories, lines, and specializations. A=A;

B=B. This notion continues into our Western world through Descartes who, Smith tells us, taught us to objectify the world. While orderly, Smith worries that this sort of mentality has brought forth "breakdown of genuine communication between persons and of relations between human and natural worlds" (p. 46). Jardine et al. (2006) too, worry that this has fragmented life itself.

Perhaps, then, it is more than coincidence that the Cartesian plane so resembles the fishing nets used by fishermen to catch, capture, control, and then subdue fish--catching, controlling, subduing life. And perhaps it is more than coincidence that both of these tools so closely resemble the timetables used in our schools--places in which life is categorized, controlled, and trapped like a fish in nets called "sciences," "humanities," or "the arts."

In a poem that so many of us read in school, William Carlos Williams tells us that "so much depends upon" all else--even things as simple as a red wheelbarrow in the rain. Yet, while English teachers have long shared these simple words with their students, it seems that the message of his poem is often left in the classroom. In our schools and beyond, it seems that the ways that all things depend upon one another is forgotten or ignored and instead replaced by specialization, categorization, and control. Teacher. Student. Principal. English Language Arts. Social Studies. Science. Reading. Writing. Grade 10. Grade 11. Grade 12. Personal Response. Critical Response. Poetry. Prose. The private and public, the spiritual and mundane--once ever entwined--are now divorced and alienated from one another (Welwood, 1992).

We see this in our English classrooms daily wherein we ask students to write "personally" or "critically," never both. We teach them that the "I" does not belong in academic writing. We teach them to box up their private lives so that they might complete that which needs to be complete so that they might succeed in the public space. We teach them to find answers. We teach them to write exams. So rarely do we teach them to understand their own needs and desires and choices. So rarely do we teach them to question. So rarely do we teach them to *live.*

In our teaching and our world, we want lines to be clear, boundaries to be strong. We rarely embrace the liminal, the borderline, the hermeneutic, the spiritual, the messy, the cyclical. We fear that which cannot be tied up, caught, put in a net, or a box, or on a line.

So in these spaces, more often than not, isolation, fragmentation, and alienation rather than interdependency have taken over, insofar as to keep our schools "clean," "efficient," and "orderly." In our schools, we still live out the tradition from F.W. Taylor (1911 in Naqvi and Jardine, 2007) whose curriculum theory organizes schools like an assembly line, where students are pushed along on a line of time toward an end where their education might become "finished." Students and teachers alike are expected to follow the militaristic management model that Ralph Tyler (1945) brought forth in the post-war years, when he suggested that "civilian educators [can] learn from training programs of the armed forces" (p. 502) so that they might bring forth clean and orderly instruction. With Tyler's (1945) recommendations, our schools and those to whom our schools

report became focused on objectives, targets, and deadlines, and the language in our schools' documents both reflected and perpetuated that change. He wrote: "Unless objectives are clearly formulated and become the primary guide to direct learning activities, there is danger that education will become a routine operation, that the objectives will be forgotten, and that the effectiveness of instruction will be largely reduced" (p. 499).

Our schools are thus organized and administered in such a way as to maintain order, "secure" (learning) environments, "establish routines", and "discipline" those who do not "fall in line" (GoA, 1997). This is a frightening thought, indeed, for given to us in these words, then, is a violence that looms beneath the surface, a violence to which we, as educators, are intimately related. Under mechanical, business, and military models, our schools become assembly lines, boardrooms, and battlefields--places concerned with products, money, and death above all else.

So, while our industrialized world seems to demand a specialized and categorical organization of the world to fulfill its requirements for efficiency and accountability, I cannot help but worry that to deny the way that all depends upon everything else is to deny life itself.

To do reimagine education is thus, Jardine et al. (2006) write, a "matter of life and death, of liveliness and deadliness" (p. 100). Welwood (1992) concurs: "Human life on this planet can survive and prosper only if there is a radical shift in consciousness" (p. xvi). We need to reimagine life not as something that can be controlled and contained with "conventional categories of explanations" (Smith,

1999, p. 46), but as something that lives and breathes "beyond the boundaries of what is known" (Smith, 1999, p. 46), where the "Other" and the "I" are eternally and inevitably linked, as are all things in all places and in all times. To do this not only seems to be of great educational and philosophical importance, but of personal importance as well.

So in this work, I attempt to reflect on the ways that I am and was once situated in all of these worlds. I question my own words and experiences and look for the possibilities for new life to emerge out of the mess that was (and is) my writing, teaching, and living in schools.

Methodology and Questions

Jackie Seidel (1991) laments that so much of educational research "forgets to say that living is difficult work. It clamours loudly to show that there is something wrong and that it can be fixed" (p. 11). While, yes, this at times has its place, this is not the kind of work that I wanted to do, this is not the work that I committed myself to when I committed myself to dwell in the spaces where life can live on unencumbered by traditions of rationality, order, chronology, and products.

To Jardine et al., (2006), understanding "doesn't mean simply running through a long list of examples of a theory that is already fully understood and meaningful without those examples" (p. xiv). Instead, understanding "means showing, again and again, how new examples enrich, transform, and correct what one thought was fully understood and meaningful" (p. xiv). Rather than understanding by grouping, or putting things in boxes, it is a matter of

understanding how all parts relate to one another--how understanding is fluid and permeates our very being.

This way of seeing the world takes me away from the structures, lines, and formulas that I have been so comfortable with--and yet, also so uncomfortable with--for so long. My research, then, is hermeneutic in the sense that it is

> not a kind of writing that seeks to solve a problem or to arrive at a solution or to objectify life into an easily comprehensible or describable form, but rather a method of picking away at a concern, worrying around its edges, following through on thoughts, waiting on insight. (Seidel, 2007, p. 5)

My research speaks to the struggles of living, teaching, and writing, rather than attempting to solve them or clean them up.

So how does one do this in a world that depends so much on categories and clean lines? Seidel (2006) suggests that we must "not be distracted," to "remember our connections to the earth, to all of life, through time into the future, and to beginnings long in the past" (p. 1913). Jardine (1990) seems to agree--he reminds his student teachers that "everything came to be co-present" (p. 213) and "nestle[s] around" (p. 213) everything else. By examining the complexities--going beyond "the (inter)face value" (Turkle, 2004, p.105), we can begin to see the "way in which the Earth is our abode, our dwelling, and how our lives as teachers are an integral part of this dwelling" (Jardine, 1990, p. 215). However, as Seidel (2006) makes clear, this is a difficult task, for it often becomes easier to just play the game and stay on the surface. However, with deliberate attention (and

struggle), perhaps we may see beyond the labels and into the content within. To do this, Welwood (1992) says, we must be aware of our purpose in life, and in our schools, which is "not to conquer and control but to serve something larger than ourselves: life itself and our fellow beings" (p. xvi).

With this in mind, I have found that narrowing my research down to a single research question--a single problem--is problematic in itself, for I have come to see that all questions branch out to others, living and breathing their way into other spaces. Yet, I have come to realize at the root of all my work is the question of *how we (teachers and students) might live in schools in more authentic ways*. This question is that from which all of my others branch out.

And so I ask in this paper, among many other questions: what would happen if we were authors of our own experiences in schools? What would happen if we wrote through the lines that write on us? What would happen if we wrote through the lines that attempt to keep things clean and orderly? And what would happen if students and teachers lived together in the mess that is learning, teaching, writing, and living?

The following are some of the lines that I attempt to write through in this work:

- The lines between theory and practice: I wonder how writing and teaching differently can help to bridge the ideal and the real. Can we find a horizon (a praxis) where theory and practice meet? And at that horizon might teachers and students live more humanly?

- The lines between student and teacher: I wonder how living and writing "professionally" and objectively might impose violence upon life and the young. Can students and teachers live and learn together in a way that oppresses neither subject nor life?
- The categories and standards for "good teaching:" I wonder what might happen if I focused less on perfection and rules and focused more on life? What would happen if I refused to be written on and instead I wrote my own teaching standards?
- The lines of time: I ask: what might happen if we moved from industrial time--clock-time, *chronos*, objective time--to a more subjective time? What would happen if instead of constantly looking toward the future I began to see the world cyclically? Or began to contemplate or meditate on the present? For indeed, "[t]he children are coming. Today," Jackie Seidel (1991) writes. So, what if we shifted from chronos to kairos--shifted from seeing the world as bounded in universal time, to seeing the world as "filled with opportunity (Smith, 1986, p. 5)?
- The neo-liberal focus on products, grades, accountability and efficiency: I ask: would teaching be a better place if we let life live--unpackaged, unrestrained, messy as it really is?

By asking these questions and living them out in my teaching and writing, I hope that I might see if there might be a better life for me in our schools. I hope that I might see if there might be a better place for children.

Method

To explore these questions and whittle away at their edges, I take a cue from Penny Kittle (2008) who has "written beside" her students for decades. However, while in *Write Beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing,* Kittle focuses on how changing her teaching practices to follow a Writer's Workshop model might help students become better writers and live better in schools, I hope to explore how writing alongside my students might help students and teachers *alike* live more "fully and humanly" (Seidel, 2007) in our schools. Unlike Kittle, whose focus was on students' responses to new forms of writing instruction, I examine how I respond as a human and a teacher to writing and teaching in more authentic ways in the classroom.

I stand on the work of many writing teachers and pedagogical giants who have come before me to create a (loose) plan for my year that focuses on the big questions of writing and living in this world:

- From the work of Wiggins and McTighe (2005) and the ideas presented in *Understanding By Design,* I organized my year around the "Enduring Understandings" I hope that students will develop about writing and finding their place in the world. Loosely, my courses are arranged around the following "Big Ideas:"
    - What is my voice and is my voice important?
    - What does it mean to think critically and creatively?

    - How do we express our ideas in ways that others will hear?
    - How do we appreciate others' ideas and words?
    - How can we live better together in this world?

- From Kittle (2008) and Murray (1989, 1982) I borrowed the idea of a writer's notebook. I ask that all students in my classes write each day without censoring and without stopping for a period of time each class. While they write, I write with them. Together, we share and celebrate these entries in class.
- From Kittle (2008) I borrowed the idea of writing letters in response to my students' work.
- From Leggo (1989), I borrowed the idea of writing about my writing. I spent weekends of the first semester of my school year reflecting on my week of teaching and writing alongside my students.
- And from Jardine et al. (2003, 2006), I borrow a hermeneutic approach to understanding those reflections.

In this way, my research borrows from narrative and hermeneutic research traditions, each of which are founded on understanding self and others. Leah Fowler (2009) explains that narrative is a "method of research that reveals our relationship to language and sense-making and that informs our lives, our work, and our relationships" (p. 96 -97). In our words and our stories, she explains, we reveal ourselves. And, as such, she sees narratives to be "tremendously rich places

to learn about the structure and nature of ourselves and others as we live through time" (p. 96). She suggests that these insights take us beyond ourselves and bring forth pedagogical and curricular insights: "We move beyond any particular story toward a more encompassing understanding of what it is to teach, to write about that teaching without traditional constraints, and to read personal narratives" (p. 100).

Yet, Fowler (2009) also illuminates the difficulties of this kind of work. Writing like this is inherently biased and inherently flawed. For indeed in our writerly choices of diction and point of view we (re)shape stories and construct new realities. So she asks: where does the narrative end and craft begin? Does craft blur the narrative lines? She writes: "Questions of boundary/relationship between fiction and truth are ancient but critical as well: Did this really happen? How much of this is true? What are the facts in this story?" (p. 107).

These are indeed problematic openings if one is on a great search for objective truth--fatal cracks in a scientific exploration. However, objective truth is not something that I am after in this work. From Gadamer (1975) on, hermeneutics has grounded its purpose and focus in understanding how we might bring about "human solidarity rather than objectivity" (Smith, 1992, p. 102). Hermeneutics understands that we are in the middle of nature, our world, and the problems that surround us, and chooses not to step outside in order to presume objectivity. Instead, the hermeneutic task, as Jardine (2000) writes, requires us "to recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living, a life that is not secured by the methods we can wield" (p. 116). This is, like all hermeneutic

writing, "is not a kind of writing that seeks to solve a problem or to arrive at a solution or to objectify life into an easily comprehensible or describable form, but rather a method of picking away at a concern, worrying around its edges, following through on thoughts, waiting on insight" (Seidel, 2007, p. 5). In this kind of research then, I hope to "contemplate life in its wholeness and complexity" (Ellis, 1998, p. 19) rather than in categories and boxes.

Hermeneutic research, then, blurs the edges of a topic, allowing for fluidity between the parts and the wholes, allowing for movement rather than containment, opening rather than pinning down. Understanding, hermeneutically understood, is a constant spiraling back and forth between the "specific and the general, the micro and the macro" (Smith, 1990, p. 190) that has no beginning and no end. This, the hermeneutic circle, is the beauty and also the deep complication of hermeneutics, for Smith (1984) writes: "There is no time at which one can say with assurance, or in a foundationalist manner, 'It is over and I have got it right'" (p. 387). Instead, the interpreter must always acknowledge that understanding is always open, can never be contained, and must always be allowed to breathe – working in us, through us, and out into our world. While this is a difficult task in our "global times" in which "mastery" and excellence are valued highly (Jardine, 2000), it is a humble and honest way of researching that is part of who we are. For hermeneutics, it has been said, is more than a way of understanding, but our way of "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 2010).

So often in research, Gadamer (1975) argues, we make method an idol (Gadamer, 1975) – a false god – that exists both elevated and encased as

something to be worshipped without question, change, or interpretation. This can, as Jardine (2000) argues, lead to the distorted view that "that one does not really understand the world, oneself, of others without [technical] knowledge" (Jardine, 2000, p. 124). But I am not seeking here to become a scientist of my own experience; I am seeking to become an author of my own experience and a student of my world. So, instead of seeing these blurry lines of truth and fiction as dangerous to the validity of this work, I instead choose to see these as opportunities, for it is in these liminal spaces--in the diction and tone and craft that are inextricable from autobiographical work--that hermeneutic possibilities emerge.

In this way, writing has become its own form of inquiry. Like Seidel (2007), "during the process of writing…I was grabbed, seized" (p. 4) by words and phrases in my personal reflections. And out of these moments, I have found fertile ground that is rich with raw material that will nourish my growth as student and teacher. I have meditated on these personal accounts as a way of coming to know and coming to understand my own experience.

Lens

I have viewed these writings and thoughts through hermeneutic, critical, feminist and, at times, ecological and spiritual lenses. While this may seem to be a messy mish-mash of theories and philosophies, this mish-mash both speaks to my journey and my beliefs about the world and what it means to understand and live in it. As a student once remarked to David Smith (1999): "It's all hermeneutics, isn't it?" Indeed, "[w]henever we are engaged in interpreting our lives," Smith

(1999) writes, “we are engaging in [hermeneutics]” (p. 27). It *is* all hermeneutics, and if what Heiddegger (2010) says about interpretation being our way of “being in the world”--then it is all *living*--messy and filled with overlaps and connections and contradictions as that may be.

Form and Structure

And so, this paper unfolds itself in unpredictable, illogical, and—yes—messy ways, but I have come to realize that we cannot ignore that life itself unfolds in these very ways. I want writing that *lives* and lets live. I want teaching that *lives* and lets live. This is what I have committed myself to in this piece and this year of my teaching life.

This paper is not divided into clean chapters or the typical five-part structure that is time-honoured in academia. The literature review weaves its way in and out of the analysis and the data. And its structure follows three threads that are hard to separate and thus weave together to illuminate the ways that teaching, writing, learning, and living, are all connected. This paper speaks to the ways that the personal, the intellectual, the academic, the private, the public and the theoretical cannot be separated. I offer few conclusions, many questions, and even more hopes.

I will admit openly that I am not sure of the answers to these questions yet. To be precise, the writing of this paper has opened up more questions and possibilities than is has generated answers and solutions. But I see writing always as an attempt. And if what writers like Donald Murray, Annie Dillard, Peter Elbow, and others tell me about writing is true, the process of writing, the asking

of questions, and the waiting for answers—or more questions—to arise, is a key part of "coming to know" and "coming to be."

So I have reminded myself in light of these things, through the process of writing this paper that my focus must not be on how I might *do* my research (or how I might write, or teach or live) but rather on how I can let these endeavours *live*, *breathe*, and *generate life*. I have reminded myself to focus not on what it all might look like when finished, but rather on what *I* might look like as these things "become." I have reminded myself, as I struggle, that perhaps by letting truth live fully and freely in its richness, creativity, and generativity rather than containing it through lines and method and product, I might thrive. And perhaps even more importantly, "life itself might have a chance" (Smith, in Jardine, 2000).

For this reason, this kind of writing--the writing that comes from a place of longing, a place of hope and desire--is revolutionary.

I may not know yet what that revolution will look like. I may not know what it will feel like or what it may do to me as a teacher and a teacher of writing, but I hope that it will continue to make me feel something. I hope that it will continue to make me feel alive.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study will not directly involve human participants and will, instead, involve my own reflections and narratives, ethical risks will be relatively minimal. However, because my reflections and narratives at times reveal interactions with the students I have taught, I have used pseudonymns to protect their identities.

That said, the written word is inherently political (Barthes, 2009; Foucault, 1977; Plato, 2010), and, therefore, it is important to consider the possible harm that might come from my own written account (Magolda & Weems, 2002). It is important for me to recognize that though hermeneutic philosophy might suggest that knowledge can never be fixed or pinned down, others may read my account as Truth. If we acknowledge some wisdom in Plato's (2010) understanding of the dangers of accepting the written word as Truth (as I have in this work) then I must be aware that my work, without a reader's active engagement, could indeed work upon his spirit in a way that may prove to be harmful. To help avoid this, I hope to make it clear in my "pedagogical commitments" section (to be used instead of a "conclusion") that my work is best read with both the suspicion and generosity (Ricouer in Prasad, 2005) that I hope that I have used to interpret the words of others.

Perhaps the greatest risk is the risk that I, myself, might face as a researcher and a teacher. Each of my discoveries hold the potential to shake up and disturb what I once thought to be true. I have found often that, as a teacher and as a human being, I was indeed acting unknowingly in ways that I had never considered. Throughout the process, I have felt angered, frustrated, and alienated from the school system than I had felt before. On that same note, those who encounter my findings who may soon enter the profession or those who currently work in the system may feel the same way, and could potentially even walk away before even entering the system. However, my hope was and is to always keep in

mind the purpose of my research, which is, above all else, to find healing. And I hope by making that clear throughout, I will save others and myself from harm.

A Caveat

I am aware, that this, in some ways, is a somewhat self-serving and self-centred project. For indeed much of this work is to determine whether I might enjoy teaching more, if I might live in schools with less anxiety, less fear, and less anger if I were to rethink and reimagine the ways that I teach and teach writing. Indeed, I struggled with this early on in my research, for like my students, I have been taught to ignore the "I." I worried about the tendency for "navel-gazing" that can emerge out this sort of research. I worried that I would have nothing to say.

But researchers are beginning to acknowledge the fact that in order to be good teachers for students, we must find balance, joy, and heart in our own lives. We need to keep our fires burning in order to inspire others. Tompkins (1999) writes: "Teaching is a service occupation, but it can only work if you discover at a certain point, how to make teaching serve you. Staying alive in the classroom and avoiding burnout means finding out what you need from teaching at any particular time" (p. 23). Leggo (2004) agrees, saying: "We need a healthy inner life if we are going to help others develop healthy inner lives" (p. 33). I lived in schools for three years with an unhealthy inner life, ignoring or numbing the desires and worries that stirred in my heart. I lived in schools for three years serving others and others' words without ever serving myself. It didn't work. I, like so many others, burnt out--lost my spirit, my joy, and my ability to inspire (>L. *in spiritus*) others. So I undertake this research keeping in mind Seidel's (2007)

understanding of the purpose of writing: that it might "at the very least…improve the inquirer's own quality of life and mind (p. 6). This is messy work, but it makes me feel alive.

A Final Introductory Thought

In her account of the writing experience, *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard (1989) tells us of the power of words to pick away at the structures that stand firmly in place:

> The line of words is a hammer. You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly, everywhere. After giving many years' attention to these things, you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck. (Dillard, 1989, p. 3)

While Dillard speaks here of the rewriting and revising process, of knocking down old introductions and well-written sentences, I hope that she will have no qualms allowing her words to speak to the ways in which writing can help us to rewrite our teaching stories.

This is a writing teacher's story of knocking down walls, living within, between, and through lines, and of learning to love the mess.

Duck.

Writing the Self

Introduction

In this section, I write to explore what it means to write (and write with children). I write to find meaning in my own chaos. I write to understand my struggles in schools. I write to connect with others. I write to change myself, my teaching, and (hopefully) change my world.

When I speak about writing, here, I speak about authentic writing, the messy personal writing that overflows out of experience and surprise that is so different from the academic writing we are taught to embrace. When I speak about writing, here, I speak about the writing that allows us to *live.*

Digging

August 25, 2012

I am a writer. So I will write.

