

Headstands, Writing, and the Rhetoric of Radical Self-Acceptance

Geraldine DeLuca

*True yoga starts with radical self-acceptance.
You are fully present with what is, observing the self without judgment.
When the body knows that the mind is kind, it will open and release.*
—Richard Faulds, qtd. in Krucoff

“The way in becomes the way out.”
—Kurt Spellmeyer

Headstand Practice

It is fall 2002, and I am 55 years old. I have been practicing yoga for four months, and I am learning to do headstand, or, as it’s called in Sanskrit, *sirsasana*. “*Sirsasana*,” says yoga teacher Cyndi Lee on the CD class I’m listening to, “is the father of all *asanas*, the single most beneficial pose, but ONLY”—emphasis here—“if practiced carefully and mindfully.” In other words, you don’t want to break your neck. I have been practicing since July, ever since I took a five-day workshop with Cyndi and her husband David Nichtern at the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies in Rhinebeck, New York. For a while, headstand seems like a ridiculous concept: the weight of your whole body balanced on the crown of your delicate head, centimeters away from your brain. I am too old, I think, too uncoordinated. I have never done anything like this in my life. Why start now? And yet, each time I do the CD, I go through the poses that Cyndi calls “headstand preparation,” placing my head on the floor in the triangle of my forearms, pulling my legs, one at a time, into my chest. I murmur that this is hopeless, but I keep doing it. As Cyndi would say, I have a “headstand practice.” It is a dignified pursuit of a goal, like sitting down at a desk each morning to write a novel and being on page five.

The real challenge of headstand is not balancing on one’s head because the forearms create a triangular support and, as one becomes more proficient, one establishes a line of balance that runs through the center of the body. But a beginner has to start by getting up there in the first place, against the secure prop of the wall. It takes me a long time to learn these moves: to tuck my legs into my

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chest, to straighten my spine, to activate my arms and shoulders, at the crucial moment, courageously, mindfully, to lift my hips above my waist, to rest the soles of my feet against the wall, and finally to straighten my legs.

For months the pose eludes me. But I feel tiny markers of progress: my legs pulling in more tightly, my body saying to me, “Oh, I see. This is the way it will happen.” But I can’t raise my hips up far enough to get my legs against the wall. I am mindful of my neck and back, mindful of my age, mindful of my grandmother’s voice saying, “What are you, crazy?” Each time I do yoga, I must be patient with myself, and, after a certain number of tries at headstand, I must let go of the effort and move on.

I can’t rush it. . . . This is a huge insight.

But I don’t need to give up. . . . This is a second huge insight.

I need to have faith in the process, knowing that even if my progress is infinitesimal, it is progress. I trust that one day I will actually do a headstand, and that inspires me. “When the body knows that the mind is kind, it will open and release.”

In theory, certainly, and in the practice of yoga as I have experienced it, teachers embrace a rhetoric of radical self-acceptance. This doesn’t mean that everyone is perfect but just that whatever conditions exist are part of the reality that we notice and try not to avoid or reject. We are where we are. There is always a tension between the desire of both teacher and learner for forward movement and the reality of where the learner is at the moment. Maybe a different teacher, or a different method, would produce more immediate results? Or maybe the student just needs time to grow.

In school, we have a curriculum that reflects our interests and the goals of the school, and students have their bodies and their minds. Where do we intersect? How much and how fast can one adapt to reach the other? Maybe we have a student of wild imagination who veers off into incoherence. Or another who lines up words in safe sentences but is cut off from the complexity of his subject or the sources of his own intelligence. Both must have a grade. We know what model the course asks them to replicate, what knowledge they are supposed to demonstrate, but do we really know what they need for their own best development? Can we create a holding environment where what they need can be found? We look for a balance between structure and freedom, effort and ease. We know that patience is required. But the final grade is only four months away. So we keep our records, maybe the students keep a portfolio, maybe there is a standardized test, and all of this creates a sense of legitimacy in teachers, administrators, and accrediting agencies. But what happens to the talents, skills, habits of mind, or body, that aren’t being measured? What happens to the students who aren’t measuring up? What happens even to those who *are* measuring up but who may lose other ways of knowing not nurtured by the course?

The practice of yoga may seem far from this conventional situation. It is a voluntary activity usually undertaken by adults with spare time and strong motivation. Maybe they want a perfect body, maybe they’re looking for inner peace, maybe some combination. But they are seekers of a sort. And while there is no pressure on yoga teachers from an accrediting board to produce perfect yogis, there is pressure on them to be clear enough—and kind enough—so that people will come back the next week. One shows up to practice, to connect body and mind, to exert oneself and to calm down, to be present. One doesn’t practice

yoga to get a grade and be finished with it. One practices to practice, as one sings or dances, for the feeling of it, for the wholeness it brings into one's life.

