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LEARNING AND WRITING WHAT MATTERS

The professor in that 1968 college classroom drew on an unfiltered cigarette and exhaled, the grey smoke tumbling toward us where we sat in rows of desks, notebooks open, pens in hand. "You're all too timid," he said. "You're writing in pseudo academic voices I don't believe for a minute." He tapped the cigarette on the edge of the ashtray he'd brought to class. "You need to experience *real* writing." He rose from his chair. "Go to Alumni Library. In the stacks find Hemingway's 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.'" He picked up the ashtray and placed it in the palm of one hand, grabbed his satchel in the other. "Read it," he said.

There it was: another unreasonable request by a professor. I had to find this library I'd never heard of and locate a short story with a stupid title. Didn't five courses give me enough to do?

At Alumni Library I climbed cement steps through two guardian pillars to massive wooden doors. I pulled one open, stepped inside, and stood stark still. This wasn't my hometown of 1352 citizens. This was serious academia, nothing like my high school graduation class of 29 and a long distance in more than miles from Red's Nite Club, my family's tavern and two bowling alleys. I lifted my eyes to a domed ceiling that must have been fifty feet high. Near the top were 18 rectangular stained glass windows, each in its own alcove.

I crossed the foyer to a narrow, metal stair that spiraled up to the stacks. I knew smokestacks from brickyards, where men in my hometown worked. I knew stacks of pancakes. But library stacks? I ascended the stairway into dimness, the only sound the blowing of the ventilating system. The flooring was some translucent material that let soft light through from below. And then there were the stacks—thousands of books packed—not stacked—in shelves, row after row so close together you barely had room to move between them.

I found *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* and took it to a small desk shoved against the wall. I sat in the strait-backed chair and opened the collection. My heart sank. The short story wasn't short at all—34 pages, and I, a word-by-word reader. In good faith, though, I settled in. I had to do better than the Cs I'd gotten on the first two papers in Advanced Composition.

Soon the strangely inviting atmosphere, uncomfortable chair, and long short story fell away as I lost myself in a fictional dream set on an African savannah. The characters were Macomber, 35, tall, handsome, and cuckolded (a word I'd learned from Chaucer); his beautiful wife, Margot; and Wilson, the white hunter and guide. Their goal was big game hunting: lion, rhinoceros, and Cape buffalo, perhaps the most dangerous animal in Africa with its ill-temper and sharp black horns.

Earlier in the day when a wounded lion concealed in tall grass charged them, Macomber panicked, "bolted like a rabbit," he confessed to Wilson. The opening scene of the story in the dining tent just after the lion hunt is tense,

Macomber still humiliated, Margot disdainful of him, Wilson restrained, determined to get through the safari without further incident.

The next morning with Cape buffalo the objective, Macomber is determined to atone for his cowardice. Amid the exhilaration of the hunt, he finds courage, strength, and purpose. This time when the dangerous animal charges, Macomber has lost himself in what needs to be done,

. . . Macomber, as he fired . . . saw fragments like slate burst from the huge boss of the horns, and the head jerked, he shot again at the wide nostrils and saw the horns jolt again and fragments fly, and . . . aiming carefully, shot again with the buffalo's huge bulk almost on him

(Hemingway 35-36)

When I finished the story, I was—metaphorically—knocked on the seat of my pants, dazed on the floor in the stacks of Alumni Library, light from below glowing around me. What had just happened? As a boy, I'd certainly been absorbed by books before: *Tarzan of the Apes*, *Sled Dog of Alaska*, *The Sea Wolf*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Peyton Place*, which for weeks had been passed around study hall. Nothing, however, had hit me like “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.”

In his book about the writing craft, *On Writing*, Stephen King explains what had happened to me: I'd been “swept away by a combination of great story and

great writing” (2000 146). I’d been, as he put it, “flattened.” Such an experience, King believes “is part of every writer’s necessary formation” (2000 146).

I wanted to write. Through writing, I believed I might be able to understand the violent death of my father in a car crash when I was fifteen, a lost first love, a past I clung to but sensed I needed to move beyond. I wanted to teach, too. I recognized that I had been wounded in adolescence; I wanted to show teenagers how reading and writing might help them cope, might enable them to prevail. I wanted to clear the way for my students to sound their barbaric yawps like Whitman, to perceive certain slants of light as Dickinson had, and, as Emerson urged, “to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways” (Bosco and Myerson 130).

