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Connecting

Helen Walker

Laura Milner


Candace Walworth

Dave Waddell

Vic Kryston

See next page for additional authors

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Connecting

Authors

Helen Walker, Laura Milner, Candace Walworth, Dave Waddell, Vic Kryston, and Richard L. Graves

Connecting

Section Editor's Message

I am writing this first introduction for "Connecting" on April 20, the second anniversary of Columbine. Just months ago, the shootings at Santana High School in California spread a coat of fresh pain over Columbine with more of the same spattering across the nation. These renewed reminders of alienation in our schools press us to what Parker Palmer calls the "mystery of relatedness" (*To Know* 121).

I cannot forget the AEPL workshop at NCTE in 1999 after Columbine when Carol Sullivan, from a nearby Denver high school, led us through a collaborative exercise in which teachers paired with students who accompanied her. My student (Melissa King, now at U of CO Boulder) and I wrote notes back and forth to each other. I recall my sense of honor and humility when this young woman across the circle was willing to answer my questions and ask hers, to share herself with a teacher she didn't even know. Melissa wrote, "I hope that when I'm an adult I'm not afraid of teenagers. I hope I remember that sometimes you feel lost and that you don't know who you are." I wondered if I was afraid of teenagers. Later in our dialogue, she wrote, "We need to realize that teachers have feelings and brains and lives outside of school." This brief written exchange excited me. What if we could make our classrooms places of deeper connection? What if we could be real people to each other, people with feelings and brains and lives outside of school?

At our 1999 summer conference, teachers sat in a circle in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains. They shared stories, and the excitement was there, too. Again, I felt honored to be a part of the "mystery of relatedness."

Many of the narratives submitted for the opening issue of "Connecting" plumb the "mystery of relatedness." They suggest that we are in the business of *solving* the mystery of relatedness, that we are a *healing profession*. However, these narratives urge us to enter and re-enter that mystery. Palmer tells us that we can only teach ourselves. We give of ourselves, and we receive. As we do, we may discover that we are healers, that we need healing ourselves, that we can heal, and that cycle connects us forever. Laura Milner opens with "Steve's Story," asking a difficult question: what if our healing efforts are harmful? She shows our vulnerability, shows that there will be no guarantees. Candace Walworth's "War & Peace in a Two-Car Garage" turns our attention to Santana High School and the violence of continued alienation. She leaves us with more questions and a more urgent call to answer them personally. "Writing about pain is cathartic," states Dave Waddell in "Caring." Describing what teachers make of this information, he highlights the outcome of "communion of caring among teachers." "Ralph and the Unexpected Fix," Vic Kryston's story, opens up more possibilities and more questions. We hear Palmer's voice echoed again: you can only teach yourself, "at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life" (*Courage* 17). We conclude the first issue of "Connecting" with "The Abraham Dream" by one of the co-founders of AEPL, Richard L. Graves, who discovers that his life is based on a desire to heal.

Steve's Story

Laura Milner

In those first weeks of English 102, Steve (not his real name) never said much to me or his classmates, in or out of class. His boyish face and muscular arms and legs were sprinkled with red freckles; he was polite, but quiet. I didn't realize that I had prejudged and underestimated him until I read his first essay and saw him cry in class.

The assignment was a timed, handwritten essay on one of two topics, designed to prepare college freshmen for the state-mandated Regents' test. Steve chose "If you could relive one day of your life, what would it be, and why?" and described the day his dad had asked him to skip high school to help move a friend from one house to another. Being a teenager involved in athletics and academics, Steve begged off, so his dad moved the furniture alone. At school that afternoon, Steve received a phone call that his dad had suffered a heart attack while lifting a heavy sofa. On his way to the hospital, Steve turned on his car radio and heard Vince Gill singing "Go Rest High," a bittersweet ballad of a father burying his son. Steve somehow knew, upon hearing Gill's song, that his father was dead. His narrative about the experience was unrelenting, chilling.

A few weeks later, I asked students to bring a meaningful song or poem to class along with two paragraphs illuminating themes and personal connections. We lit a candle on an empty desk in the middle of the room, then worked our way around the circle, hearing everything from "Cat's in the Cradle" and stories of ruined parent-child relationships to Maya Angelou's "And Still I Rise" and the importance of hope in times of struggle. More than one student choked up.

Steve was the last to share; when he pulled out Vince Gill, I felt a mixture of dread and awe. With no introduction, he played the song. Afterwards, when he tried to explain how he had first heard the lyrics on the way to the hospital to see his dying father, his voice broke. He laid his head on his desk and sobbed for what seemed like forever; when I glanced around the circle, blinking back tears, several students were crying. The words of Mary Rose O'Reilley in *Radical Presence* would later resonate: "'Pay attention [. . .] . Don't be thinking about a solution, or how you should fix it. Just listen hard [. . .] .' It's very bad business to invite heartfelt speech and then not listen"(27).

I happened to be sitting beside Steve that day, so I could feel his body heat as he wept. We sat in silence a few moments before I suggested we take a ten-minute break. When the two of us were left alone in the room, I asked if there was anything I could do and praised him for his courage. He didn't say much, but he did stay for the remaining half hour. He came to class a few more times before seeking permission to withdraw from school, even though the deadline had passed.