Are there lessons here for school learning? Insights about the nature of being a student? A teacher? Insights about the relationship between practice and results? How much do we have a right to demand from students? How much can we let them follow their own lights? There is nothing casual about yoga. You must do the pose precisely because you don't want to injure yourself and because yoga involves developing awareness. What are your muscles doing? Your fingers? Your eyes? Your throat? You take a pose that you may or may not like and you say, "Okay, how does this feel? What's coming up?" But there are also many ways to adapt the poses so that you don't hurt yourself, endless variations so that the most basic learner can practice—which means taking a position with awareness—and so that the most advanced can still face a challenge. The ultimate goal both is and is not the pose. It is about finding the courage, strength, discipline to undertake the practice. It is also about developing awareness in the context of self-acceptance, learning to be compassionate toward the self and others, embracing *ahimsa* or non-violence—a broad term that encompasses both the physical and psychic ways we can harm ourselves and others. What you learn in your yoga practice, you take into the world. When you find yourself in an uncomfortable position, on or off your mat, you breathe and pay attention. Is there room for such teaching in the average classroom?

Gym Class, the Body, and the Pursuit of Higher Education

I remember myself as a child standing on the sidewalk watching my cousin do cartwheels and handstands on the concrete. The movements seem impossible. I feel lumbering and inept. In the schoolyard, I wish not to be counted into the game. I am afraid to swing a bat, catch a ball, shoot a basket. I don't want to be responsible for the team's losing. I do love to swim, however, and I learn to do the crawl more or less correctly in high school. There is no team; there are no races. We just swim.

In gym my main concern is to have a clean gymsuit and sneakers so that I won't get a zero for the day. It doesn't matter what sort of athlete I am. What matters is the uniform. There is a merciful logic to that, a way to insure that someone like me, who hates competitive sports, can still pass. So I stand on my numbered spot and get inspected. At the time, I have little relationship to my body that is not sexualized. I wear French twists and high heels, and for special occasions I wear strapless, padded corsets called *brasselettes*. "You have to suffer to be beautiful," my mother says. I would like to think that things are better now, half a century after the second wave of feminism, but, as I emerge from the subway in Manhattan and my eyes meet the giant Calvin Klein billboards of brooding teenagers in various stages of seduction, I know we're still suffering.

Outside of gym class, the competitions of school and college do not bother me much. Or maybe I am just not aware of how much I am bothered. I am a middle-class girl who likes to study. The classroom is set up for bookish people like me who don't move around too much in their seats. At graduation, when I look out at the world, it seems to me that the safest thing for me to do is to sign up for another four years.

In graduate school, the ground begins to shift. School, which used to be a

refuge, now becomes threatening. An attitude of real or perceived disdain intimidates me at every turn. Suddenly everyone has read the complete works of Henry James. I lean toward the Middle Ages myself, and many of the texts we use are in Everyman's Library, an imprint of Dutton. The frontispiece of these books has the inscription, "Everyman I will go with thee and be thy guide./In thy most need to go by thy side." I am moved by that promise, but I never feel in graduate school that anybody is my guide. The classes are cold, erudite to a fault, and, even though I'm doing well, I always feel wanting. This becomes the normal condition of life, the effect of a culture that accepts as useful the value of everyone feeling not good enough. If we are anxious, we will work harder, collect more information, achieve more, and be better citizens. I feel congested just writing about it. In fact people have colds and upset stomachs all the time, and, although they are young, their skin is pallid and pasty. But the body is irrelevant. Fear and exhaustion are exalted. I lose sleep trying to read the complete poems of John Donne from one week to the next. I am worried, tired, bored, and feel utterly fraudulent. Sometimes I am greatly moved by a novel or a poem. But hundreds of poems all in the same week?

Completing graduate school is like finishing a prison sentence. I walk through the gates with carfare in my pocket, and the world opens up again. I get a job as an adjunct, and, like all adjuncts in English, I teach freshman composition. And there, in my classroom, I find myself again. The students don't care if I've read all of Henry James. They just want me to help them, to be their guide. Their work, even the simplest argumentative essay, seems intimate to me: the words they choose, the ideas they espouse, their handwriting. And they know me by the way I respond to them. If my formal lesson falls flat, I can still reach them at night when I read their work and write back to them. Later I teach memoir: writing memoir, reading memoir. And they tell me their stories. They tell me that writing stories helps them. "I didn't even know I *had* a story," one says. What I'm teaching them, teaching myself, though I don't call it this yet, is a kind of meditation, letting go of restriction, self-doubt, and self-consciousness long enough, through putting words on paper, to locate thoughts, to see them on the page, to let them be, and thus to find a part of the self that may be silenced in the fray of ordinary life.