I’d had good teachers here and there. The chain-smoking Dr. Frazier was one of them. His exasperation had led me to a pivotal educational moment, all because he wanted students to sweep him away by the force of their writing. He had exhorted me to read for a different purpose than to explicate an author’s meaning or understand the tenets of a literary movement. He wanted me to learn how to write from a writer. The terms “mentor text” and “mentor author” weren’t used in those days, but that’s what “Macomber” and Hemingway were. Dr. Frazier wanted me to examine how Hemingway used language in short fiction to create life and thought and meaning on the page and then transfer that to my own writing.

Like Hemingway, I could describe vividly with precise, plain words. I could write spare dialog to capture the illusion of speech. I could be understated. I could unclutter my prose, weed the garden of wordiness. I could write about territories I knew just as Hemingway had written about cruelty, inadequacy, tension within a marriage, and Africa from one white man's perspective. Perhaps I, too, could be brave in the face of danger, danger I surely felt in university classrooms that exposed my academic ill preparedness and challenged my intellect and values.

Although Dr. Frazier was an irreplaceable teacher to my educational evolution, I have long recognized as a teacher myself that the learner is all. Our knowledge, our preparation, our pedagogical insights and creativity are ineffectual if students don't quicken to possibilities we move them to encounter. But if students realize their import, indelible educational moments can be a catalyst for growth and change. Dr. Frazier and Hemingway provided a spark and possibility, but it took my determination to build the spark to roaring by continuing to seek combinations of great story and great writing over the years: Marge Piercy, Anne Lamont, Harry Crews, ever more authors at my word-by-word pace.

What experiences have propelled your allegiance to language? What indelible educational moments have driven you to be a literacy teacher? Reading Toni Morrison? Laurie Halse Anderson? Sherman Alexie? Hearing an audience's spontaneous outburst to lines you said on stage? Writing truth about your life you'd never before uttered? Creating a multigenre-multimodal research project?

And what of your students? What positive indelible educational moments are you helping them to experience so they might discover intellectual passions and further their growth and development? Your colleagues in other disciplines, hopefully, are bent on helping their students do the same thing.

My bias nearly fifty years now has been teaching people to write better than they already do. A writing invitation I've found useful is to ask students to identify indelible educational moments. They all have them, some positive, some damaging. The moments don't need to have taken place in school. They could involve outdoor as well as indoor schooling (Frost 470): a moment when they realized betrayal, for example; a moment when they knew they should intervene to disrupt racial discrimination or bullying; a moment when they understood that the way something seemed was not the way it was.

Whatever the moments are, I'm after students to identify significant ones in their learning, moments of realization they can point to. So we spend important time performing inner archeology, brainstorming and webbing with code words to placeholder the moments. And like James Britton, I believe that "writing floats on a sea of talk" (Newkirk and Kittle ch. 8 "Tell Me More"), so in small and large groups we orally share the moments we've uncovered. I want the classroom humming with conversations about characters, places, and occurrences. I want students to surprise themselves as they utter details they hadn't thought of before engaging in the back and forth of dialog.

When we turn to drafting and revising one of their indelible educational moments amid conferences and mini lessons about writerly moves that make writing worth reading, I move students to not just *tell* of the moment, but to *show* it by selecting sensory detail of place and character, by creating dramatic scenes instead of summaries, as I sought to do in writing about Dr. Frazier, the atmosphere of the stacks, and the impact of the Hemingway story. After vividly rendering the scene, I want students to have a say about the indelible moment's meaning. I want them to offer readers an interpretation of the event. It's hard, joyous work I'm asking students to do. It's word work.

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Thirty years after my experience with Dr. Frazier and “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” I was asked to conduct a one-hour writing workshop for cancer survivors at the local hospital. The invitation came because my wife was one of them, she—us—less than a year beyond a mastectomy. The support group of those who have come through slaughter was weekly companionship and sustenance for Kathy. When the workshop ended, she led me into the hall where someone waited. It was Dr. Frazier. The lung cancer, chemotherapy, and steroids had ruined him physically. His eyes were sunken. He was pale, gaunt, bloated. His skin seemed ready to burst. Still, he raised a hand in a wave and smiled.

“So you had me for a class.”

“I did, more years ago than we want to remember.”

“When?”

I took him back to 1968, to a room of nineteen-year-olds who weren't growing in their composition skills as fast as he wanted. I told him about the Hemingway assignment, the directive to visit Alumni Library.

“Pretty good idea.” He smiled and stood solid, his feet spread wide for stability.

“I'd been moved by books before,” I told him. “Reading Hemingway in that old library, though, that was the first time I thought about an author's craft.”

His head moved in the barest nod. He extended his swollen hand. I took it and held, my second indelible, educational moment involving Dr. Frazier. I knew what to do with this one too.

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