I am a writer.

Now, this is, perhaps, a bold claim to make in a paper that (on some level) will be evaluated and judged for its display of writerly skill, but it is something that I have come to realize cannot be denied without dark repercussions. Bold as I may be to call myself a writer, however, I am not, by any means, bold enough to claim that I am a *good* writer, or even that writing comes easily to me. For indeed, writing has been for me a cause of much frustration, many tears, and piles of wasted paper. This thesis itself is a demonstration of that: I have struggled for three years to make sense of the words that have found themselves on my

computer screen. I have thrown out countless iterations of this work and have cried many hours over lost words and (what I often considered to be) lost time.

However, I have come to realize in writing this thesis that writing is the way in which I make sense of the world, the way in which I make sense of others, the way in which I make sense of myself. I, like Grumet (1999), believe that "I organize my story as I organize my world" (p. 27) and organize my world as I organize my story. Writing, as difficult and messy as it may be, is my way of lifting myself out of the darkness of my own isolation as a human being and into the world--wholly, and completely.

Not too long ago, after a sudden realization during a counseling session, I found myself pulled over on the side of the road no less than three times on my way home, fingers frantically trying to process and make sense of what had just happened, ever grateful that I had my laptop in my car. As I wrote, that small realization led to another, which led into more, which finally led into a sense of relief and satisfaction like that of a hungry traveller after his first full meal in weeks. Like eating or breathing, I know that writing is something that I need to do to thrive.

But as a new teacher, I wrote nothing.

In my first years, though I, like Donald Murray (1989), felt a "deep, psychological need" (p. 253) to write, I spent my days following others' words. For instead of writing in our schools, we (as teachers and as students) are *written on.* With standards' documents, policies, evaluation criteria, and so on teachers and students alike are covered in the black ink of others' creations. Prior to even

walking into the classroom, new teachers are confronted with evaluation documents, new teacher handbooks, and survival guides each filled with the language of the military, performance, industry, and other powerful discourses that inform new teachers of the ways to achieve clarity, perfection, and continued life within the system. While these documents may indeed be helpful, Plato (2010) warns that by unquestionably seeing the words of others as Truth, we may fail to realize that we might be staring at an "illusory and deceptive" wall of shadows.

Though writers such as Augustine (2010) and, later, Barthes (2009) suggest that reflection may help us to live free from the "bondage" we face at the hands of signs that we "pay homage" to without understanding (Augustine, 2010, p. 49), in the struggle to keep afloat in my first year, I found very little time to eat lunch, much less reflect upon the words that were given to me. Instead, I saw these words--these easy-to-remember sayings--as The Way to keep alive in the system. As such, I quickly internalized the mandates, often believing that the words given to me were not only The Truth, but that the ideas were indeed my own--indeed part of my very *being*. I defined myself by my professionalism, my performance, and my ability to follow the instructions in the handbooks, evaluation documents, and programs of study--not on my ability to *live well* with others and myself. I let these documents be authors of my self.

Like the women Gilbert and Gubar (2010) write about--"imprisoned within texts," folded and "wrinkled" by pages "which perpetually tell her how she *seems"* (p. 1932)--I quickly became the archetypal madwoman in the attic:

trapped in darkness, struggling with "isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2010, p. 1931). Living a life that had been written for me but feeling inside a deep anxiety with teaching as it had been written, each day after class, I would race home and pour myself a glass of wine in hopes that it would numb me and the "funny desires stirring inside me (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short to bring out something new)" (Cixous, 2010, p. 1943), hating both myself and the stranger that I had become. Wrought with the "anxiety of authorship that [is] endemic" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2010, p. 1931) to teaching, I wondered: perhaps I'm crazy for thinking that it might be--could be--something else.

While deep within I knew that part of me longed for a pen and paper--my survival tools--I couldn't find them in the stacks of work that "had to get done." I remember writing in my Annual Professional Growth Plan (the one mandated piece of reflective writing teachers must do in a year) that my goal was to write every day. It is a testament to my need to write that even early on in my first year, I knew that I was missing something in schools. I knew that I was missing thinking. I knew that I was missing myself. And yet, despite my awareness and my goal, I never wrote.

Japanese author Haruki Murakami (2009) likens writing to his need to run, saying: "if you don't exercise, your muscles will naturally weaken, as will your bones" (p. 42). If you don't write, your muscles will weaken. As will your mind. As I existed in schools, rushing to keep up with the pace and the course, I never

once picked up my running shoes--my pen and my page--and so I slowed down. My mind weakened. My spirit faded. My energy disappeared.

Composition theorists like Sondra Perl (1983) and others today, see writing as more than simply a product of thought, but rather as a "way of thinking." The authors of *The Writer's Mind: Writing as a Mode of Thinking* (1983) explain in their introduction that "it is the act of shaping thought *in writing* that makes possible the elaboration of ideas, the establishing of relationships among those ideas, and the consequent manipulations of those relationships that we associate with complex thought" (xi). Indeed, as we write, they say, we organize, shape, construct, analyze, and synthesize our world.

So while I failed to put words on paper in my first years teaching, I was failing not simply to create pieces of work to read and record my experiences as a beginning teacher, I was failing to *think*.

It is no wonder that I so often felt as if my brain was "mushy."

And it was no wonder that I couldn't imagine that there could be any other way to live in our schools. For as writers write, "they repercieve their material or problems" (Schor, 1983, p. 124), and as they play with the tools of their craft, they "perceive new connections that can frequently lead to unexpected insights" (McQuade, 1983, p. 225). Without words, I could not imagine that there could be another way. Essayist Annie Dillard in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (2008), puts it this way: "The mind—the culture—has two little tools, grammar and lexicon: a decorated sand bucket and a matching shovel. With these we bluster

about the continents and do all the world's work. With these we try to save our very lives" (p. 24).

Deep down, I knew this. I knew that I needed to write to save my life in schools. And yet, as aware of it as I was, as much as I knew that writing is and was for me, like Murray (1989), "more than a vocation; it is a need; it is the way in which I make meaning of my world, the way I collect and relate, explore and comprehend, speculate and test in a dialogue with myself that never ends," (p. 209) it is also something that I must discipline myself to do. For indeed, I know it to be a struggle.

Writing does not come easy for me as if it were water from a well or a spring. Writing for me is a messy act of groping for ideas and struggling to make sense of whispers in the wind. Even Murakami (2009), a great novelist, struggles to find the spring out of which all ideas might flow: "I have to pound the rock with a chisel and dig out a deep hole before I can locate the source of creativity. To write a novel I have to drive myself hard physically and use a lot of time and energy" (p. 43). Writing takes discipline, energy, time, and drive.

So in order to do this physically and mentally challenging work, writers have to carve out space. They need space to focus, breathe, and "wait for the well to fill." Murakami (2009) explains:

> Focus—the ability to concentrate all your limited talents on whatever's critical at the moment. Without that you can't accomplish anything of value, while if you can focus effectively, you'll be able to compensate for an erratic talent or even a shortage

> of it. I generally concentrate on work for three or four hours every morning. I sit at my desk and focus totally on what I'm writing. I don't see anything else, I don't think about anything else. Even a novelist who has a lot of talent and a mind full of great new ideas probably can't write a thing if, for instance he's suffering a lot of pain from a cavity. The pain blocks concentration. (p. 78)

But in the midst of the running and rushing and crowded timetables and hallways of our schools, where is a teacher--a writer--to find this space to focus and attend to herself and the world? Where is a teacher to find the time to grab hold of the shovel and begin digging?

Walking on the Earth

September 8, 2012

I spent the week exposing myself to my students through writing. I sat with them as they wrote each day and wrote with them. I shared my writing with them--messy, personal, and bad as it may have been. I didn't work to spend the week working to make myself appear to be an expert. I didn't spend the week working from the top to ensure that they behaved as I wanted them to behave, I spent the week figuring out how I could allow them to have a place – the most important place – in the classroom. I spent the week trying to be with them. And it felt good.

In her book, *Write Beside Them*, teacher Penny Kittle (2008) describes her experiences teaching writing in high schools, explaining:

> For years I had expected my students to go on swimming without me while I barked orders from my chaise lounge. I told myself I had no other choice, for I had too many other things to be doing: important, busy things like managing workshop, and conferencing with students. I had lots of ideas to share in these conferences, but no idea if they'd really work with writing—or even if they'd help the writer. My teaching was all tell, no show. (p. 7)

For so many of us—certainly for me—teaching is often just like this: a song and dance of telling students how and when and why it is important to write.

Rarely do we *show* them how writing can save lives.

The word pedagogy comes from the Greek words *pais,* meaning child and *ago,* meaning to lead. And so, the earliest pedagogues were servants who walked with children, leading them to spaces of learning. Pedagogy, then, is a servile act, one that involves, at its core, "walking alongside the young" (Smith, 1999) and leading them to understanding. This image of a servant walking alongside a young child is one that resonates within me, for it is so different than the image I had of myself as a writing teacher in my first three years. For so long, I saw that the best instruction was me standing above children, at the front of the classroom, at the white board, explaining (in what I thought was an exciting and challenging way, of course). But to serve is to be at someone's feet – to abandon all ties to and height of the divine and take your place at the foot of someone else. It is to be humble, to be of the earth (>L. *humus*). And yet, so often when we think of pedagogy, we think of what we have that will elevate us--the magic powers and

secret weapons that make us more divine. But to be a servant--to be a pedagogue--is to be *humble, vulnerable,* not godlike. To be a pedagogue is to be *with* the young.

Kittle's (2008) efforts to "write beside them" position herself in this way. She writes with the young and, in so doing, allows herself to be teacher and student. She sits beside her students and writes with them every day. When they have pen to paper, so does she. When they revise, so does she. When they sit and wait for the lightning to hit, she is there waiting with her lightning rod held high.

But to position oneself in such a way requires a risk to be taken by the one who hopes to serve. This is not a simple task. For one, it requires a recognition that the teacher is not *better* than the student but instead a humble servant on a walk toward discovery. And secondly, it requires the teacher to abandon much of what he/she has thought to be true of teaching. This is a difficult task, to be sure. Kittle (2008) struggled with the realization that "what [she] had been teaching [her] students for weeks was of no help" (p. 6). She struggled as she finally came to the realization that "you really can't teach writing unless you write yourself" (p. 7).

It is a risky task to abandon the comfort and control of directing a class and to take a seat in the row. But there is no greater gift that we can give to our students, for when we write with students, Donald Graves (1983) explains, we help to dispel the myths that students (and sometimes the myths that we, as teachers) hold about writing: writing is a product, writing is easy, writing comes "from on high," writing is "witchcraft and alchemy" (Graves, 1983, p. 43).

Important as that may be, the gift is more than that. As we write with students, we grow and learn and feel the pains of real writing. As we write with students, we remember that we too are writers--writers on a search for meaning and connection and expression.

Exposure

September 27, 2012 (an unsent letter)

Dear 20-2s,

I always wonder when I write with you if I should share my work. I wonder if you need to hear my writing – my mistakes, my stories, my fears, my words.

I fear that I am giving you too much – making myself too vulnerable – sharing more with you than I would share with even some of my closest friends. Should a teacher do this? What are the consequences? Will you lose respect for me? Will you think it's lame? Will you think that I'm weak or not teacher-y enough? I worry about all these things but again, something in me tells me that I shouldn't stop.

Is it building community? Is it making things better? Is it helping me as a teacher? As a student? As a human being?

To write yourself is to expose yourself. It is to expose flaws and fears and weaknesses and darkness. For these are the things we write about. Margaret

Atwood (2002) surveyed writers and found that while all use different metaphors (ah, so like writers!) to describe the writer's task, at the core of each description was the notion that "writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it…" (p. xxiv). She writes:

> One said [writing] was like walking into a labyrinth, without knowing what monster might be inside; another said it was like groping through a tunnel; another said it was like being in a cave – she could see daylight through the opening, be she herself was in darkness. Another said it was like being under water, in a lake or ocean. Another said it was like being in a completely dark room, feeling her way: she had to rearrange the furniture in the dark, and then when it was all arranged the light would come on. Another said it was like wading through a deep river, at dawn or twilight; another said it was like being in an empty room which was nevertheless filled with unspoken words, with a sort of whispering; another said it was like grappling with an unseen being or entity… (p. xxiii).

Each of these writers describes the vulnerability and exposure and unknowing that exists at the core of the writer's task.

Writing, then, is not a simple task, for the disorientation, exposure, and "inability to see one's way forward" (Atwood, 2002, p. xxiii) is not something we as a society, embrace. Indeed, this sort of vulnerability is something that we rarely even speak of. Brene Brown (2008), a social worker, scholar, and speaker, asserts,

"[w]e equate vulnerability with weakness, and, in our culture, there are very few things we abhor more than weakness" (p. 77). And so we hide that which we feel makes us vulnerable: those things we do not know or understand, those things that make us appear that we are not "in control," those things that have been socially and culturally constructed to "trigger shame" (Brown, 2008).

But Brown (2008) says that acknowledging vulnerability--acknowledging our own struggles and negotiations with darkness--is a great act of courage, one that brings forth resilience and the ability to live well in this world. I suppose then, it is no surprise that so many, despite writing's demands for vulnerability, still undertake the journey.

However, not only is entering into and acknowledging our own vulnerability critical to the writer's task, Freire (1970) writes that it is essential to teaching in a human way: "The oppressed must see examples of vulnerability of the oppressor so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them. Until this occurs, they will continue disheartened, fearful, and beaten" (p. 64). To lift students up and bring forth life, as is the etymological imperative of education, (>L. *educare*, to bring forth) requires that we allow ourselves to be *human* in the classroom, complete with our cracks and flaws and messy insides. In doing this, we allow students to see that they too can be human, that "weakness" or vulnerability are not flaws, but instead what bind us together as human beings.

Sharing our vulnerabilities and engaging in this sort of act of human solidarity with students is different than what we are instructed as new teachers. Indeed, Freire (1970) exclaims that "[solidarity] is a radical posture" (1970, p.

49). Radical as it may be, Seidel (2006) asserts that we can "no longer remain as [we] were" (p. 61)--as we *are* in this "Western dualist nightmare" (p. 1906) where students and teachers are categorized and separated. We must, instead, move toward a more human state, wherein teachers work toward solidarity.

But to build solidarity with our students requires that we allow them the opportunity to see us as we are: not as "in control" or "invulnerable," but as real human beings on their own journeys toward self-actualization. This is a frightening thing (especially for those of us, like me, that love control). And yet, educators like Carl Leggo (2004) see it as being critical that students understand that it is not "easy to be a human being" (p. 28), that they might see in their teachers someone who understands them and their struggles and loves them just the same. Following Vanier (1998), Leggo (2004) asserts:

> What we need in schools is a commitment to investigating seriously and sincerely what it means to be human, to become human, to acknowledge the humanity of other humans, to know our ecological interconnections in the wide expanse of the earth, even the universe. As educators we need to promote and practice a curriculum of becoming human. (p. 30)

To bring forth this sort of curriculum in our schools, teachers must be willing to acknowledge their own struggles to become human. Donald Graves (2006) in *A Sea of Faces: the Importance of Knowing your Students* writes "One of the prime rules in journalism is 'share information in order to get information'" (p. 10). "Children", he explains, "are perceptive" (p. 10); without a sense that the

teacher is willing to share, they are unlikely to do the same. True relationships are risky. They require someone to take the first step forward. As a pedagogue--one who walks with the young--I believe that it is my job to take the first step, to meet my students where they are at, take hold of their hands and hope that they might follow, so that they too might acknowledge their own cracks and holes and messy bits and write to become human and enter the light.

Led by the Writing

October (undated), 2012 (A memoir written alongside my students)

I remember the words clearly. The words that coursed through my veins and cut through my heart: "I'm broken, baby." he said simply. "I'm broken". Simple words, I suppose, tied to a simple image, but the words were sharp and cut through me like shards of glass. Broken. Broken glass. Broken egg shells. Broken father? My dad wasn't fragile. He wasn't glass or egg shells. My dad was strong. My dad was my dad. He couldn't change. He couldn't break. He was just him: Dad who was a bit scary – who dressed up like those scary dudes from StarWars, the ones with the brown capes and glowing eyes – the ones who were really quite cute after all. Dad who was frustrating and so not understanding of the social importance of parties and late nights – who forbade me to go to out to parties on the weekends or go out of town on camping trips. Dad who was loud and embarrassing, but who I loved anyway. Dad who took me out for Blizzards after terrible singing performances or mean adjudicators. Dad who would pick me up

on his shoulder and carry me to bed from the car as I pretended to sleep. Dad – just Dad. Not broken.

But he was.

The writer's notebook is a tool that Kittle (2008), Murray (1989), and Elbow (1973) all see as critical for this sort of personal and critical exploration of self and the world. Kittle (2008) describes her notebook as "a writer's wanderings" (p. 23). In it, she collects "fragments of life that strike [her]," "questions," "secrets," "poems" "quick writes" and much more (p. 23 – 24). The notebook, a tool that many writers use (Kittle, 2008), is ultimately where we "collect," "rehearse," and "discover" (Murray, 1982) what we might say, write, and think in the future. It is "a place for all of that bad writing that is essential to uncover good writing" (Kittle, 2008, p. 23). But most importantly, it is the place where we might find ourselves. Indeed, Murray (1982) explains: "At the beginning of the composing process there is only blank paper. At the end of the composing process there is a piece of writing which has detached itself from the writer and found its own meaning, a meaning the writer probably did not intend" (p. 17). As we look through these notebooks and see our thoughts and struggles, we find a "trail of small surprises" (Murray, 1982, p. 5) that lead us toward the writing and lead us toward the self. In this way, the writer's notebook is a guide. It takes us on journeys and walks us toward the light.

But in order to allow the notebook to be a guide, the writer must be willing to listen to the writing: What is it saying to me in its messy ways? Where does it want me to go? Am I willing to follow?

There are times when the writing will take us where we want: to beautiful places filled with light and joy; but often, the writing will take us to unexpected places, places that we may not want to go. Murray (1989) found himself confronted with the nagging feeling that he must write about his daughter's death. And yet, he "didn't want ever to return to this hospital…with a writer's eye" (p. 186). And still the writing will push us down thorny, difficult paths that we struggle to tread upon. Seidel (2007) writes about her fear and uncertainty in following a path to Chernobyl:

> In meditating on the meaning of remembering Chernobyl for education, this essay was the most profoundly difficult piece of writing I have ever undertaken…This chapter represents for me, as a writer/scholar/teacher, the thorny, arduous, impossible and tiring work of attempting to look toward the time of the future while remaining in the present. (p. 34)

Why would we want to explore "landscapes of pain and loss" (Murray, 1989, p. 188)?

But these difficult and thorny topics are so often the things that we need to write. These are the conditions of our lives, and, on some level, we know that these are conditions that we cannot evade or ignore (Murray, 1989). We need to follow them so that we might understand, so that we might become.

It takes courage to write, but Donald Graves (1983) says that it also takes courage to share, particularly for a teacher who decides to share with his students. When we write, we put ourselves, our insides, our words up on display. When we share our messy drafts, we expose to our students that we are not perfect, that we may not be "great writers," or have our lives as together as a teacher "should." This is a risky and brave task, for it opens the teacher up to criticisms from students, administrators, parents, and even other teachers.

Teaching is not often seen as a career for the courageous; it is seen by many as a fallback career, a safe career, an easy choice. Insurance companies like my own, give discounts to teachers, seeing us as "safe" clients, clients who would rarely risk their lives. And yet, every day, teachers must put themselves on display for anywhere from 30 to 150 pairs of eyes to see. While that is a risk in and of itself, to risk vulnerability by standing in front of a class with heart exposed on paper is an effort quite unlike any other.

Still, I remind myself that these are the risks that I must be willing to take if I hope that my students might write to explore themselves and the conditions of their own lives. And so I write. Difficult and thorny as that might be.

I noticed a trend early on in my writer's notebook as I peered through it for threads as my students did the same. I noticed how often I wrote about my dad: the way he would carry me from the car while I pretended to sleep, the way he held my hand as we walked across the street to football games, the way he felt so strong. I began writing this piece to explore a moment that changed how I saw my dad forever. It was early in the year that I shared this piece with my students.

It was a risk, and it was hard, for this was a difficult piece to write. Certainly, it was a difficult piece to give away and put in their hands. And still, I asked for their help. I gave this piece to them and asked them to respond and help me say what I needed to say. I put my words on the SmartBoard and asked my students to help me shape them.

And yet, risky as it may have been, I felt both honoured and relieved afterwards. The students helped me find the missing words that I was looking for, they spoke about an image that didn't quite fit, and they thanked me for sharing myself. However, by sharing, I created an opening for relationships to form. Not only did sharing this piece knock down some of the walls between teacher and student, this piece modeled to students "how writing works" (Kittle, 2008, p. 57), how writing can help us understand and communicate "something valuable" (Kittle, 2008, p. 57). While each of these things are pedagogically important, writing this piece was also personally important for it helped to push me forward on a journey of understanding my relationship with my father and his diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis. In validating its worth, my students challenged me to continue this task of discovery and write onward to understand who I am as a daughter and how that might shape all other aspects of my life.