The public debates that swirl around the teaching of reading and writing may challenge the value of this fundamental experience. Even the act of revision, whose importance compositionists fought to have recognized for 40 years, is being questioned. "Substantive writing on demand," says Brent Staples in *The New York Times*, "is now a common feature of corporate life." Of course. But missing from his essay is an acknowledgement of the years of immersion in the writing process that will ultimately lead to that kind of facility—as well as a questioning of the corporate model that puts speed at such a premium. Students already work too fast. They need time to learn that a deep knowledge of how to write comes only from giving it time.

Of course, I'm immersed in—constructed by—this value system, too. I am often impatient with my own processes. To be the best, my nerves tell me, I must be quick. I must measure myself against the other, who may, sadly, be my best friend. I must find fault, be jealous, be superior. I live much of my life attending to what the child psychologist D.W. Winnicott calls the "false self," a self that is comfortable only when people approve of it. A small Zen-like voice knows that

the approval of others is an unstable foundation on which to build one's life. And yet it's the air I breathe. The disapproval (or perceived disapproval) of people in authority can send me into a depression. I go to a preemptive dark place where I have the illusion that I control the potential outer darkness. There is even a peculiar sense of order in that, however bleak and unproductive.

Directed Effort vs. Habitual Aggression

At night, to illuminate the darkness, I go to another community which embraces different values, what is called New Age, what Kurt Spellmeyer calls "a separate tradition of humanistic thinking," which is "public and democratic," rather than "academic and elitist" (179). It's been there all along, under one name or another, this version of reality where people assume that others are all right, where they accept as natural the value of being kind to one another. In college, I read the American Transcendentalists. I read Blake and Wordsworth. I could tell you what they said, but I never *felt* them. "Shades of the prison house begin to close/Upon the growing boy." "The things which I have seen I now can see no more." That was true of me. I could no longer see. When I was in my twenties, I found A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*. That was a nice idea: children following their own lights. And in the 80s and 90s, I read American interpretations of Buddhism: Jack Kornfield, Jon Kabat Zinn, Stephen Levine, Mark Epstein. I read liberation theologian Matthew Fox, who offers the tradition of an egalitarian Christianity that locates God inside us. I learned that Paulo Freire's work grew not only from Marxism but also from this same egalitarian Christianity. I discovered Parker Palmer, who writes of his own depression in a ferocious academic environment, who has become a spokesman for many of us. He describes:

the way I was formed—or deformed—in the educational systems of this country to live out of the top inch and a half of the human self: to live exclusively through cognitive rationality and the powers of the intellect; to live out of touch with anything that lay below that top inch and a half—body, intuition, feeling, emotion, relationship. ("The Grace of Great Things" 17)

I discover that many other people are reading these writers. I give thanks for their bravery. After reading for a while each night, I can relax and close my eyes.

From time to time I take a writing workshop at the Omega Institute, where there are open yoga classes early in the morning and after the formal workshops. The people who come to Omega are, like me, interested in the experience of a relaxed and self-reflective pedagogy. They are teachers, social workers, artists, pediatricians, people with disposable income, but also young people who work in the kitchen and camp out at night by the lake. There are free yoga, meditation, tai chi chuan classes every day. From the classes I take there, I construct my own series of simple yoga poses to do at home, and sometimes, but not regularly, I also meditate. If you're interested in Buddhism, if you accept its first noble truth that life is suffering—or, as Mark Epstein more precisely puts it, that there is a sense of pervasive unsatisfactoriness, bittersweetness, to most experience (36ff)—if you understand that your own sadness is not just some inconvenience you ought to get rid of right away, if you accept the law of karma, that all our thoughts and

actions have consequences, if you imagine that there is some wisdom that may reside *inside* yourself that you might want to locate, then the Buddhist suggestion is that you sit in a comfortable position on the ground or in a chair with your back straight, you calm yourself by watching your breath and your thoughts without judgment, you get some perspective on your own pain, you consider the suffering of all beings everywhere including yourself, and you pray for peace.

In June 2002, I sign up for the five-day yoga and meditation workshop, “Yoga Body, Buddha Mind,” given by Cyndi Lee and David Nichtern. I’m initially more interested in the Buddha mind, but it is yoga that takes up the most time. The workshop is demanding, and, by the end of the second day, I am very tired. I find it hard to take Cyndi’s offer of “yogi’s choice”—that I “rest in child’s pose,” whenever I want to. The challenge to keep up is always with me, just as it is in the rest of my life. But I’m still happy to be there.

