To say more than human things with human voice,
That cannot be; to say things with more
Than human voice; that, also, cannot be;
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
Of human things, that is acutest speech.

— WALLACE STEVENS, “CHOCORUA TO ITS NEIGHBOR”
in *The Collected Poems*, RANDOM HOUSE, 1954

**REFLECTIONS OF THE INNER VOICE**

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All committed learners and teachers share a desire to “speak humanly from the height or from the depth of human things” so that they might educe from others or produce for themselves their acutest speech, or inner voice. Before a court of French clerics threatening her to an infernal death for heresy, Joan of Arc insisted divine voices directed her. In Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff remains haunted by the voice and vision of his beloved Catherine Earnshaw long after her death. In Ken Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Chief Bromden hears voices of hate amidst the humming machinery and mumbling secrets of a psychiatric unit before Randall Patrick McMurphy’s free spirit liberates him from a world of abject fear. I am not suggesting that a heavenly command or a longing for the body and soul of a lover or an emotional maladjustment overcome us; however, we are inspired by the power of ideas and figures to create positive change in ourselves and others, and we do hear voices that inspire us with a passion similar to those which moved historical and literary legends.

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The voices we hear are of our parents, siblings, spouse, children, friends, mentors, colleagues, and students during many moments of our lives. For sure, these voices have influenced my work as a teacher of writing and a writer, and they have reinforced my conviction that the world of education offers individuals a unique opportunity to creatively express themselves. Once residing in this world, they have a chance to communicate on the highest possible level. And once they do this, they discover their inner voice. In their role of teacher, educators reveal their inner voice to educe the inner voice from their students.

Where the Writing Process Begins

When looking at the reflection in a pond, one can focus on many images: the joggers bouncing in and out of sight, the swaying trees, the pigeons flying overhead, or the glittering sun. Even when looking in the mirror, one might focus on different parts of one’s face. Reflections connote an ever-changing montage of images; thus, we all look at the same mirror image differently. At the risk of appearing unfocused, I will discuss some images that have influenced my life and led to my decision to learn, write, and teach writing.

American literary giant Robert Penn Warren once said, “As far as writing is concerned, the basic images that every man has, I suppose, go back to his childhood. He has to live on that capital all his life.” (1) Writing scholar Janet Emig corroborates this view: “I suggest that very early developments in the personality and in the perceptions of an infant are prerequisites or precursors to certain features and practices of mature rhetoric.” (2) Insights such as these prompt me to look back at my earliest images. As the son of Maltese immigrants who both had less than an elementary school education and were impoverished subjects of an occupying country, I was raised with stories of survival from the 1942 Axis bombings on the Mediterranean island and the resulting scabies that infected nearly the entire population. My parents spent little time reading to me or teaching me academic skills, for they were hardly literate in English, their second language. But the wisdom they drew from their childhood struggles often made plain to me that an education is an experience as close to freedom as I would ever know.

My Many Teachers

I have encountered so many people who share my parents’ viewpoint, which was best summarized a dozen years ago by a friend, Morris Levitsky. At the time, Morris was eighty-one years old, a stockroom clerk born to Polish-Jewish immigrants and raised on New York’s lower East Side. He said, “People should
use their knowledge to uplift others. If they use it to put others down or just to uplift themselves, they never learned anything worth knowing.”

These words echo in my mind when I work with students in helping them find their own voices, when I discuss classroom strategies with fellow professors from Cornell University or Middlesex County College, and when I discuss my daughters’ education with anyone — especially them. Grace Schulman, an extraordinary poet, editor, and English professor who taught me during my undergraduate days at Baruch College, once told me, “Words are a wonderful way to know life.” From a different perspective, general semanticist Irving Lee suggests that instead of searching for what words mean, we should look for what people mean.

As a practitioner, researcher, student, and instructor of writing, I see Schulman’s and Lee’s statements as being interdependent. The communication process requires that a listener receive a speaker, that a reader receive a writer. Yet the dangers of relying too much on feedback is evident in the writing of scholars such as Peter Elbow, in Writing Without Teachers, and John White, in Rejection. Words, then, are a wonderful way to know life, especially when those words communicate, provoke a response, and encourage self-actualization. As a practicing teacher, I intend to continue working at clearing the barriers that prevent people from writing. My master’s graduate advisor at Lehman College, Robert Delisle, once asked me rhetorically, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if students didn’t even know the teacher was present.” Yes, this is learning and teaching.

Learning to Teach

Thus, I rush toward my students only to get out of their way, to free them to their creative journey. I realize, therefore, a teacher must always strive to change if he wants his students to change. This is not always easy, according to renowned education authority Theodore Sizer, who reportedly pointed to teachers’ resistance to change as a key reason for the lack of immediate progress in his prescription for education reform. (3) Janet Emig sees additional personality problems among teachers, particularly in men. In an interview, she said, “men teach as a revelation, as an expression of ego … In my experience, most men aren’t capable of getting out of the way.” (4) A teacher must surmount these interpersonal barriers because if he does not get of the way, students will steamroll past him, possibly in unintended, unproductive directions.

In an interview, Galway Kinnell, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and professor at New York University, extends the idea of a teacher letting go of his authoritarian position in the context of a poetry class:
I don’t think the way poetry is treated in colleges … is really the right way … if you’re moved by a poem, you might not wish to say anything at all. You might wish to live with that poem in silence for a while. If you’re not fully able to understand it, maybe if you just read it to yourself again and again, get it by heart, you will come around to understand it in a way we don’t have terms for expressing. In a class, however, they want you to analyze a poem, say exactly what it means, clear up all the difficulties. You have to commit two sins: eradicate the mystery of the poem and talk about it on demand, which is to say in someone else’s language. But the university lives on talk, so apparently that’s the way it’s got to be.