This path toward understanding has not been paved with gold--or even asphalt--indeed, it is a path that I am carving out myself, step by step, but as I have done so, I have taken down the walls that I have built around myself so that I might allow real relationships to form. As I have written this year, I have started

to find out who I am and who I want to be. I have started to find the courage to be. I hope that in doing so, I might have encouraged my students to do the same.

And so I ask: what would our schools look like if we asked ourselves as we ask our students, "Do we have the courage to write?"

A Journey Through the Dark

October 14, 2012

I just finished writing and I feel it in my eyes, my body. I feel weighed down, I feel heavy. My eyes are tired. I feel like I could cry. I haven't. But I feel like it. My hands are a bit shaky and I have tunnel vision. I know that my day will feel heavy because of this.

Atwood (2002) uses a striking allegory to describe the writer's task. She likens the endeavour to the archetypal hero's quest. We, the writers, are the heroes, she suggests, looking for "riches, knowledge, the chance to battle an evil monster, or the loved and lost" (p. 165-166). Encouraged by a higher power of some sort (the king, a mentor, God…), we leave our homes--our places of comfort and safety--and undertake a journey that is full of risk and danger and hope that we make it back home with our hero's prize.

My students and I have been going on dangerous journeys together: we are writing about adoption, guilt, divorce, obsessions, anger, fear, anxiety, depression, self hatred, strained and broken relationships…the list goes on. These are scary topics, topics that have dwelt within us, topics that have nestled into our bodies

and minds, topics that are begging to be released, discussed, worked through. These are topics that we chose for ourselves--nay, topics that chose us--topics that we need to write about. We find them scary, because they are real.

Atwood's (2002) description reveals something darker about the task of writing, one that we don't often discuss in schools. True writing, she argues, is always a "negotiation with the dead," a negotiation with our own mortality and our fears of darkness. On this quest, the hero inevitably must journey to the underworld, a place without light or hope or the protection of the gods. On this journey, we relinquish all control. Atwood writes: "instead of dealing with the dead on your own territory – merry middle-earth – you…cross over into theirs" (p. 167). My students and I are crossing over into worlds that we don't understand in hopes that maybe we will begin to see how these worlds pull on our own.

Atwood's (2002) words are important, for it is this that is perhaps the most difficult in the writing process. For in these unknown places, we are without control, without our familiar comforts or supports, without the walls that we have built around us for protection, without the weapons that we know how to use so well. (Even Harry Potter loses his wand at the peak of his battles in the darkness). These are the things that we have trained ourselves to believe we need: control, a plan, tools, walls, weapons… But in the dark, we are without our mortal tools and left only with ourselves. And so we must rely only on our instincts, our guts, our intuition to save our own lives.

Perl (1983) explains that writing comes not from our tools and our left-brained skills of categorization and planning but rather from the "part of our

bodies where we experience ourselves directly. For many people it's the area of their stomachs; for others, there is a more generalized response and they maintain a hovering attention to what they experience throughout their bodies" (p. 47). Writing comes from

> the soft underbelly of thought…a kind of bodily awareness that…encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time…It is felt in the body, yet it has meanings. It is body and mind before they are split apart. (Grendlin, as cited in Perl, 1983)

These intuitive and bodily aspects of our selves are not often attended to in this world. In our efforts to control and rationalize all things, we forget that we are more than our brains, more than just logic and reason. We forget that we are intuitive beings. But in the darkness of the unknown, this "felt sense"--this intuition--is all that remains. This is the writer. The pen and the paper are only tools that the writer might yield.

It is only when the hero learns to trust himself rather than the worldly tools given to him that he might conquer the monster below. And it is then that out of the darkness, Gilgamesh emerges with stories, Demeter returns with Persephone, and Christ emerges with life eternal. Authentic writing teaches us that trusting ourselves on this journey can bring forth riches.

Yet, these spiritual quests to the underworld and back are not without bodily costs. We can never return home as we were. "The dead get blood," (p. 178) Atwood (2002) asserts with her characteristic frankness. This was no more

apparent to me than it was the day I witnessed my first writing battle scars. A student came up to me with tears falling from her eyes after having taken a journey into the darkness to battle demons that had been haunting her for years. The tears she cried were real. They weren't tears about a grade or frustration from writing something that didn't matter. The tears she cried were connected to the aches and pains of real writing, the writing that comes from deep down in the self. These are the pains of real writing that come from journeying back into the underworld – the buried, the lost, the forgotten, the repressed.

Difficult as this was to witness, this is the blood that will be shed when we fight real battles, when we write the things that claw at us, begging to be written.

And so, our writing and our selves carry with them the aches, pains, and bloody wounds of the journey into the unknown. As we write, as we wait in darkness, we are changed. And we return to earth with "the usual signs of struggle—bloodstains, teethmarks, gashes, and burns" (Dillard, 1989, p. 29). Perhaps this is why so many writers describe the task as a physical one. Murakami (2009) explains: "You might not move your body around, but there's grueling, dynamic labor going on inside you" (p. 80). It is exhausting to write. It is grueling to battle demons in the dark. If you fight, you will bleed. The same goes for writing.

But we "write with that blood," Dillard (1989) explains, "If the sore spot is not fatal, if it does not grow and block something, you can use its power for many years…" (p. 20). That blood creates new possibilities.

Composition theorists have begun, in recent years, to speak about writing as healing. JoAnn Campbell (1999) reflects on the "wounds too frequently inflicted by English teachers" (p. 304) and instead speaks of the ways that authentic writing can "heal." While Campbell acknowledges the difficulties in speaking about healing in education – for so many see healing as falling exclusively under "the province of those credentialized to heal: physicians, psychologists, perhaps ministers" (p. 304)--she sees, like Moffett (1999), that "unhealed wounds and undeveloped souls will thwart the smartest curriculum" (p. 317). She argues that when we write from a spiritual, intuitive, and authentic place, we relax and find wholeness again. Perhaps that is why these stories of heroes (and the task of writing) are also associated with rebirth and rejuvenation. For as we become whole again, as we are healed through the process of understanding, we are able to emerge stronger out of the darkness.

One of my students had never told anyone about the time when her dad tried to rape her. For six years, then, she had been carrying this with her. Not too long ago, she started writing about it. Two weeks later, she stood crying--beaten down by writing about this horrible event. Still she told me that she needed to keep writing. Since then, she has shared with me that she told her mom what happened to her. Something about writing about this memory that, in her words, "had eaten away at her," gave her strength.

Writing is healing. Writing gives us strength.

It wasn't until I began writing again--a chance offered to me in graduate school and as I have continued to write with my students--that I began to see that I

wasn't crazy, that those "funny stirrings" within me were indeed life itself longing to be brought forth. Encouraged to explore my experiences through autobiography and authentic writing, I was given the chance to realize my own oppression, my own "decensored relation" (Cixous, 2010, 1947) to myself, my body, and my being and come out of the darkness that I had been living in during my early teaching career. Through these acts of writing, through "[my] pronouns, [my] nouns, and [my] clique of referents," (Cixous, 2010, p. 1954) I entered a new world--a world unhindered by the tradition of rationality, a world in which I am allowed to live fully, with my mind, body, and spirit intact.

And yet, the overflow of emotion and self in writing was something I resisted and still resist to some extent. Never before had I written in first person, never had I explored my self, never had I let my words fall upon the page in "waves or floods" (Cixous, 2010, p. 1943). All throughout my schooling, I had been a master at following the outlines that I would use to write the rational and logical "Five Paragraph Essay" (or lengthier variations of). I denied the pronouns that spoke to my own experience (a professor years ago once laughed at me for writing journal entries in third person), and abandoned emotion in favor of a good (that is, rational) argument. I had been successful in the world of rationality and objectivity, and was conditioned to see my emotions, my experience, my self as "irrational" and thus unwelcome in the public space of schools. Writing like this, at first (and even a bit now), made me feel ashamed, embarrassed.

Yet, the more I write, the more I begin to see the importance of my own experience in bringing myself into the world. In writing myself back into my

body, I feel alive again. In writing myself back into my body, I feel like I might be able to *bring forth* life again. Cixous (2010) explains: "When I write, it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love" (p. 1959). This is who I want to be in schools. This is the teaching I want to live. This is writing I want my students to see and create.

(Re)writing teaching thus seems to be not only of great personal importance, but of great educational importance as well. With authentic and embodied writing, we restore education to its generative nature. We give back education its womb and allow it to carry life out into the world. For, Cixous (2010) says, this sort of writing "does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (p. 1955). Messy, emotional, dark, dangerous, and fleshy as it may be, writing turns us away from the impending darkness caused by enclosing the world in rational boxes, and instead, brings forth life itself.

And so I journey on and ask my students to journey on heroically with me so that we might live on in our schools with riches, knowledge, the severed heads of the monsters that once plagued us, and the lively bodies of all those that we had thought we had lost.

Finding a New Seat

October 14, 2012 (a letter given to my students)

Dear 20-2s:

Writing is exhausting. Sometimes you feel great release after it, but sometimes you don't. It's like a workout, I suppose – there are times when you give it your all and feel fantastic afterwards: energized, excited, like you could conquer the world. But other times, you just feel exhausted, sweaty, drained, and just want to curl up on a couch and fall asleep. Today is one of those days. I wrote and now I feel sad and tired and want to cry or sleep or have a bath. Why is this? Why the difference? It's not the topic or the workout necessarily… I didn't even explore anything too difficult or too deep. Maybe that's it – maybe it's that I haven't pushed through the pain today. Maybe I just gave up when the time was up, instead of continuing to ride the wave.

I wonder if when you write, sometimes, especially when you give up before releasing it all, that things rise up into your consciousness, into your mind – it unearths these feelings and memories and then they linger. They stay with you. This is hard. It's sometimes easier to not deal with it. Easier to leave it all down within that dark cave that you don't talk about or think about or listen to. But I have faith – as I tell you to have – that dealing with the monsters in the cave is important. It is important to see them, know that they are there, and work with them, try to make them less scary.

This is important for me to remember as you write your pieces. Some of you are writing tough things for your assignments – I need to be aware that some of you will feel energized by this, while others may feel exhausted by it. And that this

could change on a daily basis. I will try to be aware of this. I will try to understand. Let me know how you're feeling and if you need a day to laugh, or if you need a break, or a walk.

I worry that we spend so much time trying to control or compete with others in our world that we forget to empathize with them. I worry that we spend so much time hurrying children toward the finish line that we forget to sit with them and feel what they are feeling. This is a sad thing, for indeed, empathy is essential to a healthy world.

Reading, many have said, is about empathy. To be sure, the English Language Arts curriculum suggests that through the study of literature, students "imagine the worlds that literature presents and understand and empathize with the characters that literature creates" (GoA, 2003, p. 1). Indeed, as we follow the story of young Scout and her quest to understand the strange and frightening Boo Radley down the street, we begin to see the world as she does; "in her shoes," if you will (Lee, 1960). However, reading more is not the only way students and teachers might develop empathy. Like reading, writing is a way that teachers and students alike might develop the skills to see the world as others see it.

Teresa Wiseman (in Brown, 2008, p. 37) sees the following four skills as being essential to developing empathy: 1) to see the world as others see it; 2) to be nonjudgmental; 3) to understand another person's feelings; and 4) to communicate your understanding of that person's feelings.

To see the world as others see it, we must first understand the way we see

the world ourselves. To see the world in new ways, we must understand how we see the world today.

I once did an activity in my class to illustrate perspectives and "perspective taking" and was surprised by how difficult it was for students. As part of an introduction to critical theory and literary lenses with my English 20IB class, I, one day in April, insisted that the students find a new desk in class and record their views of the classroom environment from that perspective. Though I expected that students from various parts of the classroom would be surprised to see certain aspects of the classroom for the first time, I was surprised at the extent to which this activity evoked emotional responses.

When I asked my students to move around the class, though there was some sense of excitement at the potential for a "fun new activity," there was also a uniform sense of confusion, frustration, and almost discontent toward the prospect of displacement. Again, I expected this to some extent, for all twenty-four of my students had been sitting in their chosen desks every day for the previous seven months. What I didn't expect was what followed. The discussion began with the anticipated, "hey--there's a clock on that wall!" and "wow--that painting is awesome!" but what was less expected were the emotional responses that students had to the loss of their previous seat. Students who moved from the north side of the classroom to the south complained "it's so empty," "the walls are so plain," "I feel cold," "I can't see you," while students who moved to the north side complained about the "clutter" and the feeling that I was spying on them behind their backs. They all asked: "When can we move back?"

I suppose I shouldn't have been so surprised about this, for we have all seen it before--students come in on the first day of class, choose a seat, and remain planted there until class lets out for the summer. We seem naturally inclined towards routines (I recall one of my peers in my EDSEC 503 class commenting on how we all have sat in the same place everyday since the beginning of class. And upon hearing this comment, only two graduate students actually shifted spots. I was not one of them). If Ellis's (2005) suggestion that

> If [students'] experiences in these places are filled with familiar routines that build [students'] confidence, if they know and become known by others, acquire intimate local knowledge, and learn the norms of the culture, then a sense of place may well be established (p. 60)

is true, then it makes sense that a student would not want to risk losing that sense of place and belonging.

To take a new perspective is frightening; it is uncomfortable. We are creatures of habit and we like the routines that make us feel safe. Still, if we never move, if we never uproot ourselves to see the world from a new position, it is difficult (if not impossible) to see that our view is only one view. Until we can recognize the limitations to our own positions, it is hard to find ourselves in other people's seats. We crave the comfort of our own seats. We like our own "shoes."

Yet as we write, we become more and more aware of our own positions in the world. We become aware of where we are sitting in the world and, therefore, how we see the world. We understand from where we come and the memories and

experiences that we have grown out of that shape how we see the people and the situations that exist before us.

As we write, we reflect, and we begin to see the flaws and the holes in our own experiences. Goldberg (1983) writes: while writers write,

> they are also encountering their own thoughts, increasing their familiarity with what they know. In teaching writing, we teach our students to clarify their ideas in their sentences and to organize them in their papers, forcing them to confront what they think (p. 39)

and what they know. This awareness of the self, Brown (2008) argues, is the first step to developing the ability to take on new perspectives comfortably. We begin to understand that "what we see is *one* view of the world, not *the* view" (Brown, 2008, p. 38).

To be non-judgmental of others' views in a world that is so built upon judgment and shaming is an exceedingly difficult task. Our Western world is built upon principles that emphasize competition and individual value. In these times, we measure our worth by comparing ourselves to others. To escape the pressures of our society, we spend our lives telling ourselves: "compared to him/her, I'm doing great!" (Brown, 2008). Our struggle to convince others and ourselves of our worth means that we spend much of our time judging others and ourselves, ultimately building up walls between ourselves and those around us.

As we write our stories, share them with others, and hear others share theirs, we enter into a social process of understanding rather than competing, and

we can begin to see the humanity that lives behind those walls that we try so hard to build up out of fear of judgment and competition. And instead, we begin to see that our lives are inextricably woven together. Leggo (2004) writes:

> On the one hand, the stories we tell about ourselves are always unique and coloured in the keenly experienced sense of individual selfhood and subjectivity, but, on the other hand, our seemingly unique stories are inextricably connected to many other people and the communities that help inform and shape our sense of identity and purpose. (p. 32)

As we become more mindful of our own responses to situations, mindful of our own feelings and struggles, we learn to understand others'.

I saw this in my class not too long ago, when a student, after reading a personal narrative about a classmate's struggle with bullying, responded: "The first thing I thought of as I read your piece was how brave you are. We have all been through it, but you were brave enough to share your story with me. Thank you." In this written response to her classmate, this quiet young girl was able to communicate her appreciation and her empathy for her peer in a way that she likely would not have without pen and paper.

As students write and share their writing with each other, they become reconnected with their hearts--"the powerhouse of love that can reorient us from our self-centredness, revealing to us and to others the basic beauty of humanity, empowering us to grow" (Vanier, 1998, p. 78, in Leggo 2005, p. 449). For indeed, Dillard (1983) writes: "The line of words fingers your own heart. It invades

arteries, and enters the heart on a flood of breath; it presses the moving rims of thick valves; it palpates the dark muscle strong as horses" (p. 20).

When we as teachers write with our students, we too begin to develop the skills necessary to empathize with our students. As we write, we too learn to take on new perspectives, evaluate our own worldviews and reflect upon our own limited views. As we write with our students, we walk with them and remember the dangers of the writing journey. And this James Moffett (1983) sees as being critical to teaching well and living well. He writes: "I think we all become better teachers when we bring out and draw on our personal efforts to do what we know our students are now trying to do also—heal the feelings so the spirit can develop" (p. 314). Freire (1994) seems to agree. In his *Pedagogy of Hope,* he writes: "For their part, teachers teach in authentic terms, only to the extent that they know the content they are teaching—that is, only in the measure that they appropriate, that they learn it, themselves" (p. 68).

As I abandoned my teacherly-myth that "writing is easy," I became a better teacher and a better support for my students. As I write with my students, I become a better human being. As I write with my students, I become.

I am the Teaching

Introduction

January 23, 2013

In this dark space of grades, report cards, and exams, I turn to my students' words – their real words. I read their notebooks and am reminded that in my classroom, my students are thinking. I am reminded that my students are writing themselves – not the exam – themselves *and their lives. I am reminded that they are finding their voices. In their notebooks, I see students living and learning and growing for the sake of living and becoming.*

Even in these walls.

Their writing reminds me not only of the teacher that I am, but of the teacher that I hope to be: not the teacher that best prepares students to write an exam, but the teacher that allows children to live.

In my first years, teaching for me was measured in terms of goals and objectives, evaluation and standards. I evaluated myself on whether I completed the tasks I set out to complete in the right amount of time. I evaluated myself on students' products and their achievement on exams. This is not surprising, for indeed, so much of teaching is described in the language of products, achievement, and standards. The *Teaching Quality Standard* (GoA, 1997) speaks to these things above all else. It speaks of "objectives," "standards," "data" and

"short and long-range plans." Teaching is, as Curriculum scholar Ted Aoki (in Aoki, Pinar, & Irwin, 2005) writes, measured "in the language of ends and means" (p. 160) not in the language of *being*.

Jardine et al. (2006) see this as a problem, writing: "[l]ong, explicit, discursive lists of exactly how to teach this or that…are often misused to unintentionally *take the life out of teaching*" (emphasis mine, p. 305). Teaching, for me, became a to-do list, and I became simply the one who "got things done"--mechanical, lifeless, spiritless as that may have been.

But teaching is more than objectives and plans. Teaching is a human--not a mechanical--task. Though the tendency in our schools is to look at teaching and learning as that which can be measured on an exam, Aoki et al. (2005) asks us to not simply explore teaching as if it were like an assembly line, but to instead realize the importance of

> understanding what teaching truly is… to reattune ourselves such that we can begin to see and hear our doings as teachers harboured within the pedagogical presence of our beings, that is, of who we *are* as teachers" (p. 20).

Aoki (in Aoki et al., 2005) reminds us that teaching is more than simply a task or a job or a career. Indeed, he tells us that "[we are] the teaching" (p. 19).

In this section, I explore my own struggle to understand who I am as a teacher and what it means to teach in schools today. It is filled with my questions, worries, joys, and criticism. Messy, conflicted, and fleshy as this might be, I hope

that this section will help me to understand what Aoki sees as the "elusive" and "mysterious" "I" of teaching.

Here I am:

Letting the Monsters Speak

Just about every day, 2012 - 2013; spoken communication.

My class is a gong show. But I love it.

There are some things about myself that I must admit here. Firstly, I have always been a planner, concerned, above all, with how and when things might be done. Scattered around my house are to-do-lists with times, schedules, and step by step plans of attack. I have always learned best when told what to do, how to do it, and when to get it done. Secondly, I find myself quite uncomfortable with anything that is not linear, logical, concrete and known. I don't take risks: the notion of swimming in a churning, fluid ocean with the potential of being swept away in waves or being eaten by sharks has always prevented me from swimming away from the shore. And thirdly, I care deeply that others see what I do as exceptional.

So, imagine my surprise when I found myself this year drawn to hermeneutics as an approach to curriculum. Hermeneutics, by its very nature, requires an acknowledgement that all is and should remain open, flexible, and fluid. While hermeneutics began as the study and art of interpreting biblical texts,

Gadamer (1975) took "the art of interpretation" much further, instead telling us that interpretation is a "primordial given." Or to use a phrase from Heidegger (2010), he suggests that interpretation is our way of "being-in-the-world." Because all that we encounter requires our own interpretation, things are inherently interpret*able*--able to be interpreted and, therefore, always open, filled with possibilities, and fruitful in their native difficulties. The beauty of life, according to hermeneutics, is that the world and life and being are never foreclosed--for indeed, Jardine (1992) writes, "there is always something left to say" (p. 120).