At the end of the workshop, I buy Cyndi’s CD and begin practicing at home two or three times a week. “Be patient and observant,” she says again and again. “Go where you can. . . . You have to start somewhere. Don’t even consider worrying about it.”

Don’t even consider worrying about it!

As I work with this CD, I have the distinct feeling that I’m understanding something new about learning in general. I’m practicing headstand, *sirsasana*, I’m learning *urdhva dhanurasana*, a backbend called wheel, or upward bow, that I find extremely challenging—a high drama I’ve rarely engaged. It is very hard. But I’m progressing. And at the same time I am accepting the distance between the “goal” and my practice, learning more and more that *the practice is the goal*.

I sit on the floor in head-to-knee pose, *janu sirsasana*, one leg straight out, the other bent with the sole of one foot resting against the other thigh, and I lean forward and breathe. Gradually my head comes to touch my knee. But on the CD Cyndi says she likes to call this pose “not head to knee, but chin to shin.” If one directs attention to bringing one’s chin to one’s shin, the neck and spine stay straighter as one leans forward. So there is the pose as I’m doing it, and there is the goal of chin to shin, which remains in some realm of possibility I haven’t reached. But I also know that the perfect pose is not the point. The point, as teacher Rodney Yee says, is to “receive the pose” as I’m in it right now. As Cyndi moves to the related pose, seated forward bend, *pascimottanasana*, she observes that “the job description of this pose is to calm your mind and subdue your ego.” The comment astonishes me. How deeply it goes to the heart of my struggle. In my sweatiest, clumsiest moments, I hold on to Cyndi’s assurance that, wherever my practice is, she’s not judging me. Or if she is—if she is judging someone doing *pascimottanasana* in front of her—she will, in her own practice as a teacher, notice that and let it go. And if I am judging myself—or if I feel a teacher is judging me—I will notice that too and let it go.

She moves to *baddhakonasana*, cobbler’s pose, another forward bend, for which one is seated on the floor, the soles of the feet together, knees apart. “Don’t ever press down on your knees,” she says. “That’s an invitation for an injury. It is not recommended to push or pull in any yoga pose or just ever in your life. Watch yourself and figure out the difference between directed effort and habitual aggression.”

How much of what we see around us—on television, in films, in traffic, on the streets, on the news, on campus, in playgrounds, in ordinary social relations,

in our own minds—falls under the heading of habitual aggression? Heeding her words, can I begin by not being aggressive to my own body, not forcing it, not hating it, simply paying attention to what it is telling me? In the bathroom of the yoga studio, there is a small framed quotation by the American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron: “Our true nature is not some ideal that we have to live up to. It’s who we are right now” (12). Can I refrain from reading a secret challenge into that observation? “So, are you happy with who you are right now? Shouldn’t you get better, do more yoga?” Chodron says that sort of thinking is a “subtle aggression against who we really are” (3). It is hard just to be in this present moment, to accept the self right now, to sit with our self and breathe.

Which Self?

In the academic world, people define themselves by their *curriculum vitae*. Maybe they have a book with a head shot on the jacket flap. I stare at the pictures, trying to imagine who the authors are, what their true nature is like, what they do in the morning. I’m drawn to the acknowledgements page, the footnotes, the index. Often I am grateful for their work, but, depending on the subject, I may also feel anxious and competitive. That person is obviously not wasting time the way I am. That person is serious. Only if I can do what that person does will I be all right. Only then will my self be happy.

In both eastern and western thought, scholars distinguish between false selves and a true self. The ancient goal of yoga, according to its texts, is to find the “true self” which yogis envision as the self that is united with God. By contrast, the self on the book jacket is illusory. It suffers because of its identifications with its various accomplishments, disabilities, and fears, and because of the “residue” and “latencies” (*samskaras* and *vasanas*) of the experiences it no longer remembers (Eliade 42ff). But maybe the person on the book jacket has found her true self in writing that book. I sit on the yoga mat, and I think about that. What residues and latencies keep me from my own creating self?