Peter Elbow’s proposal of teacherless writing sessions seems indisputable from some perspectives, but it is not enough for today’s developmental writing student living in a culturally diverse environment and employed in a dynamic, technological workplace. Santi Buscemi, author and English professor at Middlesex County College has said that the teacher of a developmental writing class should use literature as sources of inspiration for his students. (5) In an essay describing the objectives of a writing course, Nevin K. Laib writes that good writing emerges from experience — which young adults are still in the process of obtaining — not from understanding a collection of grammatical rules. (6) I have proposed asking students to develop a subject that interests them (for example, baseball card collecting) as a springboard to learning more about other fields (such as the impact of baseball cards on the printing industry or a comparison between rare baseball cards and art masterpieces). (7) I suggest that we encourage students to consider possible topics for narrative, descriptive, causal analysis, classification, illustrative, argumentation, definition, process analysis, comparison-contrast, and analogy essays related to a single subject in which they wish to specialize. I believe that a student subject specialist approach may cultivate a writer-editor relationship between student and teacher, which should be less intimidating than a student-teacher relationship since the student enters the relationship from a point of authority.

Controversies and Quagmires

I am aware, however, of the many critics of the college and corporate writing class. David M. Lawton’s commentary urges that writing classes be abolished altogether and that all the money saved on these courses be invested in teaching writing in the elementary schools. (8) Rather than fear for my job security, I recalled two excellent Albert Benderson essays. The first reviews the work of writing-process and writing-across-the-curriculum advocates, such as
Sondra Perl (another of my Lehman professors). (9) The second observes that in an increasing number of schools, including universities, critical thinking skills are being taught in most courses. (10) Both essays rebut professors who agree with Lawton in lamenting that students today do not know what their predecessors did. One can infer from Benderson’s argument that the complexities of society and business have imposed unprecedented pressures on students to learn the tools of technology, to better cope with family separation, to manage themselves in a world that offers little guidance for doing well, and to recognize the distinct features of all contributors to the cultural explosion — all of which were not expected to as high a degree of students from previous generations.

These pressures impact on teachers as well. As Emig notes, writing teachers “must learn far more about biology and physiology than we have previously been asked to learn.” (11) Teachers also need to learn more about desktop publishing applications and world cultures. The curriculum of inclusion movement, now two decades old, may be delayed but not defeated, adding additional mandates for teachers to learn. Writing teachers, as well as all educators, must consider possibilities for including all their students’ identities in the learning network — even those students from Malta. Mitsuko Saito-Fukunaga points to a barrier to intercultural communication when writing

I have learned that what may strike us as the peculiarities of a culture are often the most beloved and precious properties of the people immersed in that culture. They become peculiarities, strange experience or shocking phenomena to outsiders only when outsiders are not prepared to accept or tolerate them. (12)

Outside Looking In, Inside Looking Out

What can I offer to anyone reading these words? In Inwardness of the Outward Gaze, Learning and Teaching Through Philosophy, I suggest an approach to learning and teaching through an interpretation of classical philosophical readings. In other words, I hope to help students and writers, and readers and writers, learn to understand their world and better express themselves not by offering a collection of writing tips. (I have already written such a book, The Art of On-the-Job Writing, published by the International Society for General Semantics, 2003.) Rather, I suggest means of looking inside the classroom by learning outside it, and means of learning inside the classroom by looking outside it. Consider that in a 1965 interview, William Faulkner admitted, “If I had not existed, someone else would have written me ... The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important.” (13) Although I believe in the exis-
potential truth of Faulkner’s comment, Faulkner was the one, nevertheless, who created the marvelous tales and denizens of Yoknapatawpha County. What I am trying to say is that any worthwhile innovation on behalf of students will surely become critical concepts for analysis, experimentation, refinement, and institutionalization — with or without me. But I — and you — want to be there when it happens; otherwise, you would have put this book down some time ago.

I acknowledge that serendipity plays such a huge role in our creative and professional lives, and that the terrain on which intellects travel is uneven and obstacle-laden. For instance, I studied literature, creative writing, and education — but in a business college. I worked as a marketing director and became a leading businessman in my field — but in a nonprofit human services organization. I developed several unique cultural activities such as concerts and poetry readings — but in a blue-collar town devoid, for the most part, of cultural arts programs. I teach creativity through writing — but in bottom-line oriented, hard-boiled business environments. And I teach bottom-line oriented, hard-boiled business writing in college — but for classically inclined English departments. I have published more than a hundred articles, but nearly always as an outsider looking into the world that mattered most to the specialized publishers that printed them. I have advocated for children’s rights in public schools, but always from a parent’s perspective of the other. In a sense, my professional endeavors in the public space have always forced me to stand as an outsider looking in.

But once reading and writing, I have positioned myself as an insider looking out — hearing voices so that I might find my own. I continue to respond to readings in the way I prepare my lessons and teach my students. Teachers must continually expand their knowledge base, reading critically and devising techniques for incorporating their knowledge into classroom instruction. Teachers should use whatever they have to lift their students.

We do this by leaving our ideas with our students. In 'night Mother, Marsha Norman’s play, the character Jessie announces to her mother that she is about to commit suicide and tells her who in the family should get her personal effects. In Sam Shepard’s play Buried Child, Dodge, the family patriarch, sits in a rocking chair moments before dying and divides his estate and finally acknowledges the existence of his grandson. We all want to leave something behind. I want to impart to as many students as possible the notion that literacy is the vehicle for traveling down any road they choose to travel. Philosophy feeds our inner voice, and literacy expresses it. Both are far more than the means to knowing how we think; they are how we think.
REFERENCES


4. Emig, p.132.


11. Emig, p.120.