What drew me, then, to hermeneutics is what ultimately drew me to education in the first place. Unlike other ways of seeing the world, hermeneutics speaks about openness, possibilities, people, connections, relations, and, most importantly, healing, rather than quotas, bottom lines, techniques and strategies. Hermeneutics takes me away from what I have been so comfortable with--and yet, also so uncomfortable with--for so long, and allows me to move into a way of understanding that I hope might someday guide our world.

However, a hermeneutic approach to curriculum is not a simple, clean, logical, and well-planned approach, for indeed the "borderline figure of Hermes emerges in impudent disregard for our best laid plans" (Wallin, 2007, p. 6). For someone like me who, for so long, lived for The Plan--lived to make sure that all went in the right order and as expected, so that I might be seen as the "expert," the "authority," the "perfect teacher"--learning to embrace the liminal, borderline figures who question authority, shake up the expert, and create cracks in the plans,

has been a challenge. For indeed, Hermes--the Greek god of the threshold and borders--is not a simple god: he is an unpredictable and fickle god, who undoubtedly pops up when least expected and takes away the stability of our own foundations.

> As a borderline figure, Hermes pries open such a proclivity to the wor(l)d as given, stealing peace of mind and reading us back to ourselves in unanticipated and unfamiliar ways. Afterall, Hermes is both thief *and* trickster, transgressing 'clearly' defined borderlines with ease and without qualm. (Wallin, 2007, p. 4)

But Hermes is not the only figure in our collective consciousness that defies boundaries. Like Hermes, "[c]alling to us from the boundaries of our own world, Coyote howls holes in the taken-for-granted, the assumed, the unuttered, and the unutterable" (Clifford et al., 2001, p. 14). While these archetypal figures in literature appear in different guises, they function to fulfill the same role: they question and challenge and push boundaries; they expand the horizons of what is known. And they are both loved and hated for it.

Learning is, at its core, an endeavour in moving beyond what is already known into lands that have yet to be to be explored. To do this, we must step through doors and walls and journey into the unknown. The word liminal is derived from the Latin for threshold--a point of entry. Liminal characters, then, are those characters that push us through the threshold and give us new points of entry. When liminal characters like Coyote, Hermes, Frodo Baggins, Bugs Bunny, and Harry Potter traverse into taboo lands and shake up authority, life emerges out

of the cracks that these characters create in the firmament.

Yet, authority figures fear liminal characters. So often, those on the borderlines are seen as monstrous. They shake up the world that we know, crack through the foundations of thought and experience, and challenge the stability that we have built up. So often, we, like The Ministry of Magic seek to destroy these figures, to quiet them, or "put them back in their place." But as we know from literature, these liminal figures--those that challenge and cross borders--are so often our heroes. These are the characters that save lives and heal the broken world. "That is," Clifford et al. (2001) write, these are the characters that "teach" (p. 15).

And in this way, as frustrating as they may be, these liminal, borderline, and hermeneutic figures are gifts. For when we allow the boundaries of teacher-student to be subverted and challenged, we encourage "becoming." It is no surprise, then, that Hermes, border crosser and trickster, is also the god of the wound. He heals. He cures. He revives. Bridging the boundaries of life and death, Hermes brings forth life.

But in order to allow this healing to occur, we must welcome the surprises; we must welcome the liminal. This can be hard to do, however, because we are so used to lines and boundaries. We are so used to being in control. Brent McKeown (2011) wrote about his experience dealing with individuals who, like so many, feared the liminal:

> Not long after we submitted our proposal for a session dealing with texts that blur the boundaries between genres (what I termed —

> "liminal" texts) we both received the following email from the chair of the organizing committee:
>
> *Thank you so much for this proposal. We are very interested in this presentation; however, I am wondering if it would be possible for you to make some revisions. I have run this proposal past my conference focus group (i.e. my colleagues) and we are a little baffled. (I actually had to look up the definition of "liminal" – and I always thought my vocabulary skills were reasonably strong. What a blow to my self-esteem!)*
>
> *This is a little academic for the average conference attendee – my new English teachers who should be attending a session like this would be too intimidated by the description.* (p. 24)

While McKeown uses this anecdote to illustrate a growing problem with anti-intellectualism in our schools, I see it speaking to another problem: the liminal itself is "intimidating." We like black and white. We like borders and boundaries. The liminal makes us fearful; in its face, we lose our confidence, we become *timid* (>L. *in timidus*). And so we send it away. Take it out of our proposals. Hide it in a "dash-two" class. Shut it down. Refuse to let it speak.

"Reading" the liminal in these ways in our schools, however, has tragic consequences: it freezes and paralyzes students and, ultimately, paralyzes our schools. In this way, our schools fall short of their educational imperative to bring forth life. Instead, our schools contain and freeze that life that we hoped to bring forth.

I have always struggled with the comments that I hear come out of the mouths of teachers in the halls or the staff room and—worse--those that come out of even my own mouth at times: that kid questions too much; that kid is trouble; that kid has autism; that kid can't speak English; you will be lucky if you can get that kid to write anything.

Clifford, Freisen, and Jardine (2001) write about our tendency to use language in this way to explain away people, to explain away the complexities of human beings with a single phrase, word, or acronym: autistic, trouble, ODD, ADHD, ELL, OCD, BD… the list goes on. In their paper, "Whatever happens to him happens to us: Reading Coyote reading the world," they question these lines that we as educators so often place around students, they question the ways that we understand difference as something that can be understood and thereby controlled or worse "eradicated" (p. 11) in our classrooms, and they challenge teachers to begin to see that the "intractable, irreducible differences of individuals" as that which "can form the ground of true freedom" (p. 11). Instead of seeing differences as problems that should be controlled to keep the "peace" in our classrooms, they propose that these differences are that which allow our classrooms to live on. They suggest, quite radically, really, that it is the children who we attempt to control and tame with labels and language--the "monsters," and the monstrous, the tricksters, the liminal figures, the boundary crossers of our classrooms--that can transform and heal that which we have broken.

This way of seeing children in our classroom--not as problems to be contained or fixed--but as human beings, each with his own authentic self is

something that resonates with me on a deep level. I am teaching an English 30-2 class right now with a group of students that many would (and have) called "monsters." They come with their labels, but more than that, they come with natural inclinations to shake up authority--often authority that needs shaking.

I presented the class with an assignment not too long ago, thinking that I better "prepare them for the diploma," to write a business letter to Karl Marx telling him whether they agreed or disagreed with his beliefs about humans and work. After explaining the assignment and explaining the importance of understanding the structure, Viktor, a boy who is seen by so many to be a "monster," said to me: "I'm not doing this. This is stupid: I don't know Marx. How am I supposed to write him a letter? Aren't business letters supposed to have a purpose? What's my purpose in writing to a dead guy?" While he was trying to be polite (a feat in itself for this student), the tone of his words screamed: This is stupid. School is stupid. Meaningless. Without purpose.

And he was right. It was stupid.

I changed the assignment. I asked them to write me a business letter proposing a research project. I asked them to include a section that spoke to the ways that a philosopher's (like Marx's) writings might help them carry out their research. "That's better." He said.

He was right. It was.

Perhaps this is why I feel so conflicted so often in our schools as I run around and attempt to control and quell the "monsters" and the monstrous. Perhaps this is why I so often feel like a monster myself. Perhaps this is why the

more I let these "monsters" run free and be themselves, ask the questions that they need to ask, live and move as they need to move, the more I feel healed. The more I feel renewed. The more I feel like a good teacher.

The paradox, however, that comes with letting Hermes run free in the classroom, is as much as I may feel like a good teacher inside, or feel like I'm doing the right thing, it may look differently to those who quickly walk past my classroom (and at times, even to myself.) In living beyond the lists and standards of what others have outlined as "good teaching," we risk being seen as monsters ourselves. As we become liminal figures, opening ourselves up to the surprises and the questions, challenging the boundaries and "natural" order of things, we, like Hermes, challenge authority, "awaken the sleeping," "shake reality," "faulter the foundations of thought," and "crack the ground" (Wallin, 2007). This is a frightening thing, one that does not look or sound like the definitions of teaching we have seen for so many years, grew up with ourselves, or read about in the standards documents that we hold at such heights. And yet, more and more, I'm seeing that liminal figures are needed in our schools. Our foundations are not perfect. Indeed, they are flawed in many ways.

Still, Clifford et al. (2001) warn us about "romanticizing" these figures. As important as students like Viktor are, they are often terribly difficult to be around: "[Coyote] is a playful trickster and a greedy, arrogant, self-centred fool who never, ever learns and who often falls out of trees at exactly the wrong time and ends up dying, rotting, and smelling up the place" (p. 22). These figures are not perfect. They are difficult. They say the wrong things at the wrong time. They say

the unexpected. And it, at times, is terribly painful. I will never forget the moment when I was told by Joe, a young man (for whom I'd basically planned my whole year to keep engaged), "I don't need you." As I held back the tears, I realized that as painful as it was to hear, maybe he was right. Maybe I need him more than he needs me. And maybe I will be changed more than he.

And maybe that is OK, surprising as it may be.

Uncovering the Curriculum

January 19, 2013: Last Day of Classes, Semester 1

A comment stuck out to me today. It came from a bright girl – probably one of the best writers and thinkers in the class. She worries that we are falling behind. She worries that we aren't going to "cover the curriculum" – that we haven't read enough plays or novels yet or written enough "essays." Her friends in other classes have, but we haven't. She worries that she won't be able to compete on the exam or next year. And yet, she loves what we are doing. She loves thinking. She loves writing. She loves exploring texts. Still, she worries that we are not covering enough.

The students want more definition. They want more lines. They want clearer categories.

But aren't these lines what I'm hoping to break through?

Our students (and indeed our own selves) have been raised in a world in which lines and organization and clear structure rules. They have been taught that accountability rules, deadlines are of absolute importance, and that the curriculum is a box that we must work within.

And yet, while stacks upon stacks of boxes may make things appear neat and tidy, we find few surprises when life is organized and controlled in this way. And if life's twists and turns and challenges and unexpected moments are what bring forth new life, then keeping things in boxes is a mortal trap.

Yet, in these times of accountability and auditability, it is so easy to forget that the boxes before us have been constructed and even easier to forget that they can, therefore, be deconstructed.

All is interpretable. All is open. We just need to let it be.

McKeown (2011) describes the English Language Arts (ELA) program to be a truly liminal curriculum, one that has room to breathe and interpret and live built into it. And yet, so often as teachers, we see the net, the grid, a checklist of "minimum required texts" that must be read and written within the timetable set out for us.

Dawn Latta Kirby and Darren Crovitz (2013) in their *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, discuss the importance of allowing the writing classroom to function "as a *liminal space"* (p. 48)--a place where boundaries and borders are permeable, where students and teachers alike are capable of "crossing normally impervious boundaries and of negotiating the values of different worlds" (p. 48). This involves, among many other things, an opening to possibilities

beyond what has been traditionally seen in other classrooms, beyond what has been traditionally viewed as Writing Instruction. For when we allow students to break free of expectations and play (and colour) outside of the lines, healing can exist, and life can emerge.

Donald Murray (1989), in his book *Expecting the Unexpected: Teaching myself—and others—to read and write*, agrees as he speaks about the importance of "unteaching students" in our schools. He tells us that some of the most important work that we can do as writing teachers is to teach students to forget the rules that they have been taught, to break free from the structures that place them and their work in tiny boxes. He says:

> If we study literature, listen to music, visit art and photography exhibitions, we will begin to understand that excellent writing comes from the distortion of tradition. What delights us about the arts is that we have an expectation of color line or sound or language, and the artist goes beyond that expectation. (p. 103)

The most meaningful texts--the most meaningful experiences--are those that transgress the lines of the expected, those that move beyond what we've seen before and show us the wor(l)d in new ways.

So I ask: What would happen if students and teachers alike moved toward seeing the curriculum not as something that can be covered, but as teeming with life? The curriculum not as the answers or the texts, but as the "unexpected questions" (Slattery, 2007, p. 541), "the ambiguous and ironic dimensions of classroom experience" (Slattery, 2007, p. 541), the breakdowns (Wallin, 2007), or

the moments of surprise? What would happen if we began to see the curriculum not as something planned and mapped out, but as *encounter*? As "engagement with works of art, culture, science, and history" (Fairfield, 2010, p. 10) and "dialogue with [art, culture, science and history]" (Fairfield, 2010, p. 10)? What if we helped students see the curriculum not as something to be followed or worshiped blindly, but as something that we engage with "from within the frame of our common language of experience" (Smith, 1991, p. 201)? What would happen if we saw the curriculum as an opportunity for "genuine meeting of the different horizons of our understanding" (Smith, 1991, p. 197)?

Of course, this isn't easy. For indeed, this sort of teaching is messy: it is as "disturbing—and frightening—for the instructor as the student." (Murray, 1989, p. 103). For teacher and student, parent and administrator, this might not appear to be "good teaching" or even teaching at all. Indeed, in a liminal writing classroom, "bad writing" should exist, (Murray, 1989) more listening than "teaching" should occur, and more invitations than directions should be sent out. In this sort of English classroom, students might be encouraged to break free of the "traditional expected writing" (Murray, 1989, p. 103) that we so often demand of them. It means moving beyond the assignment constructs that are dictated by the diploma exams that so many teachers find themselves caught within (Slomp, 2007). It means allowing the students to be the guides.

This is a different sort of teaching, one that I am trying to live out in my classroom, but one that I still struggle with. I find myself doubting myself, worrying that I am not doing enough, not teaching enough, letting too much slide,

not setting enough rules for writing, not giving enough structure or demands, not doing enough to prepare them for the exams. I worry about being judged by parents, students, and other teachers. Like Murray (1989), "I want to be the authority, to initiate learning, to do something--anything--first, to be a good old American take-charge guy" (p. 20). And so, I find myself asking: do I bend to the pressure? do I give in and give them lines?

It is difficult to treat the curriculum as *always already* (Gadamer, 2006, p. 45) open, interpretable, in our age of "accountability," and yet, more and more, I see this, rather than the organized, controlled, vision I once had for my classroom, as what I hope to see in my classroom. This is what I think Jardine (2006) speaks about when he talks about a curriculum in abundance, or what Aoki (in Aoki et al., 2005) sees as a curriculum-as-lived and a living curriculum. More and more, I begin to see that when I, as a teacher, refuse to be contained by the lines and expectations, I find myself doing my best teaching. I find myself witnessing beautiful moments when life emerges from the mess.

So perhaps it is not only a matter of "unschooling" our students, but "unschooling ourselves"--of "reeducate[ing] [our]selves to get out of the way" (Murray, 1989, p. 20) and play outside of the boxes. For maybe then, life might burst forth from the lines.

Children of the Republic

January 25, 2013

It is the end of the semester: the children line up outside the doors to the gym; they cannot speak, they cannot use their telephones, they cannot move freely. They file in, one by one, to sit row on row, to spit out what has been put in them. The gym looks eerily like those Soviet training films--rows of silent children, producing, performing, putting puzzles and guns together so that they might have the power to control the world. They raise their hands when they finish. They are permitted to leave. Test complete.

As the children do this, the teachers grade them. Behind closed doors and stacks of papers, the teachers determine which of these products passes and which fails. Which students will pass and which will fail. Who will go on and who will be left behind.

My colleagues sit in a building downtown marking exams, where students' names are replaced with numbers. They grade. They don't interact. They cannot speak. They cannot respond to the text with more than a grade. They are removed entirely from the human being who produced the piece of paper.

It all feels so unhuman. So cold. So lifeless.

Marking like this can be a sad and soul-destroying feat.

I worry that so much of what we do in schools takes the life away from our children. From an early age, we teach them to stand in line, sit still, be quiet, not to speak unless spoken to. We do this so much to the point that our presence at the gym doors on exam days is redundant. They don't need us to tell them to sit in line. They don't need us to tell them to be quiet. They know. They have been practicing for ten years. This is as much of a test as is the paper that sits before them.

So much of our work, then, as teachers hinges on policing students' behaviours such that they become the "good students who sit in line." Strangely enough, our work so quickly becomes shutting down excess--shutting down life.

Indeed, Jardine et al. (2006) explore the tendency in today's schools to make all "abundance, excess, and overflow" monstrous. In our classrooms, a child with an unexpected question, a wild and playful spirit (Jardine, et al., 2003), or laughter, tears, fears, or enthusiasm becomes "troublesome". School psychologists are called in to label children and recommend how teachers can better "deal with them"--often suggesting that they be placed in a school or classroom with their "own". Students who fail to fall in line are sent away, hidden from view.

As true and as sad as this may be, it is not a new phenomenon. More than two thousand years ago, Plato (2007) suggested that evil would fall upon the Republic should her citizens demonstrate an overflow of emotions, excess of appetite, or live in abundance. Instead of a "curriculum of abundance," Plato enacted a "regime of scarcity" (Jardine, et al., 2006) limiting and containing those very things.

Like the poets who expressed and appealed to the "lower elements in the mind" (Plato, 2007, p. 348) our emotional, irrational, and willful children are (at the very least) contained and censored or (at the very most) banished from today's classroom. While oftentimes this marginalization is rationalized through claims that it is in the "best interest of the child" (Jardine, et al., 2003, p. 164), it is perhaps more honestly done for the sake of harmony and control in the classroom. Because the harmony and stability of the state depends on the harmony and stability within her individuals, following Plato's model, children who are full of will or desire are said to have a monstrous soul (one balanced to the wrong side of the scale). Good children favour mathematics and sciences over arts and literature which are seen as flighty, flaky, or objects of fancy. As such, these more rational subjects are favoured (demonstrated in the ever-present emphasis on empirical research in schools and universities) in order to cultivate the rational part of the mind for fear that the arts may encourage within the child ideas of fancy or, worst of all, revolution.

The good child in the classroom, like the good citizen in the Republic, is not a revolutionary but instead marches to the beat of the state drum. He is "in control" of his wills and desires, marches to a rhythm suited to "a life of courage and discipline" (Plato, 2007, p. 95), and thinks and behaves logically. He becomes much like a soldier. Our schools today are set up to foster these ideal character traits. Jardine et al. (2002) explain, "children…learn very quickly how to discipline their bodies, how to color between the lines, how to print neatly, how to please their teachers by doing 'their work' in a neat, orderly, and timely fashion"

(p. 164). Children are determined to be "good students" on the basis that the child can cooperate, share, take turns, sit still, focus his energy on learning (Jardine et al., 2003), so as to maintain and reinforce the societal norms and collective goals of our state.

While Jardine et al. (2002) write, "[s]chool robs too many [children] of the ability to feel, touch, and embrace the world with energy, imagination, and ferocious appetite" (p. 164), the containment of imagination that Jardine et al. discuss was indeed part of Plato's "conscious social reproduction" (Feinberg, 2006, p. 13), and certainly part of a school system established to do the same. To be sure, from its very beginnings, our public schools in Canada have been structured to reinforce, maintain, and conserve the values and the goals of the state, and have consistently treated children as the means to bring forth a more just and stable society. In Canada, the earliest public schools began with Platonic aims of inculcating unified and firm cultural values within the citizens. While the early English schools desired to instill within their children "a body of sentiments and traditions that cause it to differ from the United States" (Lower in Tomkins 1986, p. 17), (a goal that, interestingly enough, still seems to be a part of the curricula of modern Canadian schools), the French focused their attentions on making children "good servants of the King…and of God" (Tomkins, 1986, p. 12). On the walls of the early schools hung portraits of the Queen and the crucifix as ever-present reminders of the common good, which must be served by good students and good citizens. Today, the Canadian flag adorns the walls reminding us of our duty to the maintenance of the state above all else.

Like in Plato's educational system, children in today's schools are consistently seen as "our greatest natural resources" (Jardine, 2006; 2003; Seidel, 2007)--the future of our very own Republic. Their "ontological vocation" (Freire, 1970, p. 37) in these spaces is not to live, but instead to live for and contribute to the state. Like petroleum, children are farmed, refined and separated, and then shipped out into the world to be used to fulfill society's aims. As raw materials, children are removed from their parents, and then are "moulded" (to use a word from Plato) through the educational process into "functional mechanical objects bound to economic (ab)use value" (Wallin, 2006, p. 18). Schools become mass-producers of successfully contained and packaged objects designed to fit in to the machine-like system. As in Plato's time during which an individual's value was determined by his ability to maintain justice in the state, a child's value is determined by the shape he takes after moving through the automated, assembly line-like school system and the role he takes in "contributing to society."

But thought of in these crude terms, children are likened to plastic--automatons (Wallin, 2006) with faces fixed in a dull stare, unable to laugh, cry, or move freely, their bodies contained in tight little boxes, and their minds mechanical, void of all imagination. Though these plastic figures may complete their task of creating a stable and harmonious state, Jason Wallin (2006) writes: "we are thrust into the position of having to decide: are these 'children' alive or dead?" Isn't it frightening and dangerous to think of our "good *children"* as those who most closely resemble robots (Wallin, 2006)?