The idea of a singular self that is “true” is, of course, oversimplified. And yet we tend to know when we’re far from the experiences that give us a sense of fulfillment in our lives, when the “false self” or selves have the upper hand. Like psychoanalysts, yogis see the self as haunted by the unconscious. Psychoanalysis invites us to talk about our problems with an analyst to recover the hidden content, which, when illuminated, may cease to hold us in its grip and offer us greater freedom. Yogis engage both the mind and the body through meditation, the *asanas*, the breath, as another integrated route to that understanding and freedom. The yoga class can become, like the psychotherapeutic relationship, another holding environment where it is safe to feel. Sometimes people find themselves crying in the middle of a pose. Something mysterious rises, some memory locked in the body that gets expressed in a pose. Maybe we know what it is, maybe we don’t. Maybe we talk about it with a psychotherapist, maybe we don’t. But we understand that body, mind, emotions, spirit are all connected, that there is wisdom in this practice.

The word yoga means both “union” and “yoke” in Sanskrit. We take on the yoke of the discipline to find a sense of integration, a still small voice, the God within—call it what we will. We focus on the breath, a thought rises, we notice it, and we gently put it aside. We struggle to stay in a difficult pose and watch the

way our attention moves from one part of our body to another. We feel pain or sweat runs into our eyes, or maybe we fall out of a pose altogether, and again we notice what we feel—embarrassment, frustration, anger at the teacher, anger at ourselves. Or maybe something opens, and we feel a sense of peace and spaciousness. This happens over and over. We develop a witness consciousness, like our own inner therapist, that acknowledges and separates us from our thoughts, that says “you are not only that” or “you don’t have to do that,” and maybe we get a glimpse of a new way of seeing ourselves. We treat our bodies and our minds with dignity. We “take our seat,” as meditation teacher David Nichtern says, with a straight spine. And we move toward freedom.

It is not my purpose to say that yoga is better than psychotherapy. Yogis have teachers, as analysts have analysts, people who observe with them, who help them understand their suffering. The two practices can work together. What is important is the recognition that, as Spellmeyer and others say, “the way in becomes the way out.” Whatever happens is expressive. We don’t need to deny anything. Rest awhile, say the Buddhists, the yogis, the legions of teachers who see children as starting from a good place from which they should not be pushed or pulled in the direction of someone else’s goal. They remind us that we’re larger than our defensive self-conceptions, our frightened false selves. If we felt safe enough to stop defending ourselves, what would we discover that we already know?

Taking Our Selves to School

I acknowledge that the institution has goals that it pays me to support. And students need certain skills and knowledge for graduate school and careers. But I notice that my yoga experience dramatically supports my belief that my students are already okay as they are, and I want to help them to be courageous as they make their way through school, to ask “to what end?” and to choose lives for themselves that include compassionate awareness of themselves and others. I understand that their emotional and physical lives and the emotional climate that exists in my classroom are as important as the books on the syllabus, that their intuition is a form of knowledge, that their becoming attuned to emotions as they arise is part of the knowledge making.

There is growing support in cognitive science, medicine, and psychology for the importance of attending to our intuitive, emotional selves. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio and psychologist Daniel Goleman both write about the way we know ourselves and our world by paying attention to what Goleman calls emotional intelligence. Damasio challenges Descartes’ dualist principle that mind and body are separate. He observes that a thought often begins with the production of hormones that create a feeling, that that feeling becomes part of what we call thinking. We may know things before they register as thoughts. Goleman argues that people who have emotional intelligence, which means a constructive relationship to their emotions, are more likely to function well in the world than those who are cut off from their emotions (*Emotional Intelligence*). Scientists are also demonstrating the brain’s neuroplasticity, the capacity of one part of the brain to take over a function that it does not normally have. In a blind person, for example, the part of the brain associated with sight does not necessarily lie fallow but can become active in reading braille. Likewise, says Jeffrey Schwartz,

we can, by conscious force of will, train the brain to function differently—to change a behavior that is causing us pain.

In their collaborative work *Destructive Emotions*, Goleman, the Dalai Lama, and a team of scientists, teachers, philosophers, and monks demonstrate that we can, through meditation and innovative pedagogies, diminish the experience and effects of negative emotions and behaviors. Goleman describes “the lama in the lab,” a highly trained monk whose brain activity is tracked as he meditates. The resulting MRIs show enormous activity in the left prefrontal cortex, which is associated with feelings of “happiness, enthusiasm, joy, high energy, and alertness” (12). This, says Goleman, is the “neuroanatomy of compassion,” and if it is something that is nurtured through meditation, then it is something we can learn.