Not only is there danger for our children in carrying out a curriculum designed to stifle and contain life, as we dehumanize and devalue our students as active and living participants in their own learning and in the world, there is danger for us as educators. For in these spaces, we become oppressors, and in becoming oppressors, we too become, as Freire (1970) suggests, less and less human. In our desire to create "good children," Freire (1970) explains that we "overlook the concrete, existential, present situation of real people" (p. 93). As we steal the opportunity for children to become on their own, to believe that they have the power to change and grow and live, we dehumanize them, and in so doing, dehumanize ourselves (Freire, 1970). By believing that we have the answers and are in ourselves complete, we hinder our own ontological vocation to become and struggle to be more and more human.

Indeed, I remember thinking about the irony of the framed artwork on the walls of my first classroom that showed images of social justice with words below that read: "respect all life" and "reject violence." I realized that by seeing my students as problems, or resources, or products and by failing to allow the students to *be*, I was living in a classroom of hypocrisy; I was failing to respect all life, and instead was committing violence each day. I remember feeling like an oppressor.

It is not surprising then, that so many teachers resent their work, their duties, and their situations. It is not surprising then that so many teachers want to leave.

How do we then, as teachers, who are mandated to teach students to "contribute to society," honour the lives of the living beings who sit and move and wiggle in front of us each day?

Is this for Marks?

January 24, 2013

It took me three days to talk myself up to be able mark my students' final exams. I read the exams once and almost cried at the prospect of putting numbers – so final – on students' work, their lives. How could I possibly label these children that I've grown to love over the year "excellent," "proficient," "satisfactory," "limited"? How could I put numbers next to their names?

I read through the exams again and berated myself for failing them. I haven't taught them anything. I am a terrible teacher. I need to teach the structure better. I need to teach exam writing.

I read through the exams again and this time railed against the structures: What is this test testing? Why do we make them do such meaningless tasks? What does this test have to do with life? with who they are? How does this bring forth life? I know that they can write so much better about things that matter to them. They can think so much better than this. Why won't you let them show you?

At last, I realized I had to put it all aside. I had a job to do. So I ignored all that stirred within me. I ignored their names and the pain I felt at putting numbers on them. I pushed aside my emotions and my qualms and my sense of humanity. And I did my job.

As the stacks of grade papers piled up in front of me quickly and efficiently, I felt proud.

And then I felt sick.

Though prior to industrialization, schools and learning existed (and even flourished) without grades (Tocci, 2008), in today's schools, they are seen as "essential to learning" (Blount, 1997, p. 331); that is, they are seen as *inherent* and *fundamental* to learning. And as a result, students are often unwilling to engage in learning without it being "for marks". Grades have become so entrenched in the day-to-day workings of schools that one critic commented that imagining a school without grades would be like imagining America without money (Bell, 1994). Though, as Tocci (2008) argues, a grade is only "one tiny inked marking" (p. 773), it takes on "an objective existence of [its] own" (Leitch, 2010, p. 650). Although students enter the classroom to learn, they quickly are made aware that the product of their learning--their knowledge--will be quantified and the number given to that product will hold importance beyond its simple shape.

In this space, grades take on human powers; they become "gatekeepers," sorters, and motivators. As such, students, teachers, and parents alike, have all become more and more aware that a single grade has the power to change the direction of a person's life.

> That is, they may perceive that individual students indeed are ranked on the basis of student assessment by educators for purposes of admission to particular school courses and programs, access to support services that are within and also external to the school, inclusion in enriched educational experiences, assignment to groups of students who share particular interests or learning needs, inclusion in public celebration rituals such as honour rolls and school assemblies, admission to postsecondary institutions, and success with scholarship applications, for example (GoA, 2009, p. 42).

Sadly, the all-powerful grade is rarely questioned, and as a result, its powers oppress, control and constrain individuals, making the *number* more important than the "I."

This, Karl Marx (2010) would have argued, is an (un)natural consequence of the capitalist mode of production. In the neoliberal paradigm (and the social, intellectual, and cultural spheres that are determined by it), "very trivial thing[s]" (p. 663) become objects of great importance that shape and guide (and ultimately disembody) the lives of workers. Learning, something so natural, becomes only a means to an end, a strategy to get better grades and produce better results. Rather

than being the life-sustaining breath that it is, learning becomes something that students have to *do*. This is a tragic result of our focus on grades - one with haunting repercussions, for as Jardine et al. (2006) put it, we have, in these spaces, "drained the life out of what we love" (p. 137).

Our relationships with students in this sense become reduced, as Marx (2010) warned, to "mere money relations" (p. 659). And writing--something so natural, so human--becomes only a means to an end, a strategy to get better grades and produce better results. Rather than being the life sustaining breath that it is, learning becomes something that students have to do to satisfy their oppressors and their demands for clean, scientific products. Writing, something that should make students feel alive and human becomes "a mere means to existence" (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 7).

Many have written about the pressures of standardized exams and have problematized their use in schools seeing them as inauthentic representations of learning. And yet, despite our awareness of their problems, (in fact, as a result of our awareness of their problems), so many of us find ourselves teaching more and more to the test (Slomp, 2007). Slomp (2007) asserts: "Increased pressure to align exam scores and school scores leads to an increase in teachers' focus on teaching and assessing (in the classroom context) the skill-set captured by the exam's construct" (p. 271). This, Slomp (2007) sees as a problem "because the diploma exam is only measuring a limited portion of the curriculum" (p. 271) which, when guiding classroom practice, leads to only a limited exploration of the ELA

curriculum. *The Government of Alberta Student Assessment Survey* (2009) admits the same:

> [t]eachers often limit important outcomes rather than address *all* curriculum outcomes. For example, some teachers favor rote memorization techniques instead of deep learning and student engagement in real-world math problems, in their mistaken belief that this will improve test scores. (p. 8)

Furthermore, and much more problematically, Slomp (2007) suggests, "The writing construct of the writing component of the English 30-1 diploma exam supports limited student learning" (p. 273). Overall, it is clear that the standardized tests *drive* rather than *support* student learning (Slomp, 2007).

However, the problems with the ways that standardized tests drive pedagogy and writing instruction in the classroom go deeper than student learning. For when we teach writing as if it were a magic formula that we dole out to the students, we teach students that we, the teachers, are gods that must be worshipped for we will give out "gifts" to those who listen and worship well. Students believe that the teachers have all the answers, that they will be able to prepare them to succeed on the diploma exam, and so they wait for us to dole out the formulas for a "good essay." But as we do so, we teach them to be passive recipients of these gifts--receptacles. So instead of living, breathing human beings, students become boxes--containers, "things" (as Freire (1970) writes), filled up with stuff that takes up space but does not sustain them or nurture them or help them on their ontological path to "becoming human" (Leggo, 2004). This

is a sad consequence of focus on products, for in turning students into objects--in reducing them to containers because we don't trust them or believe in their ability to come to know on their own--we teach them that freedom isn't something that they can have on their own, that they cannot *become* on their own.

Tragically, then, above all else, students learn to be self-deprecating, *to ward off themselves, to pray for deliverance from* (> latin *deprecatus*). "They call themselves ignorant and say the 'professor' is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen" (Freire, 1970, p. 63). It is no surprise then, that English teachers all over have students like the young Carl Leggo (1989) who believe that they "[don't] have anything worth saying" (p. 74)--that they "have nothing to write."

Instead of trusting in their own experiences and their ability to use and value those experiences as ways to come to know and understand the world more fully, instead of trusting that they do, in fact, have something to write about, something to say, something to discover through their own writing process, they trust only the teacher. "Almost never do they realize they, too, 'know things' they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men" (Freire, 1970, p. 63), so instead, they do only what they are told—inauthentic, disingenuous, and useless as that may be.

As we mark up their pages with red ink or place a number on their words, we slice through them, leaving shreds of them--bloodstains on the paper. Sad and frightening as this may be, it isn't surprising to Zhao (2007) who maintains that the American construction of individuals as "doers" rather than "beings"

interferes with educators' abilities to "nurture and develop the intellectual structure of students' minds" (Zhao, 2007, p. 13). Because teachers, schools, and the culture as a whole "celebrate" (Zhao, p. 2007, p. 6) and emphasize observable behaviours and the "external (doing) part of humanity" (Zhao, 2007, p. 3), students' inner selves are inevitably ignored and even oppressed.

I remember this moment clearly: I was in grade 12 and we were discussing existentialism, when my English teacher (frustrated, I'm sure, by my characteristic argumentativeness and questioning) said to me: "Lindsay, your opinion does not belong in this class."

So I walked out.

I wonder how many of our students walk out, drop out, burn out because their opinions, their experiences, their lives "don't belong" in the classroom? How many students give up because they are told that they don't matter, that what matters is correctness or the exam. How many students are told that the motifs in *Macbeth* are more important than their own struggle to do what is right, or their own attempts to live and adapt to the conventions of a new country? In his time in schools, Leggo (1989) admits: "I never wrote about my one trip to the French island of St. Pierre or about picking up empty bottles or about my sense of sharp conviction when I was nine that I was hell-bound because I knew that Pikey played strip poker with Holly and Cathy or about my grandmother who laughed with tears telling stories about Old Man Giles carting away the waste from the

outhouses" (p. 77-78). Instead, he, like so many others in my classroom and others', wrote to satisfy the teacher, wrote to satisfy the requirements of the exam, wrote to please, instead of writing to live.

In our English classrooms, so often writing and learning become *matters of doing*, *means of production*, not life-sustaining and *human* activities. To the teacher and the student, learning becomes meaningless--"an *external* existence that exists *outside him,* independently, as something alien to him" (Marx, 2010, p. 653). The writing of students becomes mechanical, devoid of meaning, and devoid of humanity.

Even Leggo (2005), a poet who today seeks to "live poetically" in the world, describes his own high school writing as "the feeble mechanical offspring of intercourse with conventions and rules and the teacher's red pencil, of intercourse without desire" (Leggo, 1989, p. 83) not a dialogue with the self and/or the teacher and/or the world. Seidel's (2007) experience is similar:

> In school I became a 'good writer' and I churned out many perfect formulaic essays absolutely to my teachers' specifications and praise… I had never experienced before, among them a) the ethical responsibility to the work of writing itself, b) the creative and difficult obligation to become a servant to the work and to the craft (not to a teacher, editor, publisher), and c) to learn to write with freedom and without strict method or structure, rather out of purpose and love for life and language itself. (p. 3)

Sadly it seems that under the neoliberal paradigm of our schools, an essay has been transformed from an attempt, or a trial, as the etymology suggests (essay >Fr. *essayer* – to try, to attempt), into a product--one that better be written properly, formed well, and structured to hold up under intense scrutiny. This meaning of "essay" seems far from the early use of the verb "essay" used in an early English translation of the Biblical story of the Prodigal Son, in which a young man leaves his father's home, strays from the expected path and "essays the world," and afterwards is welcomed back into his father's home to a feast upon the table. Unlike the father in the Prodigal Son, the lord we serve in the West is much less forgiving. After we have essayed the world--tried it out, attempted to live in it in unexpected ways, on expected paths, or indeed no path at all--the Market does not run forward to us with welcoming arms after our own attempts have gone wrong. Instead, after our trials, we find that it has already lavished its fatted calves upon a select few of those who stayed behind to labor and generate profits. Our own journeys, attempts, and moments off of The Path are, under the banner of neoliberalism, forever linked with the wastefulness, extravagance, and recklessness of the Prodigal Son, but without the forgiveness offered to the boy.

The implications for education are profound: children don't take risks in their writing and students who find themselves lost, behind, or simply "not on the right track" are increasingly "left behind" (as much as the American policy would like us to presume otherwise). This is what Allman (2007) calls the "cruel irony" (ch. 1) of capitalism: what is presented as a system that would give all the

opportunity to succeed necessarily requires a certain amount of "dumping" in order for certain groups to reach the divine.

This is far from the vision of education that I hold for our children. A vision of a world wherein all children are valued for who they are not for what they produce, wherein students might live and breathe fully and humanly in our schools and in our world. While my awareness of this discrepancy between what I want and what is might be important, I worry that it might not be enough to bring forth change.

A Time to Change

December 19, 2012

As time shakes its angry head at me, I know that I will be unable to fight it now. I am too far behind. The monster has caught up to me and threatens to swallow me whole. And that means spending less time being human - spending less time allowing my students to be human. My writing instruction will change now, as it has throughout the course of the semester each time I felt Time's breath on my neck. I will abandon what I know to be true about writing and instead of acknowledging that writing takes time to think and wait and connect and grow, I will turn it into a product – and I will turn my students into the machines that plug in numbers and letters into a formula to create something that mirrors the product from the exam.

Here is a story about Time:

The world was once in chaos, full of disorder and full of possibility. Fearing his mortality, the Titan Kronos sliced open the heavens and placed the world on a line of time.

Still, afraid for his life, Kronos began to eat his children, swallowing them whole out of fear that they would take away his power. Afraid for her last child, Kronos' wife, Gaia, replaced her youngest with a stone in order to trick her angry husband. Unable to tell the difference, Kronos swallowed the stone instead of the baby Zeus.

As I think about this, I wonder: How often do we swallow our children whole? How often do we turn our children into stones and objects to trick the gods of time? Is this -- a time that would swallow our children, a time that cannot distinguish between stones and children – a time we want in our schools?

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So much time in our schools is spent rushing: rushing to finish the race, rushing to get through the course. It's no wonder that so many people feel, like Seidel (2007) "colonized and imprisoned" (p. 41) by time.

Like in industry, time in our schools is seen objectively, as "absolute and invariant" (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002, p. 685), rather than subjectively. As such, time is seen to be independent, external, and unchangeable. Therefore, time becomes a powerful constraining force (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002). We find ourselves "rushing, rushing, rushing" (Seidel, 2006, p. 1901) and struggling to find time to "go to the washroom and eat some lunch" (Seidel, 2006, p. 1901). We see time as chronos, (universal, serial, linear, and quantitative time (Smith, 1986,

p. 6)) "experienced as the constant buzzing interruption of 'bells,' the disciplining of time, forcing us to be always *on time*, to move to a schedule, both in curriculum topics and the calendar rhythm of days" (Seidel, 2007, p. 54). In such a space, we inevitably sacrifice some of our children out of fear that we will not get things done on time, that we will not be able to maintain our power.

Whitrow (1988) argues that our understanding of time in the West has been shaped, in large part, by the Judeo-Christian trope. Unlike the Greeks who focused on the present and the past (Whitrow, 1988) and the Egyptians who "had very little sense of history or even of past and future" and instead "regarded time as a succession of recurring phases," (Whitrow, 1988, p. 25) the Jewish people had a linear and teleological understanding of time and the world. Christianity "inherited the peculiar Jewish view of time with its hope of redemption," (Whitrow, 1988, p. 56) "a decidedly linear character, a sense of dramatic unfolding of events, a medium for the disclosure of the Divine" (Smith, 1986, p. 14). It is from this paradigm that comes the "modern idea of time's unidirectional nature" (Whitrow, 1988, p. 53).

Yet, nothing solidified the importance of time in daily life as did the realization by the mercantile class that "time is money" and "consequently must be carefully regulated and used economically" (Whitrow, 1988, p. 110). In business, as in religion, if used efficiently, time would bring forth redemption, glory, and the divine. With the adoption of the Protestant Work Ethic as the foundation of capitalism and economic production in the West, this commandment to be efficient, effective, and forward thinking found itself

entrenched in the daily life of Westerners. Time as mechanical, measurable, and absolute (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002) became the model in industry as a way to "give rhythm and form to their everyday work practices" (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002, p. 687) and also to ensure accountability and economy.

Our diploma exams in Alberta serve as a striking example of these sorts of neoliberal accountability measures in schools. Employed just as much to keep students accountable for their learning as to keep teachers accountable for teaching and evaluate effectiveness in the education system, the diploma exam allows stakeholders to monitor and "evaluate teachers" (GoA, 1997, p. 45), "evaluate schools" (GoA, 1997, p. 46), and "evaluate school districts" (GoA, 1997, p. 46). So we give the exam (Time's hungry belly) a rock--pieces of writing devoid of humanity, devoid of nutrients, devoid of life. And the exam swallows the rock whole.

This is far from the vision of "curriculum in abundance" (Jardine et al., 2006) we hold for our children--where the curriculum is living, growing, evolving and blossoming in a space where students are actively involved in activities that sustain them and help them thrive, where students are involved as "living parts of the living human inheritance" (Jardine et al. 2006, p. 11). Though, in our schools--in our lives--we often feel like they do: "[o]ur bodies do not belong to clock time" (Seidel 2007, p. 82). Truly, our bodies belong to the earth.

The danger in focusing on the end, focusing on the deadlines (the *dead*-lines), focusing only on the exam, becomes that we end up spending our lives

concerned with death and forgetting that education is for living--that *life* is for living.

What Smith (1986) sees as kairos is a much more humanistic model of time--a time that depends on context, on situation, and recognizes the struggle, the tension--inherent in *living* and *being*. "Implicit [in kairos] is the concept of an *individual* time" (Smith, 1986, p. 11, emphasis in the original). It is a time that focuses on individuals, that sees us together, dependent on one another and on our surroundings. It is not a mechanical time--a time that causes individuals to march to the rhythm of the clock. It is not a "lonely time" (Seidel, 2007, p. 89) or a time of "being for another" (Freire, 1970, p. 49). It is not a time that destroys life or swallows whole. It is a time of being *with* others, for being with the world.

Unlike the followers of the Judeo-Christian mentality, the Mayans never saw "time as the journey of a single bearer with his load" (Whitrow, 1988, p. 95), and instead were able to see the world as magical rather than scientific (Whitrow, 1988). With a more subjective time, we are able to take opportunities to walk outside and experience nature without worrying about whether it will improve results on the diploma exam. In this time, "as we…let go of the time of the future, tumble off the line of time, we get a sense of the sacredness of life, of the movement of time" (Seidel, 2007, p. 89). In this time, we experience the magic of our world: nature, relationships, communities. In this time, we experience life.

This is the time that I hoped to see in our schools. This is the time that I left business school for. Yet, while I realize now that this is the time I crave in our schools, I am still not sure how I might bring it forth. However, I believe that

asking questions is the first act of critical thought--the thought that brings forth change: So I ask: what would happen if we moved from industrial time--clock-time, *chronos*, objective time--to a more subjective time? What would happen if instead of constantly looking toward the future we began to see the world cyclically? Or began to contemplate or meditate on the present? What if we shifted from chronos to kairos; shifted from seeing the world as bounded in universal time, to seeing the world as filled with opportunity (Smith, 1986, p. 5)? Would I still swallow my children whole?

Present Tensions

October 20, 2012

Yesterday Casey asked if she could share her writing – "it is mushy," she warned.

How could I turn down such a request?

Yet, three or four years ago, I would have. I would have wanted to get things done. I would have shut down the unexpected.

But today, I welcomed the surprise. And what a joy it was to go with the flow, to welcome the tides. Casey shared her writing – a piece about being in love – a perfect piece. From her. Straight from her soul. Vulnerable, funny, full of exciting images and powerful words. And the students responded. How could they not? There was joy in the space. Joy at writing. Joy in humanity.

Her excitement inspired two more students to share: one sang a song she just wrote, and one—a boy who sits quiet and hunched over – read a piece with a metaphor about a diamond that sparkled and would not break. Perfect.

I was overjoyed yesterday. I loved my job yesterday – and I couldn't help but say that to colleagues. Students are sharing themselves. They are writing things that they care about. Things that they want to talk about and share with others. They are excited to learn about themselves and the world. And are excited to give that piece of themselves with others.

It is hard to live in a space in which so much must get done while life keeps trying to break through. As teachers, we are asked to live with this tension daily, to live with the question of whether to "keep pushing forward" or embrace the moments that dance out before us.

In a world in which so much is predicated on a mythical future that we are trying to prepare for--or wait for--or change, it is easy to forget that there are children sitting in front of us *today*. At a curriculum conference in Edmonton in 2011, Jackie Seidel spoke of the irony of the Alberta Teacher's Association's slogan: "The Future. It is why teachers teach." Behind this neoliberal, teleological slogan that speaks to the importance of advancement and progress and what might come next above all else, is the sad reality that education so often sees children as

a means to bring forth an (mythical) end rather than living breathing beings that sit before us today, beings who *need us today*.

Embracing a kairotic time--a more poetic time, a time focused on the beautiful moments of today--requires us to live within the tension that exists when forces pull us in different directions. It requires us to take time to sit and wait and dwell together. So despite the rush and fear and anticipation of the future, we must, Aoki (2005) asserts:

> make time for meaningful striving and struggling, time for letting things be, time for questions, time for singing, time for crying, time for anger, time for praying and hoping (p. 161).

While preparing for the future, we must allow *life* to happen *now*.

To do this, the teacher must be "open to the paradox of being both in control and not in control" (Park, 2005, p. 154). To be sure, this is not a simple feat. It is filled with tensions and contradictions. We feel afraid, we feel tired, we feel pulled, and torn, and we question. But Aoki (2005) reminds us of Olympic figure skating champion Brian Orser who said that his best skating happened not when he was calm, but when he was living in tension--when his body and soul "resonate with the ice" (p. 360). Perhaps it is for this reason, Jeff Park (2005) in his book, *Writing at the Edge: Narrative and Writing Process Theory*, writes:

> I would suggest that the teacher and the writers inhabit a paradoxical space—a space that allows for trust, love, care, and encouragement, yet simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically, pushes for deeper, more critical and creative thinking. To maintain

> such a balance is difficult work for a teacher but it is the heart of the practice. It is easy to swing too far to one of the binary positions and in doing so, negate the other polarity. It is necessary for the teacher to remain willing to stay in the uneasiness and uncertainty of the paradoxical space, and to do so takes enormous courage and a sense of responsibility because no easy methodology and roadmaps exist. (p. 159)

Perhaps we, like figure skaters, can feel the edges and rhythms of our practice better when we are living in a state of tension, resisting the human inclination to control the art, and instead letting it work through us freely. Letting ourselves, as Orser explains, "become the music" (in Aoki, 2005, p. 362).

In his *Pedagogy of Hope,* Freire (1994) tells us that "[t]eaching is a creative act, a critical act, and not a mechanical one" (p. 68). We are not machines; we live and breathe in the surprises and unexpected moments. So in an effort to live authentically in the classroom, we have to remind ourselves that we are not automatons; that, we, unlike machines, "think by leaps, by inference and intuition, by hunch, guess and accident, especially accident." (Murray, 1989, p. 46).

As difficult as this may be in a world that values the efficiency and productivity of machines over humans, we must remember that humanity is at the heart of our profession. Indeed, only the "word processor thinks neat and complete." (Murray, 1989, p. 46). Humans are messy, and the life we live is

messy. It is full of surprises and joys, sadness and fears. To fail to embrace these tensions is to fail to embrace life.

Getting out of the Way

October 13, 2012

I sat with my students and we assessed their proposals together. Sitting next to them, I didn't come down on them and impose myself upon their work. We thought about their work together and assessed it together. We talked about why they wanted to write about their topics, and they told me about what they thought about writing this. It made a difference. I wasn't this god coming down upon them, threatening their livelihood or dolling out riches, instead, I was beside them, supporting them, walking with them.

In his dissertation, Slomp (2007) discusses the difficulties of assessment, seeing it as one of the most troublesome aspects of teaching and, specifically, teaching English Language Arts. To be sure, my own colleagues and I seem to struggle most with this aspect of the job--indeed seeing it as a "job" or a task that "must be done" rather than as a means to bring forth learning or understanding. I have said on numerous occasions that if I didn't have to ever put a grade on an assignment, I'd be a happy teacher.

I can't help but think that teachers and students might feel this way too if it weren't for the habit of giving and receiving grades. Penny Kittle (2008) explains:

> Writers need feedback, not evaluation. I believe this. I embrace it. I seek readers as I struggle with my thinking, but I don't want a letter grade on my writing. It won't help me with that piece; it will likely damage my confidence and disrupt my process. (p. 208)

We know in our hearts that it is this aspect of the job that creates divisions between teachers and students, fragmenting the relationships that teachers so desperately hope to build. I have had countless students carry anger with them after receiving a grade that they didn't want on a piece of writing that they put their hearts and souls into. And yet, our school constructs demand grades, demand assessments. So, as teachers, we are torn by what we feel in our guts is best for writers, a conundrum that Kittle explains like this: "Letter grades on individual writing pieces—*bad*. Individual grades that can be averaged for a progress report…-- *necessary*" (p. 208).

So despite the fact that assessment is something that has to be done, and something that has been done for so many years, many are beginning to explore ways that assessment might be done differently, done in a way that honours the child and the relationship between teacher and student. Kittle (2008) writes about the importance of feedback and of guiding students to become more and more aware of what they can and are yet unable to do in terms of writing. She guides her students back to their process, asks them to experiment, writes them letters in response to their work, and gives them opportunities to revise and redo. The student self assesses individual tasks and his body of work in a portfolio. Groups of students workshop pieces and give feedback to one another and celebrate

successes and help each other up after failures. In her assessing, the student becomes just as important as the teacher.

The word "assess" comes from the Latin *assidere* "to sit beside." And yet, so rarely do we sit beside children as we assess them and their work. Instead we sit far away from them, outside of class time, outside of school hours, or while *they* do *their* work. Rarely is assessment thought of as something that students and teachers engage in together, side by side, in solidarity. I ask: what would it be like if we were to "sit beside" the young while we assessed them?

While this may be more difficult (indeed, Slomp (2007) explores the challenges of conferencing and assessing at students' sides) and perhaps even more messy than assessing already is, such actions might help teachers maintain and foster the (often fragile) relationships that they work to build in the classroom. By lowering oneself to sit beside students, a teacher engages in an act of solidarity-building in the classroom.

Jeff Park (2005) explains that these deliberate choices to remove bricks and take down walls (exhausting as the work might be) move a teacher beyond pedagogy and into praxis. Praxis, critical theorists explain, is the horizon at which theory and practice meet. Freire (1970) explains the importance of praxis in a classroom that seeks to honour the humanity of all present:

> We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so would reduce theory to a pure verbalism or intellectualism. By the same token, to negate theory for the sake of practice, as in the use of

> dialogue as conversation, is to run the risk of losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice (p. 19).

This praxis is ultimately what I hope for as a teacher, and ultimately what I struggled with early on in my career. Afraid to be "disrespected" or not valued as an authority figure, I saw myself as someone that might "fix" things for students, that might bring forth their salvation with my great ideas and rigid assessment practices. And yet, I realize now that this is precisely where I was mistaken. Freire (1970) writes: "The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into *communion* with the people whom he continues to regard as totally ignorant is grievously self-deceived" (p. 61). And so, despite my best intents and attempts to be the "Teacher" in the classroom, I instead forgot that teaching means much more than authority and rules. Teaching, to me, means spending time *with*--not above--students. Teaching is communion--the teacher is student and the student is teacher.

To bring forth praxis into the classroom through activities like conferencing, peer assessment, and self-evaluation helps to break down the walls between authority and subject, teacher and student, school and life.

> In this model, the teacher is not simply an authoritative figure who instructs and controls the people within the space. Instead, the teacher is open to the paradox of being both in control and not in control, while maintaining a source of non-judgmental power that allows each member to have his or her own agency and identity… In this sense, the pedagogical space contains trust and becomes a

> community where sharing of ideas and thoughts is allowed and encouraged without the threat of dominance. (Park, 2005, p. 154)

And yet, this too is not a simple task, for indeed it requires trust to be the foundation of our classrooms. The student must trust the teacher and the teacher must trust the student in order for both to give up control and allow surprises and humanity to guide the day-to-day work in the schools. A teacher in Sondra Perl's (1998) study, *Through Teachers' Eyes,* articulates the difficulty and "pain" he experienced in the process of giving up control in the classroom:

> Can I convey the overwhelming difficulty of giving up control, of having patience, of 'knowing' in my heart of hearts that probably the less I do, the more and better kids will write? Getting out of the way is a hard thing for an activist teacher. It's the feeling of not being needed or wanted. It's the pain of setting up a circumstance that makes me feel superfluous in so many ways. (p. 256)

But Perl's work tells us that that is just what teachers need to do to bring forth change and growth: "get out of the way."

The skill it takes to "get out of the way" and relinquish control so that the teacher might sit or walk beside his students is far different than the skills defined in pre-service programs, beginning teacher handbooks, and contract evaluations that speak to the importance of being "in control," and of "managing" both the teacher's own humanity and that of the class. But to bring forth a classroom built on the foundation of respect for human life and dignity requires teachers to *respect* life, not shut it down. To do so requires the teacher to be vulnerable

himself (which is not a simple task in a society that is so afraid of exposing our own weaknesses) so that students have reason to trust him and see him as human. And to that end, the teacher must see the students as human beings whose selves are critical to the relationship and the learning. For indeed, Freire (1970) explains "[t]rusting the people is the indispensible precondition for revolutionary change" (p 60).

Letting Go

November 30, 2012

I finally got around to marking the final pieces that my 20-2s wrote a few weeks ago. Abed wrote 3 pages (single spaced!) on cricket, Raheel wrote 9 pages (single spaced!) on his Dad's experiences in the war, Krista finally abandoned her "plan" to write about Global Warming and instead wrote a rap about hardness and her need to be strong and withdrawn, James wrote about the time when his family was so broke that they got "paid in bread." They wrote real pieces and these kids (20-2s--for whom getting a sentence about Macbeth is often like pulling teeth) wrote three or four drafts of pieces that turned into powerful pieces of writing that spoke to who they were as human beings.

I almost cried when I read Krista's piece, I was so proud of her. I was overjoyed to see her walk around all morning with that assignment with her 95% on it in her hand – the pride at being recognized for writing something meaningful etched on her face. Seeing these kids excel, seeing them write about things that mattered –

this made me feel like a teacher. This made me feel like I was doing something real. Did they write perfect essays with perfect mechanics or organization? No. But they wrote pieces that mattered, they wrote pieces that spoke to who they were as people. They wrote pieces in their own voices. They wrote pieces that had messages that others could understand.

And isn't this – not perfect grammar and punctuation – what writing is?

I have never felt this much joy in putting marks on assignments. I usually hate it. It usually breaks me down and destroys my soul. Marking these pieces lifted me up.

I distinctly remember saying to each of my classes on the first day of school, my first day of teaching: "if you take away anything from this class, I hope that it will be the ability to write a good essay." I needed to prove myself as a new teacher--prove to the world that I knew how to teach, and with the diploma exam functioning as a judge of "good teaching" I knew that that was the standard I would have to reach or (in my mind) exceed. I wanted to be the best teacher, have the best results, have students who could write better than all the other teachers'. I wanted them to write perfect thesis statements, follow the plans to write a perfect essay, complete with topic sentences and five paragraphs and perfectly integrated quotations. Never did I question what a "good essay" might

be; nor did I consider or reflect upon why a "good essay" might be my goal or what writing a "good essay" might do to my students.

So I taught students to write drafts, gave them "recipes" and "formulas" for writing logically, and taught them to edit their work for clarity and correctness. But I knew, as well as the students knew, that this wasn't writing. I knew that this wasn't authentic. Indeed, this kind of writing is, as Murray (1989) explains, a "limited, schoolbound form of writing" (p. 22). It is a single form used only by school children and (to some extent) by literary critics. We teach as if we expect our students to stay in school forever or as if we believe they all must become the next Northrop Frye. It is no wonder that students don't want to write if they are told that the only writing that "counts" is the writing that looks like "this." It is no wonder that so many of our students hate school or see it as useless. It is no wonder that we hear constant cries of, "Why are we learning this?" "It doesn't relate to me." "How will this help me?" "When will we use this outside of school?" "This isn't meaningful."

But *this* is not the only kind of writing. And it is not the only kind of writing that should "count." Park (2005) argues that expressive writing can help students develop a better "understanding of self in relation to others and the world" (p. 147). And isn't this what we hope to help our students develop? Isn't this what the front matter of the ELA Program of Studies articulates, saying "As well as being an important aspect of culture, language is essential for forming interpersonal relationships, extending experience, reflecting on thought and action, and contributing to society" (p. 1)?

A shift to expressive writing not only validates individuals but can help validate our school system for those who are most disenfranchised--to those students who see school as a "waste of time." Indeed, "the use of expressive writing could validate the individual within the school system and society, both of which are often perceived as monolithic structures by students" (Park, 2005, p 146). As we let students become authors of their own experiences, they become authorities in the classroom. They begin to see that they, too, have something worth saying.

A big part of teaching, it seems, is learning to let go, get out of the way, let the cracks show, and let the unexpected in. It is learning to let go of that which we believe to be "teaching", to let go of the pressure placed on us by diploma exams and standards and demands. It is learning that our duty is not to teach students to write perfect texts that look like those that others have made. It is learning, instead, that "we have the responsibility to free our students from the tyranny of the printed page" (Murray, 1989, p. 26), that we have a responsibility to *life*. Our responsibility as teachers is to help students become--not to help them become "literary critics" or "great essay writers," but to become authentic beings: beings that believe they have something to say that's worth saying, beings that can think and express, beings that care to become.

In the writing classroom, we have great tools in our hands that can help our students do that: a pencil and a page. In order to give them the chance to become, we need to let go of these tools, put them in their hands, and let them hammer away.

Living humanly

Introduction

This section is perhaps the messiest of them all. While I tried to (somewhat artificially) separate writing, teaching, and living so that a reader might have some organizing structures, this section (both unintentionally and intentionally) shows the ways that these all weave together. Sometimes the weaves and knots are tighter than others, othertimes, the threads hang loose.

In this section, I explore the tensions that are inherent in living in our schools. I examine my own struggles to maintain hope, keep my fires burning, breathe freely, and help students live on in spaces that so often stifle rather than bring forth life.

*****

We began each class of my EDSEC 601 course in silence, listening to our breath as it entered our lungs, moved through our bodies, and back out into the world. It was an exercise in opening ourselves to possibilities, reconnecting to ourselves, and freeing our minds and souls from the words and expectations of others. But as much as I longed to listen to the air that moved through me, I have to admit that so often words crowded my mind, silencing my breath. Even in the silence of the room, words stirred within me, working in me and through me. Thoughts of deadlines, assignments, expectations, and the future displaced the life-giving breath that I was meant to attend to. Frustrated and saddened that I couldn't hear my breath, I felt like I had failed.

As I think about my time in schools, I realize how often it felt like--and still feels like--I couldn't find my breath. Always rushing, listening to the words of others, it is hard to hear the whispers of our own spirits.

The word breath has a long connection to the word spirit. The Ancient Greeks called both *pneuma*; in Latin, breath emerges from *spiritus*; and the Bible says that the Lord breathed life--spirit--into man. To Plato, (and then, ultimately the Christians who adopted many of his ideas) spirit resides (along with reason and appetite) in the soul and works within us, giving us the courage to search for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. The spirit animates us, moves within us and makes us whole.

But the words of others, Plato (2010) argues, write upon the soul (and the spirit there within)--shaping it, and distracting individuals from their ability to live well as human beings. For when words from external sources become elevated and even internalized to the point where they are seen as the "legitimate sons" (p. 81) of the individual, the individual's soul is distorted and his spirit becomes weak. And he attains, as Plato (2010) writes, "a condition you and I can only pray for." (p. 81)

The loss of new teachers' spirits has become a common concern in educational research, and while O'Brien and Schillaci (2002) do not call for prayer, their invocation to explore "what is taking place in…the profession that tends to change the teachers' views from compassion, [and] idealism… to what often seems like defeatism and cynicism" (p. 36) recalls Plato's fears about the loss of the Greek spirit. New teachers are often thought of as those who might

breathe life into a struggling system. And yet, too often, they find themselves out of breath, struggling to survive. Instead of sustaining and renewing the system with their vigor, they lose their drive, their courage, their spirits.

Like so many new teachers, in my first year teaching, I too found my spirit dampened, crushed, and even knocked out of me. Instead of going on a journey on which I would "walk alongside the young", as Smith (1999) says, I found myself upon a battlefield--"in the trenches"--trying to find and use as many strategies and weapons that I held in my arsenal to keep the students at bay. I created "behaviour management plans" (ATA, 2010, p. 6) and "systematically prepare[d] short- and long-range plans" (ATA, 2010, p. 7) to ensure that I'd be able to "attack the curriculum" successfully and efficiently. But I wasn't on a battlefield; I was in a classroom--under a poster on my wall that said "Reject Violence", no less.

Discouraged, angry, and deeply saddened by my own lack of integrity and inability to bring forth the vision that I held, I lost the courage to continue. I lost my fire, my spirit, and the energy I needed to bring forth life.

In this section, I struggle to understand my experience of losing my liveliness in schools. I hope to discover how I (and others) might live and breathe more freely in the midst of our schools and the language that exists within – language of war and cynicism, language of accountability and products, language of control and restraint. I hope to understand how new teachers might go on a journey with students when the language of our schools tells them that they are fighting a war. I hope to understand how new teachers might *live well*, rather than "survive" in schools. Ultimately, I hope that new teachers might find use in my

work to help them understand how their own bodies, minds, and experiences might be shaped by the language of teaching when they enter the classroom, so that they might not be drowned by it, but instead might learn to live within it, spirits intact. At the very least, by allowing the language of our schools to dwell within me for a while, I may find--as I began to discover in the silence at the beginning of my EDSEC 601 class--that I can release the power that these words hold over me and, once again, find my breath.

Anxieties in the Present

January 5, 2013

There's so much to do. There's so much to get done.

There are two more days left of Winter Break. I've had time to sit and think. I've had time to rest and focus on life and children and writing. I will go back to school in two days to the rush. Exams are coming. Report cards are coming. Semester end is coming.

I feel the anxiety creeping into my bones. How will I get it all done? How will I teach in the way I know in my heart and my bones that I should teach when there is so much to get done? Will we have time to think? Will we have time to write? Will we have time to live?

Exams are coming. Report cards are coming. The end is coming.

Will I forget the children that are already here?

In her PhD dissertation, Jackie Seidel (2007) writes about teaching on a line of time that pulls us away from the present. She recounts her experience teaching in a space where a "ticking clock governed" (p. 41) and, like a time bomb, forced them to hurry through the motions of teaching to ensure the end was not disastrous. She writes:

> An organic freedom which I had earlier in my teaching life perceived and experienced in school had all but disappeared and seemed a far-off dream. Gone were the professional development days filled with intellectual study, conversation and learning, now replaced with the consumer culture of success. We were mandated to demonstrate constant improvement and often spend our already limited 'PD' time reviewing results and discussing how we will 'improve' our achievement results in reading, writing, and mathematics. (p. 41)

As Seidel elucidates, so much of the language of our schools asks us to think and worry about the future, attend to deadlines, worry about what is coming next and, "plan down to the minute" (p. 6) and "overprepare" (ATA, 2010, p. 5) for the unexpected. The future must be constantly on our minds in our schools, so much that it is rare to see the *present* as a gift, but instead common to see it as a threat to meeting the next milestone or achieving the results that are expected.

One of the saddest and most shameful thoughts I had in my first year in schools was the thought that I could get things done much faster and prepare my students better for their exams if only they would stop asking questions, if only they'd stop coming in for help, if only they could just let me do my job.

It is a terrible thing when a teacher believes that she could teach better if there were no kids around.

When the teaching that we feel in our bones and our blood--the teaching that so many of us feel that we have been *called* to do--seems to conflict so profoundly with the structures of the school that bind us, it becomes hard to breathe through the chains and the ropes. Conflict between the soul of teaching and the world of schools can often seem paralyzing, for in these spaces, it often seems and "feels fundamentally impossible to intellectually or spiritually reconcile this living experience with the economic and future visions driving educational projects and dreams" (Seidel, 2007, p. 43).

It is no wonder then, that rates of depression and anxiety are increasing (Whitaker, 2010, in Smith, 2010) and that as I rushed through those spaces in my first years I found it hard to breathe. It is no wonder that one day the pressure on my chest sent me to the emergency room.

That day, when asked by the doctor, I described the weight that bore down on my chest as "child-sized." Was I right to describe it as such? Was it the children that were bearing down on me? Were the children trying to get my attention, shouting: "Focus on us! Attend to us! *We are right here!"* Or was I mistaken, did I misspeak? Was it instead the bricks and mortar of the spaces that I

found myself in that weighed down on me? Heavy walls. Heavy bricks. Crushing me. Crushing my body. Crushing my spirit.

Teaching is heavy work, Seidel (1991) writes. And Andy Fisher (2002) agrees:

> Anyone who knows what it is like to feel anxious or pressured--states in which it is hard to breathe--knows how claustrophobic our lived space can become and how tightly a dreaded future can squeeze in on us, such that we lose our ability to creatively and freely respond to the present moment. (p. 116 in Seidel, 1991, p. 43)

Beyond the obvious, that the children who sit in front of us today *need* us to respond, this is problematic for teachers: without breath--choked and claustrophobic--how can we possibly *live*?

Seeing Outside

October 15, 2012

I remember it clearly:

There were no windows. There were so many walls. I couldn't see out.

When I entered the profession, I hoped, like Freire (2008), that together with the young, I might begin to "re-create the world and make it more human" (p. 145). I believed in schools. I believed in teachers. I believed that I might bring forth new life to the place that I would soon inhabit.

On my first day of teaching, my principal remarked on my enthusiasm and excitement to the whole staff. She was excited by my passion. I wondered why. It seemed so strange to me that someone would see passion as being remarkable in schools. Shouldn't schools be filled with energy?

But in my first year of teaching, I found that energy and passion for change was indeed a strange thing.