Wild Mind and Monkey Mind

How do these notions of the self and the meditative practice of writing unfold themselves in the discourse of composition and rhetoric? Writing, like graphic arts and crafts, like music-making, dancing, cooking, like any creative act, has long been recognized as a form of meditation. One loses the self in the work. One finds peace, joy, focus. One calls on that elusive self and does something beautiful with its energy and vision. But in the current conservative educational climate, busy with technological innovation, obsessed with standards and prescribed outcomes, these artful pursuits are often the first ones cut from the budget. When I started teaching, in 1973, I came up against the product-oriented five-paragraph essay and the notion that first one lines up one’s thoughts and then one writes. I taught people to write thesis sentences and topic sentences and complex deductive paragraphs that widened and narrowed in levels of generality like an accordion. And maybe well-written paragraphs do look that way when you stand back from them. But is that the consciousness with which they were composed?

That same year, Peter Elbow published *Writing without Teachers*, and I sat on the subway, gratefully reading the work of this teacher who gave us all permission to write without him. Another escapee, I thought, another person who’d done it all wrong and lived to tell about it. Write freely, said Elbow, without stopping, for a set period of time, and see what you’ve got. “Meaning,” he wrote, “is not what you start out with but what you end up with” (15). Immediately I incorporated this practice into my classes. Later, as Elbow wrote for teachers across the disciplines, free writing came to be called “low stakes” writing (as prior to and in preparation for “high stakes” writing), which sounds more respectable (“High Stakes”). In the eighties, Toby Fulwiler called upon James Britton’s categories of writing—expressive, transactional, and poetic—to demonstrate that the first, the expressive, Elbow’s free writing, was least often used in classrooms across the disciplines. Writing was used as formal communication but not as a tool for articulating and understanding one’s thoughts. This sometimes playful, formless, questioning kind of writing remained untapped as a resource because it seemed to run counter to the needs of disciplines for rational, well-organized thought. And yet we also know that the process, with all its messing around, is a boon to creativity. We need the hunches, intuitions, the ways of knowing and feeling bubbling below the surface. We also need the acknowledgement of uncertainty and humility in offering our thoughts and permission to acknowledge that just maybe we’re wrong.

Every spring, my colleague Myra Kogen and I run a faculty development seminar in the uses of writing across the disciplines. Early in the seminar we distribute an Elbow essay—sometimes the Elbow/Bartholomae debate that appeared in *College Composition and Communication* in 1995 about whether there is in fact any writing without teachers. Most people in the social sciences and the humanities side with Bartholomae because we're all "situated" in our discourses, in our cultures, all postmodern, all inescapably tied to our masks. (The science people, on the other hand, think that the whole debate is, as one physicist puts it, "blah, blah"—just two overwrought academics splitting hairs.)

The scientists' impatience with our rhetoric notwithstanding, we are, of course, all connected, dependent on the labor and ingenuity of countless others not only for our forms of discourse but for the water we drink, the floor we stand on, the paper on which we record our work. But still there is the simple and profound human impulse to express oneself freely. And Elbow cheers on every other writer who has the temerity to think that his or her work is the fresh work of a "self" inquiring into its own nature, ever so slightly different from the self sitting in the next chair. "What can I learn about my own mind," asks this individual writer, "by observing what I put on the page? What do I have to say that is an aspect of me and that is worth someone else's attention? How can these thoughts take shape and become a formal piece of work?" Bartholomae might call this "the syllabus built into the learner"—what's the individual configuration despite the social constructivist nature of learning ("Teaching Basic Writing" 30).

What invariably happens at the faculty development workshops, as we ask faculty members to write freely about their thoughts on a reading, their own experiences as writers, and their struggles with current writing projects, is that they find themselves engrossed in the process, operating just as if they were free. As their thoughts unfold on the page, they begin to see the possibilities of writing without teachers: the long-gone teachers in their heads, the critical editors, the most unforgiving of their colleagues. It is a revelation to some to tolerate their own hesitations, to be patient as they wait for something interesting to emerge. And, as we talk, barriers come down. We understand each other better. It is a simple yet thrilling experience because, in that period of kind exploration, accepting language as it comes, talking frankly about what dogs us in our teaching, we honor our minds and the demands of our work, and we feel supported. The group becomes another holding environment in which it is safe to take risks.

Across the hall, in my graduate course in Theories and Practice of Teaching Composition, the students enter with many anxieties. Some are being asked to teach freshman English with no prior training. Their jobs are the relatively easy ones. Many others are teaching in middle or high schools, following the rigid agendas of supervisors who are in turn overwhelmed by the numbers they are going to have to produce when their students are tested for reading, writing, and math competency and those scores are published in the newspapers. It is the age of outcomes assessment and No Child Left Behind, the age of the war on terrorism, where Army recruiters in starched uniforms stand in pairs at urban high school doors, encouraging teenagers to sign up. State examining boards suspiciously construct ever more elaborate apparatuses to make sure that everyone learns the same thing at the same time. And the new teachers are all commanded to hurry up and get their Masters degrees so that they can be quickly certified and then pronounced excellent. They are often taking two graduate courses while teaching

full-time in high schools with 35 students in each of five classes (subject to supervisors walking into their classrooms unannounced to make sure the script is being followed, using outdated texts), spending their own money on supplies, preparing their students for high-stakes exams. Thus many new teachers in my class are exhausted at 27 and looking either for hard rules to ease their burdens or another job.