I sat through department meetings each month with a leader with vision, a man with an enduring and profound care for children and belief in education, a human being who wanted to change the world with his teaching and leadership, but with each meeting, (though he hid it well) I saw his hope fade. I saw his convictions weaken as he found himself up against resistance from teachers, administration, and the systemic structures that all seemed so hard to change. And as he found himself against wall after wall, I began to feel deep in the pit of my stomach that if he couldn't break through the concrete, then there was no chance for me.

And so, despite a growing need for change, a growing need for life to be renewed, we stood there, trapped in our box, there, unable to think (or see, or live) outside of it. It was a cynical place. And soon, I too became cynical. Without light, I found myself growing accustomed to the dark.

The school I worked in during those years was built in 1966 at the peak of the Cold War. As were many buildings built during those times, this school was shaped like a box--a "shelter", with concrete gray wall after concrete gray wall and no windows to see out. Built as if to conserve life--to shelter it from the

changing world--this school, even forty years later, stands tall, protecting its inhabitants from change.

It is well known that schools are bastions of conservativism, but I worry about this. The walls of our schools, so often made of concrete and brick, make it so hard to see out, so hard to imagine that it might be another way. And "[we] believe--that is, [we] are conditioned to believe--that it cannot be changed" (Leitch, 2010, p. 649). This is, as Freire (1998) writes, a "hatefully fatalistic" (p. 36) view of the world. For when we believe that things cannot be changed, that they are the way they are because they have and will, thus, always be that way, we become, as Bernstein (1986) writes, "prisoners enclosed within [our world]" (p. 102).

I read once about a child who grew up enclosed in a room, trapped behind brick walls. That child never learned language, never learned, never grew. This is no different for us--walls, metaphorical or not, contain. With them firmly in place, our bodies weaken, our minds suffer, our spirits fade. We cannot grow. We cannot live.

This is far from what we hope for in education, where students and teachers might instead be able to become, to burst forth, to live and live well.

But if this is the case, if walls and conservativism are markers of schools, "then where is hope?" Jackie Seidel (2006) asks. Can we find it in these spaces? Can we see the light when the darkness is just so dark? Can we live and grow in darkness?

Burning Out

September 2, 2012

In this madness (?), chaos (?) it can be so easy to get bogged down in the minutia. So easy to get caught up in "getting it all done." So easy to get frustrated by the new administrative demands. So easy to feel angry and anxious. So easy to forget why we are doing all of these things. So easy to think that I might burn out again.

It is common in educational circles to lament the tendency for new teachers to quickly "burn out" upon entering the school system. While we speak of burnout frequently, the potency of the phrase is often forgotten and the layers of "sedimented meanings" (Fischer, 1986, p. 198, in Jardine et al., 2003, p. 198) inherent in the words are so often washed away in the river *Lethe* – the river of forgetfulness. However, it is within "this realm of ambiguous, lived familiarity and the evocations of sense and significance enfolded within it" (Jardine, et al, 2003, p. 195) that lies fertile ground for interpretive possibilities.

On the surface, the phrase speaks to the loss of energy, drive, spirit, and idealism that teachers often experience upon entering the classroom. Research tells us that while teachers often enter the profession with hope, seeing "teaching in a very broad and positive light" (O'Brien & Schillaci, 2002, p. 35), quickly, they find themselves feeling angry, constrained (Britzman, 2007), uncertain (Britzman, 2007), vulnerable (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2007), frustrated (McElhone, D. et al, 2009), discouraged, disillusioned, disappointed and depressed (Hammerness, 2008). As cynicism quickly displaces their idealism,

lethargy replaces their vigor, and depression quells their hope, we say that they are burning out.

This connection that we casually make between spirit, life, and fire is deeply entrenched within our Western mythology. In Christian, Ancient Greek, and First Nations' mythologies, fire is a sacred, divine, and primordial element that descends upon the earth - transforming it, giving the people that dwell upon it new life. In this regard, fire-as-spirit works within individuals, and gives them (divine) wisdom, courage, energy, and life. Without this animating force, mythologically speaking, the individual is simply a body: lifeless, dead. With this in mind, the notion of "burning out" has tragic pedagogical implications, for without spirit, teachers are nothing more than bodies - mindless, breathless, lifeless. Without spirit, our teachers come dangerously close to being automatons--robots who, day after day, move mechanically through the halls.

This is a tragic thought indeed, for embedded within the metaphor that new teachers' idealistic, animated, and hopeful spirits are flames is the suggestion that our schools *depend* on new teachers. Fire--volatile and powerful as it may be--is essential to the sustenance and continuance of our planet. Refusing to see the earth as fixed or foreclosed, fire works upon the earth, perpetually reshaping, revitalizing, and reforming its landscapes, continually giving it new life. Thus, always present in the suggestion that teachers might *burn out* is the implication that they *are fire* and are thus required on a *most basic level* to (re)shape, transform, and reinterpret the spaces that are present. Lacking this fire, our schools lack the catalyst for growth; they lack the catalyst for *life*. And if we

believe that, as Jardine (2000) writes, education is, at its core, concerned with the bringing forth of life (*educare*), then without this fire, our schools have the potential to become un-educational.

So what is required, then, to keep our schools educational? What is required, then, to keep the fires burning? What is required, then, to keep the spirits of new teachers ablaze?

Open Spaces

September 15, 2012

This year, busy though I have been, I feel I have kept my spirit alive. My body has been exhausted. I have come home night after night and have fallen asleep, but I have felt inspired, willing, hopeful. I have yet to feel that spirit burn out.

On a chemical level, fire requires oxygen; it requires air, openness. So if we think of the spirit as fire, then our liveliness, our courage, our animation depends on that same openness, that same space.

Still, curriculum and sociology of education scholar Michael Apple (1990) wrote that "the daily lives of teachers in classrooms are becoming ever more controlled, ever more subject to administrative logic that seeks to tighten the reins on the processes of teaching and curriculum" (p. 228). As a result of our neoliberal tendencies toward "centralization, standardization, and rationalization," (Apple, 1990, p. 228) he writes, "the reality of many teachers' lives bears little resemblance to the rhetoric" (p. 228) that speaks in favor of teacher empowerment, interpretive stances, and freedom in the classroom. While Apple

spoke of the realities of a world nearly twenty years removed from the one that I found myself in when I began teaching and that which we find ourselves today, his claims are no less valid. Teaching remains a profession "bound" (GoA, 1997, p. 3) by standards and best practices that bear with them a demand for literalism rather than interpretation, for teachers to fall in line rather than blaze freely.

But, it doesn't have to be this way. Education and educators don't have to be *bound.* Indeed, for life to emerge, all should be *open*. Jardine (2012) argues that "When it goes right, pedagogy is akin to a meditative practice, which, *when practiced*, can come to provide enough imaginative and intellectually vigorous and compelling "room" for students and teachers alike" (Jardine, 2012, p. 76). In light of the growing instances of anxiety and burnout in our schools, curriculum scholars are beginning to turn to contemplative and meditative practices in the classroom, practices that acknowledge the importance of space and time and the spirit in schools.

The Centre For Contemplative Mind in Society (2013), an organization devoted to bringing forth education that honours the spirit, envisions

> an education that promotes the exploration of meaning, purpose and values and seeks to serve our common human future. An education that enables and enhances personal introspection and contemplation leads to the realization of our inextricable connection to each other, opening the heart and mind to true community, deeper insight, sustainable living, and a more just society. (p. 1)

Heesoon Bai, Charles Scott, and Beatrice Donald (2009) at Simon Fraser University are exploring this sort of pedagogy, a pedagogy wherein teachers and students alike take the time to "indwell on [their] own being, moment by moment as [they] explore the art of awareness below" (p. 325) and to "[return] attention to where it originally belongs" (p. 325) rather than the standards and deadlines and endpoints that become so "real" in schools.

Practically, however, a teacher might ask, where might I find "space" to contemplate within this already packed curriculum?

Contemplative pedagogy, however, is not simply something that is added to an already packed full curriculum, but instead a transformation of how curriculum might be seen and lived in the classroom. Bai, Scott, and Donald (2009) suggest that "contemplative approaches include the capacity for knowing through silence, pondering deeply, beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness, and so on" (p. 327). The ELA curriculum does not seem incompatible with this sort of approach to learning and living. For indeed, it asks students to "reflect on the significance of cultural values and the fundamentals of human experience," "to grapple with the intricacies of the human condition," and "develop self-understanding" (GoA, 2003, p. 1). Meditative and reflective exercises like that which Naqvi (in Naqvi and Jardine, 2007) writes about, provide students and teachers alike the opportunity to consider their own lived experiences:

> [The teacher] spent time circulating a real apple and a plastic replica around the class, and the young children spent time

> thinking and talking and listening to conversations about what it means for something to be real and not fake, not plastic. What was discussed, as well, was the miraculous way in which humans have this ability to be conscious of, and to experience, the truth of things, to experience their reality and their gift, and to see through fakeness and phoniness. (p. 224)

This sort of reflective, philosophical, and meditative educational experience is far from the traditional "practice" that we see as teaching and students see as learning. This may not "prepare students" for an exam or the "real world" as we so often deem necessary, but it instead allows students to sit and dwell *in* the real world, in the space of the present, experiencing their reality and the gifts that the present brings. This sort of contemplative practice allows for questions and surprises and the openness out of which life might emerge.

This is a radical kind of practice to live out in these spaces, a practice that is still seen as "childish" and "laughable" or even a waste of time by traditionalists (Naqvi and Jardine, 2007, p. 220). Yet, in this world that has become evermore plastic, evermore filled with simulations and simulacrum, evermore crowded (Earth's population reached 7 billion people not long ago), it seems critical to push education into collisions with practices that help to create space to live and breathe in this world. Indeed, Naqvi and Jardine (2007) see "traditional education" that follows the Taylorized notions of efficiency and army regimentation as being greatly "impoverished" in these times that demand so much more.

There is something powerful in the notion of our schools as meditative, contemplative places--places where students and teachers alike might find peace rather than competition, silence rather than noise, openness rather than closing down.

My students were surprised when I told them at the beginning of the year that before writing we would always take one minute of "staring out the window time" before they started. This is a practice I adopted from Murray (1989) who insisted that both silence and the emptiness that comes before writing "should be accepted, even welcomed, and understood. It is an essential condition of constructing a new meaning. The slate is wiped clean, and we are freed from the failures and the successes of the past, especially from the successes, those attractive prisons of thought" (Murray, 1989, p. 136). In our schools, we so rarely offer students time to wait and wonder and hope. Students are used to being told to be quiet, to sit still, to listen – but we teach them to do these things so that they might "listen to the teacher" or "listen to the speaker" or to "work quietly". Rarely do we ask them just to listen--to let the silence speak. Rarely do we let them simply be open to possibilities. This is, I think, a terrible oversight, for as Leggo (1989) explains, "silence and utterance are inextricably related, two manifestations of language, diastole and systole…" (p. 172). The silence brings forth utterance; the silence punctuates the utterance, together creating the "immutable rhythm" (Leggo, 1989, p. 172) of the heart.

Surprising and rare as it may be, beginning a class with silence rather than chatter--the silence of waiting, hoping, and then writing--not only gives students

the opportunity to recharge and connect with themselves and their own heart rhythms but it gives us as *teachers* the opportunities to connect to our own selves and our own cores. And Leggo (2005) sees this time to reconnect to our own hearts as critical:

> Educators live such demanding and challenging lives that it is very difficult to maintain the time and location for nurturing the inner life. Teaching involves a constant drain on our resources and so a Sabbath is essential. Educators literally burn out. We need a healthy inner life if we are going to help others develop healthy inner lives. (p. 33)

We are part of a healing profession, but we can't heal if our own selves are fragmented. We can't tell others to take care of themselves if we won't do the same. Contemplative pedagogy like this encourages a "return to the self" (Bai, Scott, and Donald, 2009), not in a selfish, egocentric sort of way, but in an effort to help understand where the self resides within the world.

I still struggle to find this silence and these openings in schools; yet, as I write with my students, I have begun to find space. In the time at the beginning of my classes when I sit down to write, I am able to contemplate my place in schools and my place in the world. And in doing so, I, like Seidel (2006)

> remind myself consciously that there are parts of teaching that I should not allow to occupy my mind and heart. Not thinking too much about preparing for the future. Not thinking too much about

> high-stakes exams. Not thinking too much about competition, either between children, colleagues, or schools. (p. 1906)

In the silence, I find the space to let my spirit breathe.

The small moments of openness in our days gives us the chance to let our fires breathe and find the power to set others on fire. This is a critical and fundamentally educational endeavor; for as it blazes through a forest, burning its path through lands covered in tradition, authority, legends, and myths, fire re-interprets spaces that were once seen as stable. Refusing to see the earth as fixed or foreclosed, fire works upon the earth, defying tradition, stability, perpetually reshaping, revitalizing, and reforming its landscapes, continually giving it new life. Teachers' spirits, in the same way, when given the space to breathe, transform spaces and give new life.

So I ask: what would happen if our schools had space? What would happen if they were places of opening rather than closing down? Would we have the courage to bring forth change? Would we have the energy to spread seeds and create sparks? Would we still burn out?

A Stranger Upon the Stage

October 26, 2012

Four years ago, I was struggling, angry, depressed. I felt like a failure as a teacher, as a human being. I worried about an eternity of being written by others – policies, rule books, evaluation documents that wrote on me – created a teacher-character that was a stranger to me – an unreal character: "The Perfect Teacher" one with no real emotion, no real humanity. A fairy tale teacher.

In my first year of teaching, I was given the honour of being nominated for a beginning teacher award. Based on my performance evaluations, my professionalism, and my ability to teach *Macbeth*, I was considered to be one of the ten best new teachers in the district. Deeply disturbed throughout my first year by the ways my own actions and "professionalism" stood in the way of my ability to help students live and breathe in this world, I was shocked when I was told that I had been nominated. And though I should have felt honoured and proud, instead, I couldn't help but think that if *I* was one of the "good ones" that our schools must be in graver trouble than I thought. To my friends, family, administration, and school district, the nomination signified that I was indeed a good teacher - maybe even a great teacher. But to me, the nomination signified nothing.

Roland Barthes, (2009) in his *Mythologies*, speaks of the spectacle of public wrestling and the elaborate show of the striptease, seeing both as "stage-managed" (p. 3) sports rather than authentic endeavors of the heart. While he lauds the spectacle for being a spectacle, I can't help but think of my own performance as a teacher as I read Barthes' (2009) work and criticize it for being the same sort of "stage-managed sport".

From early on, teachers are told to "play the part of a teacher" (ATA, 2010, p. 6), to "act like a teacher" (ATA, 2010, p. 6) for we have a "role to play." Aware that my future in the profession depended on my performance as a new teacher, I knew that I had to put on a "good show" to survive. Like the wrestler, I knew that my job, as a first year teacher, was to "go exactly through the motions

which are expected" (Barthes, 2009, p. 4). I put on "teacher clothes," used my "teacher voice," and "acted like a teacher."

I knew that it was for "successfully" going through those motions that I was given great praise, even though I felt like I was dressed in someone else's clothing and speaking with someone else's voice.

If the public is indeed entranced by the spectacle, as Barthes (2009) argues, and "wants […] the image of passion, not passion itself" (p. 7), I can't help but wonder if the *image* of teaching has become more important than the humanity behind it. And while the performance may indeed be what the public desires, I am compelled to ask: is the spectacle enough for those who truly want to "walk alongside the young"? Can it possibly be enough for the students entrusted to their care? And can real life possibly go on when all that exists is performance?

In our age of empiricism and positivism, the signifiers of "teaching" have become those that are observable and measurable, and, under neoliberalism, "*auditable"* (Connell, 2009). Teaching has become, like wrestling, an "open-air spectacle" (Barthes, 2009, p. 3), judged and defined by spectators. Good teaching, then, in Alberta, has been reduced to signifiers categorized under the headings "Knowledge", "Skills", and "Attributes" (GoA, 1997). While many of these signifiers may be important for teaching, they are also, as Connell (2009) argues, deeply imbued with and determined by political and ideological agendas which, through the process of mythification (Barthes), historically and socially constructed "standards of teaching quality" (GoA, 1997) have become *naturalized* and thereby made innocent. We forget that, more often than not, these signs and

myths are imbued with deeply political and economic aims: nationalism, globalization, neoliberalism, neoconservativism. As such, new teachers are reminded to "dress for success" (ATA, 2010, p.6), as if the clothing they wear is naturally tied to "good teaching", and researchers like Simmons (1996) state that "professional dress is, in fact, of major importance in winning respect in the classroom and in conveying the appropriate public image of what happens in schools" (p. 297), without considering (or revealing) how encouraging new teachers to invest in a professional wardrobe might serve the market more than the teacher, or how a visual distinction between the "professional" teacher and the "unprofessional student" might enact some kind of violence upon the young. But, as Barthes (2009) writes:

> [t]he public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so: it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees. (p. 3)

Even the ATA beginning teacher handbook reveals (however unknowingly) that professional clothing is merely a costume that is part of the elaborate spectacle of teaching. It states: "If you dress the part of the teacher, you show that you take teaching and learning seriously" (ATA, 2010, p. 6). But, despite the feeling of success I was supposed to achieve by "dressing the part", I am reminded of the sense of shame and emptiness that I felt upon receiving a "Best Dressed Teacher" award from the students' council during my second year

teaching, when other colleagues were given “Most Caring” or “Most Compassionate” awards. Although the students saw my award as a great compliment, I felt deeply saddened that teaching--something that I truly felt called to do--had been reduced to my cute vests, tailored jackets, sleek pencil skirts, and my “casual Friday” designer jeans. I dressed for success, but wondered how that award or my clothing signified success at all. I was the “new character” created by neoliberal globalization that Smith (2009) describes: “a new kind of character that is ‘both successful and confused’; monetarily successful perhaps, but highly confused over the question of what it means to live well with others” (p. 376).

In spite of the nomination for my performance in first year of teaching and an award for my professional costuming, I don’t look back at my first couple of years and think of my success. Instead I feel frustrated that I was teaching students that they simply need to “play the part” of good students to succeed in school.

Sadly, in our schools, students are taught so often that only the observable matters, that only what can be assessed counts, and only the appearance of learning is important. They are encouraged from their first day of school to display the signs of a “good student” and taught to suppress the signs that have been deemed to be less desirable in the spectacle. As such, behaviours--and students--become binarized. Raising a hand to ask a question is good; calling out: bad; sitting still: good; wiggling in the seat: bad. Just like in the world of wrestling, every sign in our schools is “endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot” (Barthes, 2009, p. 5). In the

new world of management, auditability, report cards, and assessment, there is very little room for gray.

As such, a student who fails to project the image of "good student", is "revealed as irreducible" (Barthes, 2009, p. 180) and thus "becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown" (Barthes, 2009, p. 180). The students who perform badly are sent to perform in their own spectacle, away from the main stage of our schools. They are sent to the office to be taught to perform better, they are sent to perform in the 20-2 stream instead of the "pure" 20-1 stream, or to "behavior classes" to learn the signs of "good studentship," or worse, they are sent away entirely. But even in those spaces, they too must continue to play a role. In our world of binaries, students are either "good" or "bad", "normal" or "abnormal". And because we see the binaries created in our schools and the signs that make up the evaluative criterion as natural, rather than historical, we are unable to see the agenda that is imposed upon us and are, therefore, unable to imagine it being any other way (Barthes, 2009). Too absorbed in the spectacle of the show, we fail to consider that someone wrote the lines and directed the play. Barthes (2009) argues that this is indeed the power of myth: to "transform history into nature" (p. 154). When "myth is read as a factual system, [when] it is but a semiological system" (Barthes, 2009, p. 156), possibility for change or even discussion is eliminated. If a "bad student" is just an uncontestable fact illustrated by signifiers that are understood to be inextricably tied to their signifieds, beyond the student putting on a new costume or using new props, he or she will continue playing the same role until the show closes.

The danger in this, however, is unmistakable: as long as students and teachers alike continue to play a role, never will they be able to “live fully and humanly” (Seidel, 2007, p. 4) in this world. Barthes (2009) seems to agree, seeing dire consequences of this sort of mythification:

> Just as the cuttlefish squirts its ink in order to protect itself, it cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making of the world, fixated this world into an object which can be for ever possessed, catalogued its riches, embalmed it, and injected into reality some purifying essence which will stop its transformation its flight toward other forms of existence. […] Thus, every day and everywhere, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to this motionless prototype which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge internal parasite and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world. (p. 183-184)

So, as much as we love the “sound and fury” (Shakespeare, 2005, 5.5, 26) of a good performance--one that unfolds predictably and auditably, I can't help but wonder if spectacle belongs in our schools, if it belongs in our world? If life is reduced to a performance, then don't we all become just "poor players that strut and fret our hour upon the stage" (5.5, 23-24), and sooner or later, won't we all realize, like Macbeth, that life "signifies nothing" (5.5, 27)?

This is far from the message that I wanted to share with the young when I entered the profession. I hoped, like Freire (2008), that together with the young, I

might begin to "re-create the world and make it more human" (p. 145), and instead, I felt both like the cuttlefish and its prey: paralyzing and paralyzed.

Instead of spectacle shouldn't we open up a space beyond the stage, where students, teachers, and indeed all humans can be involved in the world as "living parts of the living human inheritance" (Jardine et al., 2006, p. 11)? Instead of teaching them to speak the language of myth, shouldn't we help students (and ourselves) learn to speak the language that "*makes* the world" (Barthes, 2009, p. 173) rather than confirming it? Instead of teaching students to perform, shouldn't we teach them to *live*?

Beyond the Stage

September 5, 2012

It was strange to share my writing with them so early in the course… I didn't feel like I was playing a role; it didn't feel like I was acting. It felt like I was me.

I suppose it shouldn't have come as such as surprise, knowing myself and knowing about writing, but as I have written with students this year, I have felt human, I have felt like myself. As I write, I share with them the real me – not the polished "teacher-character" that I lost myself in in my early years, not the perfect "Ms. Carmichael" that I created, but *Lindsay*: human being struggling to live in this world. And I find myself enjoying teaching more. I am less anxious. I worry less that I'll do something "out of character," and instead, I just live and teach and write.

This is unsurprising, for many have written of the liberating power of writing. Indeed, Donald Murray (1989) writes: "I am never so much myself when I am out of myself, fled into the writing" (p. 138). As I've written with my students this year, I have allowed myself to be out of myself--out of the chains of perfection, performance, and precision that I have so often placed around my wrists. I have allowed myself to flee these things and write to become, to express, to reveal, to feel, and to live.

Jane Tompkins (1999) struggled to free herself from similar chains. She writes in her "Pedagogy of the Distressed":

> I wanted to change the way it was legitimate to behave inside academic institutions. I wanted to make it OK to get shrill now and then, to wave your hands around, to cry in class, to do things in relation to the subject at hand other than just talking in an expository or adversarial way about it. I wanted never to lose sight of the fleshy, desiring selves…. (p. 21 – 22)

In her quest to *live* in schools, Tompkins (1999) found that she was able to do just that when she abandoned her attempts to be perfect. As she abandoned her concern with performances that she found "distressing," she began to see that life was possible beyond the charade.

This notion that our selves are fleshy, messy, and real and are not things to be hidden is something that I hope to model to my students, for I worry about children in our schools. As I've read through their notebooks, I have seen how desperately they struggle to be themselves. They speak of masks, hiding, fitting

in, pretending, etc. With the pressures of fitting in, pleasing their friends, pleasing their parents, pleasing boys or girls, it's no wonder that kids are so exhausted all the time. Being someone else is exhausting. Denying parts of yourself is exhausting.

Rather than focusing my efforts on teaching students that we have to be polished or perfect or that we must compartmentalize ourselves the moment we walk through the doors of the school, I hope to teach students that we are okay as we are: fleshy, emotional, intellectual, passionate, and human; that we don't need to be someone else to "survive in the system." I hope to teach them that our lives are for living, not for hiding.

Milk

November 24, 2012

I had a moment this week when I felt that I shared too much. I left feeling guilty, worried, afraid that I'd get in trouble.

I was writing in class to prompts that the students had thrown out that day…And so I wrote about my first and second kisses – the first being one that was unexpected and horrible because of the person, but a pretty nice kiss nonetheless, the second being the one that I had dreamed about and wanted to be my first kiss forever, but which turned out to be a mess of slimy tongue in a movie theatre. A funny piece, I suppose. A bit silly, but real.

A student heard me laughing as I wrote and wanted me to share as I often do… and, without thinking, I did. And afterwards, I felt vulnerable, afraid, worried. I want my students to see me as a human. But I don't know if I want them to see me as a sexual being. That is something that I'm much less comfortable with - something that I feel that they are much less comfortable with. I felt weird. I couldn't make eye contact.

As much as I long to and have been attempting to, it is hard to live fully and humanly in our schools. For despite the fact that education is, at its core, concerned with the "bringing forth" of life (*educare*)--a distinctly womanly, sexual, and bodily imperative--the womb from which life is born is so often closed in our schools in favour of the mind. While I have longed to share myself with my students, my femininity and sexuality are still parts of myself that I deeply fear any student seeing. Many have written about this, worrying about the ways that our schools write over our femininity and sexuality: the cyclical time we feel in our bodies is replaced by linear time (Seidel, 2007), pregnancy in the classroom is met with "extreme discomfort" (Brook, 2000, p. 191), and "menstrual bleeding on the lecture stage" (Brook, 2000, p. 191) has become a woman's "worst fear". Sexuality is something we avoid in the classroom at all costs.

But this can be a dangerous thing. In denying the womb, in denying her ability to bring forth life as an educator, the woman loses her power to write upon the world, for indeed, Cixous (2010) tells us, that woman "writes in white ink"

(p. 1948)--woman brings forth life in her milk. Flowing with generativity from deep within her, woman writes, creates, and *lives* in an embodied, fluid, fleshy way.

However, instead of flowing streams of milk, education is written in black bullets--professionalism's checklists, matrices, and lists of standards, each foreclosing and denying life.

Upon a distinctly capitalist base, much has been done to "rationalize and standardize the process and products of teaching, to mandate very specific content and teaching, to define all teaching as a collection of measurable "competencies" (Apple, 1990, p. 232). Both economically and politically motivated by governments, these actions serve to reinforce the principles of the mind embodied in Kant's "Rational Man" over the converse: the "irrational woman." So, while traditionally "feminine" discourses are present in the metaphors that we use to *speak* about teaching (nurturance, care, love, etc.), these are trumped, more often than not, by the distinctly "male" military, scientific, technical, industrial, and medical discourses that serve as the foundation for performance evaluations.

This has great implications for educators, for in order to teach "well," teachers (who are statistically more likely to be women (Apple, 1990)) must deny a part of themselves and indeed a part of education itself--a fracture that often results in great individual distress.

My own experiences as a teacher reflect this pressure to deny the fleshy, embodied, feminine nature of my (teaching) self.

As I covered up my breasts and my curves with "professionalism", I

denied my generative capacity. When my students let me down, I told myself not to cry, not to be "*that* girl" for "teachers don't cry". When I was frustrated with my administrators, I held back my anger. Afraid to be seen as "weak," "powerless" or "irrational" in this public space, I denied my emotional self in favor of "professionalism", "competence", and "power" as defined by the documents on my desk that I treated as divine. I happily allowed external expectations to write over my own experience, shaping it, constructing it--their directions my guide, my god.

Indeed, my ability to follow the curriculum, embody professionalism, and push aside my emotions had great benefits. I was rewarded with a Continuing Contract in my first year (something quite unheard of in our district), a nomination for a beginning teaching award, a best-dressed teacher award, and accolades from my peers. I was what Gilbert and Gubar (2010) would call a "passive angel" (p. 1936): beautiful, perhaps; a good messenger, indeed. Wings clipped. Generative power denied.

Without my wings, without my womb, my milk, I found myself staring at a body that didn't seem like my own. Divorced from myself, my body became "an uncanny stranger on display" (Cixous, 2010, p. 1946). Outside of myself, I saw its limbs tied up, its feet march in line, its heart beat to a rhythm set by someone else's drum.

In my heart, my bones, my gut, I knew that this wasn't me that I was staring at from afar--I knew that it wasn't teaching. And yet, I could not find a

way to bridge the "life threatening fissures" (Fowler, 2003, p. 161) that I felt in my being. I felt trapped, alone, and suffocated.

These are the struggles I felt in my first years, the struggles that almost kept me from returning to the classroom. Yet, Kittle's (2008) work with students, writing and living alongside them, sharing her words and struggles, her own first loves and kisses, made me wonder if an embodied classroom might be possible.

And so I write and I share, worrying still that it might get me in trouble, that students might find the whole thing "icky." But so far my humanity has been warmly welcomed, it seems.

After sharing my piece on my first kiss, a student came to talk to me. She was a quiet girl, sweet and bright, kind and thoughtful. She rarely spoke without being addressed, but that day, she came to me and said "I know exactly what you mean: expectation sometimes can be so problematic; we hope for so much, but it can fall short. Surprises are so much better."

She was right: surprises can be so much better. I expected to get in trouble for sharing myself too much, for being too fleshy, too human, too real. I expected someone to tell me to put away my personal pronouns and get back to "teaching." And instead, I was surprised, for my sharing this piece nourished my relationship with this young girl. I was surprised that my self--my whole self--could live on in these spaces. I was surprised (though maybe I shouldn't have been) that my white milk gave life.

Called to Teach

September 21, 2012

I think in the busyness of September – or October, November, December or January – it's easy to forget that teaching is a calling, a vocation. Easy to forget that teaching is a spiritual task – something that might bring one closer to the divine. It is not just a job for me. It is not just action -- body, arms, and, hands and feet -- it is something both much deeper and much higher at the same time. I teach because I feel that I was meant to teach, called to teach.

Remembering this seems to be working. I'm not being caught up in the bus(y)iness; instead, I'm remembering that teaching is so much more than the motions that we find ourselves running through on a daily basis. I feel like I'm doing good work. My spirit feels alive – I am filled with joy and hope and excitement. I feel like I'm on fire when I leave my classroom. I can't wait to go back to school on Monday. I can't wait to teach. I can't wait to help them find themselves. I can't wait to find myself. I feel full. I feel alive. I feel great joy. And I know I'm doing important work.

This is my vocation.

When we think of vocational education, we think of schools that teach skills of the trades. Vocational education is education that trains people to *do*--it is tied to procedures and tasks. But the word vocation has its roots not in the body or the actions of *doing*, but rather in theology and spirituality. Vocation (from the

Latin *vocationem,"*a calling") comes not from a tangible list of procedures or skills, but from a "*sense*"--a felt sense--that one has been called (> L. *voca,* voice) to do certain work.

In this sense, teaching is more than training, it is more than a profession, or a trade, or something that people *do*, instead, teaching is a calling, one that brings us closer to the divine. It is something that takes us beyond ourselves and the planes of humanity, and weaves us together with that which is bigger than us.

We can contrast this notion of teaching as vocation with the notion of teaching as career. Etymologically speaking, a career is a race (> F. *carere,* a racetrack), a challenge, something you can "win" or "lose." When we think about the pace of our schools, it isn't hard to see why we might fall into the tendency of seeing teaching this way. We so often feel chased, behind, or like we are running toward a finish line. We are told that we should "climb the ladder" quickly, so that we might "get to the top" faster than anyone else. We are told to hurry, and constantly feel that we must rush.

But the danger that exists when we focus on the race, on being "on track," or on "getting to the end," is the tendency to feel that we are "falling behind." And in such a paradigm, it's easy to feel like we are losing the race.

I spent two and a half years feeling like I was losing my race. That does something to a person. There is shame in being "behind," there is shame in not finishing all that that you should in the time that is given. Though they are fewer, there are still days when I feel that way. It's hard to teach like that. It's hard to live on a racetrack.

Late in my third year of teaching, I took a group of students to Greece. It was a trip that I didn't even know if I should go on. I worried that I wouldn't be able to experience the majesty of Greece in her fullness, that I would be too busy with the children to appreciate the sights and sounds and mystery of the place, that I would be too busy talking and teaching to hear her voice.

However, instead of talking, I listened. Instead of "teaching," I learned. Instead of directing, I witnessed. Instead of rushing, I waited.

Away from the pressures and pace of the curriculum (>L. *curere* – the course), away from those that I saw myself competing with, I found myself in service of life itself--attending to and witnessing to the power of Greece herself. Together, the children and I witnessed a thousand flames move through the streets as a Good Friday procession changed the shape of Rhodes; we stood at the sacred altar at Delphi where once an eternal flame burned, where once an oracle spoke and was heard; we felt wind blow over us as we walked over the bridge at Corinth where St. Paul bore witness to the gifts of the Spirit. There, we waited, we listened, we responded, and we lingered in those spaces that lived and live on to be interpreted and reinterpreted. There, we learned, we grew, we danced; we had conversations about life, love, the spirit, and the soul.

In the stillness and silence, I remembered that I was called.

Something changed for me during that trip. I returned from Greece sure of my calling. I declined acceptance to Law School and decided to begin graduate studies in education. I knew I needed the space and the time to hear the voice that was calling me to teach.

Graduate school gave me the opportunity to dwell in spaces of the heart and spirit. Encouraged to explore my experiences through autobiography and art, I was given the chance to realize my own oppression and come out of the darkness that I had been living in during my teaching career. Through these acts of writing – through "[my] pronouns, [my] nouns, and [my] clique of referents" (Cixous, 2010, p. 1954)--I entered a new world, a world unencumbered by the tradition of rationality and efficiency and perfection, a world where I felt allowed to live fully, with my mind, body, and spirit intact. No longer did I race. No longer did I feel fragmented from my calling.

But it is hard to find that space in the classroom and in the halls that are so full of frenetic energy. We run. We hustle. We try to finish. It is exhausting. Teaching becomes something we have to *do*.

But when I am in these crowded, fast-paced halls, where I rush and rush, Leggo's (2005) words remind me to return to Greece: "In order to maintain a healthy inner life, educators need a keen sense of vocation, wonder, hope and equilibrium" (p. 33). So in these times, I try remember what it was like to teach under the Greek stars, what it was like to experience the spirit at Delphi, what it was like to run the footrace beside my students at Olympia. While I can't uproot my students to run beside them in Olympia, I can sit down with my students and write with them. I can run *this* race with them. And when I do, when I sit down with my students and listen, I am reminded that the world is filled with space and time and spirit and am once again filled with wonder and hope.

And in that silence, I hear the call, the call to *live* and *live with* children in schools.

Writing, Teaching, and Living Messily:

Pedagogical Commitments

Conclusions

I used to tell my students that a conclusion was the part of the writing where all loose ends could be tied up. For as Chekov once said, it is the place where the gun that was introduced on page one must go off. And so, I often told my students to imagine that the conclusion was the place to take those loose ends and tie them into a perfect red bow.

Beautiful and appealing as it may be on the surface, when I peer deeper and contemplate that image, it now seems to me to be horribly constricting. Boxes and bows, perfect for presentation, contain and hide the gift within. They enclose, hold together, tie up, and bind the work. While, to some extent, these sorts of packages are necessary to help put the work into a reader's hands, these ideas seem horribly incongruent with a work so hinged to the notion of opening things up so that the mess might be allowed to be messy.

In many ways, the traditional notion of a conclusion seems to be ill-fitting for a work like this. In the sciences and social sciences, conclusions report and summarize findings and their significance and provide a final answer to the research question (Creswell, 2009). While these are indeed important aspects of inquiry, I am reminded, though, of Turkle (2004) who writes about how PowerPoint presentations filled with bullets pierce through life rather than bringing it forth. In the same way, a conclusion seems to "encourage presentation,

not conversation," "close down debate rather than opening it up," and "convey absolute authority" (Turkle, 2004, p. 101).

I don't, however, believe this exploration makes me an "absolute authority" on anything but my own experience (and only in the sense that I am the "author" of it), nor do I want to "close down debate" or "present my findings" as if they were Truth. To offer a conclusion in this way seems so final--as if it were to suggest that my exploration is concluded, finished, or resolved. I find little resolve here, even after three years on this writing journey.

Instead, I am energized by this work and hope that it continues to spill out into my life, my work, and my writing, shaping and transforming each in unexpected and surprising ways.

It seems fitting, then, that as I finish this thesis, a new school year is beginning. The pace is once again picking up, but instead of rushing, I am wondering and hoping for the year to come. While finishing something so important and beginning something of equal importance seems, in some ways, to be poor timing, to me, this timing seems to be perfect. It reminds me of the kairotic timing I long to see in schools--the timing that is concerned not with linearity or deadlines or completion, but a cyclical time that is filled with opportunity, relationships, and sacred possibilities. True, it would be simpler to finish the thesis, then begin planning for a new year, and then begin teaching, but this overlap reminds me that this work is not done, that it will never be done, for it should live and speak and breathe through my writing, my teaching, and my living in schools.

As I approach this new year, I see so many opportunities to let this work speak through and in my teaching. As I sit and plan out what I want my students to do, I am reminded that I am called not to make them "doers" but to help them *be* and *become* human. I am reminded that I am called to do the same.

And so, I call this section "Pedagogical Commitments"--my commitments to walk alongside the young in human and life-giving ways.

A Commitment to Write

January 20, 2013

Writing with my students has helped me to see them with new eyes. To see them as humans who struggle, humans who live, and want to live and understand. To see them as struggling in the world that has been built for them, a world so strongly tied to the market, to competition, to jealousy, to "fitting in," – it is no wonder they struggle.

Writing with my students has helped me to see teaching with new eyes. It has reminded me of my purpose as a teacher. It has reminded me of my place in the schools – not to be above "them" but to be with them – to be them. We struggle with the same things. We are living in this world together. We question the same things. We hide in the same ways. We write to understand.

Writing with my students has helped me to see myself with new eyes. I have discovered who I am and who I desperately want to be. I see my value now – not

my cash value or exchange value, but my value as a human being. I know that my value is in my relationships with others.

Writing with my students has made me rethink what I hope to be remembered for. Do I want to be remembered as the best teacher? Do I want to be remembered as the teacher who taught essay writing the best? No – I want to be remembered as someone who cared.

As I have written with my students this year, I have started to become the teacher I hoped to be. I have become aware of who I am, and who I struggle to be. As I have written with my students, I have come to recognize that I am in the middle of things with my students. I have taken my place at their feet this year. And I have tried to show them that I am not divine, that I am just a human--of the earth--with fears and hopes, twisted roots, and muddy soil.

I am a writer. So I will write. For 10 minutes at the beginning of each class, I will continue to write beside the young. And when the young write assignments for me to read, I will write pieces for them. At their feet, I will serve. I do this in hope that they too will learn to serve.

A Commitment to Teach

January 19, 2013

When I struggle with my anxieties, when I fear that I haven't been a "good teacher," I remind myself of this students' words: "You are the first teacher I've felt is not teaching me school, but actually trying to help me in life."

A student insisted to me at the end of the first semester: *"I think I've found my voice,"* and I too, think that I am finding mine. And so I commit to using it--not the mechanical, neoliberal, scientific, or militaristic voice of others--in my classroom. My voice, while shaky at times, speaks of relationships and empathy, voice and expression, thought and understanding; my voice speaks of life. I believe that these are the subjects that make my teaching voice unique. I write in a personal, interpretive, and meditative voice but somehow remain academic and grounded in literature. I commit to allowing that voice to live on in my teaching, even when I am afraid. To do so, I will continue to read the work of those academics like Smith, Seidel, Jardine, and Leggo who inspire me to focus on life--messy as it is--in the classroom. To do this is a commitment to remain a student while I am a teacher so that I can continue to become and show students that becoming is an "impossible" task (Leggo, 2004, p. 34), but indeed our vocation as human beings.

I vow to teach students to find their voices and to let their voices live on in my classroom so that they might have the courage to let their voices sing out always. This is of critical importance not only for me as a teacher, but for me as a human being. For Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Heart* (1998) writes: "I cannot be if I forbid others from being" (p. 59). That said, I do this not as a means to an end;

instead, I do this because teaching students to write and think and care brings me great joy.

A Commitment to Live

September 15, 2012

I feel for the first time that I'm allowing kids to be spiritually free. And in doing so, I feel freed as well.

While this work has inspired many new questions and possibilities, perhaps most important is its provocation to explore new ways of living and knowing in the world – to attend less to products and categories, but instead to "our connections to the earth, to all of life, through time into the future, and to beginnings long in the past" (Seidel, 2006, p. 1913). I am inspired by those who see life poetically, spiritually, and ever-entwined and dependent on all other things.

I know that like Leggo (2004), "I am sustained by poetry and language, hope and heart, humour and humility, enthusiasm and passion" (p. 34). So I will continue to wonder in this way what it would be like if our public schools might become more poetic, heart-filled, and spiritual places, wherein the focus becomes, as Welwood (1992) says, "not to conquer and control but to serve something larger than ourselves: life itself and our fellow beings" (p. xvi). And I will wonder

how writing and teaching might help to bring forth these spirited and spiritual ways of being and knowing.

To do this, I commit to an active wondering, a wondering filled with attempts and quests to live unbound by the expectations of others so that I might see my own self and my own connections to the universe. This will be a messy task, for I must learn to be an author of my own experience and refuse to bow to the gods of time and productivity and efficiency. Instead, I will frequently and diligently turn inward in an effort to see how I might connect to that which exists outside of me.

A Final Commitment

Writing, teaching, and living are messy. They are filled with surprises and unknowns, darkness, and loose ends. While these things can be terrifying indeed, they are fertile ground from which life can bloom.

So finally, I commit to living in the mess. I refuse to avoid that which is not clean and controlled. I refuse to run away to simpler places or manufacture simplicity out of complexity. But most importantly, I commit to living with my mind, body, and spirit intact. I commit to *living fully* in the world and to seeing her messes as beautiful.

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