We take the obvious path: we read a range of essays on process, revision, and responding to student work, helpful practices in teaching grammar, in understanding models of learning language and rhetoric, in finding ways to bridge the gap between students' literacies outside the classroom and the academic literacy they need to succeed inside. We read stories and poems together; we ask questions, and we work in groups. And we also read a small chapter or two each week of Natalie Goldberg's bold and simple book *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*, as a counterbalance to all that complexity, to make her point that writing is like drinking a glass of water.

What do I do after I drink a glass of water? . . . What do I do with waking up in the morning or going to sleep at night? . . . Writing practice is simply something fundamental. . . . it makes you notice your mind and begin to trust it and understand it. . . . If you get this the rest is none of my business. (6-7)

She learns to write by writing. "Over and over, we begin." And her final message is: "don't listen to me. What do I know?" (9).

Some students find Goldberg annoying. "What is this, kung fu? Our students need to pass the New York State Regents Exam." They want formulas. I acknowledge that constraints can be clarifying, as they certainly are in yoga. But, in the tiny space of those tense English classrooms, writing practice often narrows itself down to dreary formulations which can, as Ann Berthoff and others have observed, kill the very faculty the writer needs most: an ability to question the premise that this straight line of boxes of thought will take us where we need to go (129). I look at some of the papers, and it seems to me at times that the students might just as well have filled in the frames with happy faces or question marks: "Is this what you want? Is this what you want?" Their own thought doesn't matter. What matters is the getting in, the gesture acknowledging that the next three boxes are where their thought would go, and the getting out. Unless another experience intervenes, this container is what writing becomes.

What Goldberg teaches is patient practice, kindness to oneself, a willingness to sit with what's difficult, to find the joy in it, *not* to go for the formula, whether it's an idea or the shape it takes. She offers some patterns herself—to start, for example, with "I remember," and then maybe "I don't remember"—*samskaras* and *vasanas*—what's underneath. But then she steps out of the way. Her metaphor for writing is the Buddhist "wild mind." Most of us, she says, are stuck in "monkey mind," that small dot in the sky where we go to find all our assumptions about life.

We put all our attention on that one dot. Meanwhile, wild mind surrounds us. Western psychology calls wild mind *the unconscious*, but I think *the unconscious* is a limiting term. If

it is true that we are all interpenetrated and interconnected, then wild mind includes mountains, rivers, Cadillacs, humidity, plains, emeralds, poverty, old streets in London, snow, and moon. A river and a tree are not unconscious. They are part of wild mind. (32–33)

And thus, from this perspective, Elbow and Bartholomae unite: free writing and the strong, oppositional reading. Maybe there *is* no writing without teachers, without models, but we also know that the teachers we find most important in the end are those who encourage us to lift out of the predictable boundaries of our lives. Both Elbow and Bartholomae hold out for the same inquiring breadth, the same acknowledgement that we are each out there on our own. And we are also connected not only to other thinkers but to poverty, rivers, history, all living under the same literal, metaphorical sky.

Poets in the School

It is striking to observe that when an artist enters the school system, whether for a single session or ongoing teaching, the first things to go are grades and penalties. We understand that a special situation is upon us and that we can work from a deeper sense of commitment that is connected also to a sense of openness, simplicity, and play. The beauty of Goldberg's teaching is that it rests on a few fundamental principles. Not because art is simple, but because artists become artists by having the faith to show up every day at their workspace to trust their curiosity and intuitions, because they know that the complexity of their thoughts and work cannot always be separated into "skills," because they come to their own rules, because, as they testify over and over, they live in a state of waiting to see what happens. The time when the artist comes to class is the time when something less rigid, less paranoid is allowed to happen. It is the time when the students are permitted to relax into themselves and find the joy of their own creativity.

In *Writing in the Asylum*, Jennifer McCormick describes her work at an overcrowded urban high school in Brooklyn in the early 1990's. Some students have walked into classrooms with guns, so now there are security guards and metal detectors at the entrance. Why these guns are so readily available, why these young people think that carrying them is the only way to feel safe and powerful, are, of course, questions of bitter national debate. But in this high school the students experience the results of the deadly combination of poverty, joblessness, and guns, and here at the metal detector is the spot where damage control lives. Working as a tutor, McCormick develops a close relationship with five women students. As she helps them with their writing and the problems of their lives, they become her guides as well. Unlike their more privileged contemporaries, who are busy multi-tasking, these women spend a lot of time waiting. They go through the metal detectors, empty their pockets, stand with their legs apart. They are always under suspicion, locked out of lunchrooms and libraries for security purposes. They learn, both in school and in their lives, to stand in line. They call themselves "Dixie Cups": human throwaways in a throwaway society.

McCormick works with Hermine Meinhard, the resident poet in this school, to subvert this bleak landscape. Meinhard asks the students to go deep into an inner world, to try on masks, other selves that support self-reflection and strength.

A young woman named Tanzania writes in a poem she calls “My Abstract Life”:

. . . I am destined to be
 Lost . . .
 If I speak, I am to be
 quieted.
 If I move, I am to be
 stopped.
 . . . no one knows anything about
 me.
 Yet they can tell stories
 about me.
 I don't question their
 actions any more, I let
 it be. I have succumbed
 to the madness.
 I have become madness. (qtd. in McCormick 79)

In writing the poem, McCormick observes, Tanzania “reconfigures the boundary between self and world” (80). She begins to tell her own story. She develops a witness consciousness through which she reflects critically on her conditions and asserts some control over her life. She does not become the madness because there are opposing forces: her own ability to write and the support of teachers who affirm that what she sees and writes matters, that *she* matters.

Other examples abound of teachers and artists who go into public classrooms, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and, with a sense of kindness, aesthetics, and an ear to listen to their students, evoke all the beauty and sadness that have been pushed away by the routines of a too-busy life or a too-empty life or a life of deprivation and abuse. They all work from a sense of radical self-acceptance. They believe in the ability of ordinary young people to respond to beauty, kindness, humor; to find their passion; to make art. And in response to that belief, people do make art—not so that it can be judged but for the sheer joy and relief of it. (See, for example, *Speak Your Mind*.) The work ceases to be about being the best but about finding, creating oneself, and finding a community of others who share a vision and are eager to listen and to share.

Learning to Live in the Present

In *On Paradise Drive*, culture critic and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks does a comical rendering of the middle and upper-middle class in America. He writes of children being programmed to enter the Ivy League from the time their Apgar scores are taken in the delivery room. Their childhoods, says Brooks, are being “professionalized” by parents who see childhood as a time for maximum programming so that their children will become competitive for entrance into the best nursery schools, high schools, colleges, law firms, corporations. They are busy all the time, just as their parents are. *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik writes a funny, sad piece about his daughter who tells him that her imaginary friend is too busy to play with her (80). Carl Honore observes himself contemplating the “one-minute bedtime story” for the parent on the go (2).

The story of the too-busy, affluent American child, offspring of driven adults, aided and abetted by driven teachers, has become a scripted narrative that drives our country and is hard to interrupt, a deadly enacting of monkey mind. As Parker Palmer observes, affluent Americans believe, as Palmer did himself, “that they can ‘win’ while everyone around them is losing” (*To Know* 4). They can block out poverty, violence, the suffering of others. Brooks looks for the bright light in all this activity. It is, he says, a distinctly American orientation toward the future. We are energetic, exuberant people with the pioneer spirit written into our heritage. Our ancestors all came here from someplace else with the readiness to till the land, take the lowest paying jobs, and work their way up by virtue of their ingenuity and courage—except, of course, for the African slaves, who had no choice about coming, and native Americans, who were here already, whom we killed, enslaved, stole from when they stood in our way. The ideology of the United States has always been to conquer the unknown and adapt to the Protestant work ethic. The dark side of that spirit is a rapacious sense that everything belongs to us, everything unknown needs to be conquered. This ideology drives the “real world” for which my students are to be prepared. But as teachers we also have an opportunity and an obligation to shape that reality by suggesting that time and space for stillness are important, that our connection to all other beings on earth is important.

Savasana: Corpse Pose

At the end of each yoga session, we lie on our back on the floor in *savasana*, corpse pose. Arms and legs resting quietly, we close our eyes and “watch our thoughts coming and going, like birds” (Lee). After all our work, this position is what we come to. Does “our mindstream leave our body and continue on,” as Cyndi says, or do we simply take our place in nature with the decaying, ever renewing trees? I don’t know. But it is useful to remember, as we lie in “final relaxation,” that we won’t be here forever. We must bequeath what we’ve done to future generations. May we leave them the beauty of the earth that we enjoyed, the knowledge and values to preserve it, the minds and hearts to feel their connection to it all. ☺

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