Laura Milner is an assistant professor in the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University. Her teaching and writing are influenced by her Zen meditation practice, and, as a new doctoral student in composition at Indiana U of PA, she is exploring the role of writing in personal and cultural healing and peace making.

His request was granted. His seat in our circle was empty, but his spirit remained.

I worried about him for months, wondering if his classroom breakdown had inflicted more harm than healing. As a practicing Zen Buddhist, I want to avoid causing harm, and sometimes I think composition teachers do more damage than we realize in the name of helping students “improve.” What stories are they longing but reluctant to tell? And what is the price of telling or not telling? Natalie Goldberg says writers return to things they can’t forget, “stories they carry in their bodies waiting to be released” (48). When these stories are silenced or withheld, many students cannot learn and cannot connect.

After worrying about Steve for some time, I was relieved to meet him stocking shelves at Kmart, grateful to hear him say he was okay and back in school. I was even more gratified this semester, three years after the classroom incident, to find him again with an “assistant manager” badge pinned to his pressed, plaid shirt. We chatted about his upcoming graduation and his career options: would it be engineering or retail management? He had never looked stronger or more confident, now taking nineteen hours at the university *and* working fifty hours a week, making the dean’s list *and* being promoted. We didn’t mention his dad.

I left the store feeling glad that Steve’s story had a happy ending, relieved that sharing his experience in class had not ruined his life. I didn’t have the nerve to ask him if or how the writing and/or the telling had changed him. I didn’t have the nerve to hug him, to tell him I remembered and was his biggest fan.

Is Steve the exception? How many students have stories “caught in their throats,” blocking their ability to “participate in the world” (O’Reilley 25)? Those who tell bits and pieces of trauma without fully disclosing still haunt me. They leave me wondering why we don’t spend more time creating what O’Reilley calls the classroom space where “something can rush in, something we did not plan and cannot control” (6). I suspect it is in these spaces where the most life-changing learning occurs, where students and teachers sit together, listening, examining, and listening some more, waiting and watching for what might emerge, forging connections that seem fragile at first and only later solidify into something for life, something to know and remember, like Steve, something to hold and release simultaneously.

War & Peace in a Two-Car Garage

Candace Walworth

I wasn’t expecting to learn anything from playing war. In fact, I had refused to play war with my nephew until the fifth day of my visit to Illinois, the third day of non-stop rain. By that time I figured that my chances of surviving another game of Monopoly or Shopping Mall were slim. My niece and nephew had already confided to my parents that my attention span for Nintendo was well below average, that I was too slow for Slap Poker, and that I had lost my touch at Ping-

Pong. Mom and Dad were taking naps, and my niece had gone to play with a friend. That left Brody and me. He yelled from the garage, "C'mon, Aunt Candace, let's play military."

I didn't want to because I didn't want to encourage war by playing war. But when I opened the garage door to tell him that I didn't want to play, he was seated at my dad's desk carefully handwriting a memo on blue-lined notebook paper. He furrowed his brow, tucked the piece of paper in an envelope, sealed it, and handed it to me. The brow and the voice, a gradually deepening voice that I could not identify as "his," impressed me.

"Here, Lieutenant Jamison," the voice said.

I opened the note. It read exactly as follows:

Dear, Lieutenant Jamison

You have your assignment now + its rather important. The secretary of State and UN Vice President are going to China. They are going as diplomats. They are going to negotiate to free the 10 pilots. Your mission is to provide armed escort and don't repeat DON'T be afraid to fire. Do not fire though unless fired upon.

Sincerely,

General Buckhimer

I can't say what drew me in more, witnessing his voice deepen in a single sentence or a dim sense that I had been handed an invitation to the inner world of a beloved boy poised at the crossroads between childhood and adolescence. All I know for sure is that I *became* Lieutenant Jamison, and, when a phone call interrupted the game an hour or more later, I had to stretch my imagination to believe I had ever been anyone other than Lieutenant Jamison. For the first time in the five-day visit, I was God, co-God with my nephew, and neither of us seemed to mind sharing. Nothing existed until we breathed life into it. I answered phone calls from Buckhimer & Associates, calculated platoon expenses with gusto, and tapped out messages to General Buckhimer on the clunky Royal typewriter that once accompanied me to college.

It wasn't work, yet it wasn't play either.

While discussing the mission to China over cokes in the canteen, Jamison and Buckhimer looked out the window to see another game underway, one thundercloud tackling another in a giant cloud match. Lieutenant Jamison requested a delay in the mission to China to watch the final quarter of cloud play. After consulting with minor officials by walky talky, General Buckhimer declared, "Request granted. Just remember you can't always have what you want."

According to General Buckhimer, the highlight of the mission came when we finally arrived in China, and he "drove" Grandpa's parked Buick over a treacherous mountain pass. For me, the highlight was the surprise of discovering a dynamic, liberating relationship hidden under the bad words "playing war."

After returning home, I was reading an article by Joanna Macy called "Facing the Violence of Our Times" when a sentence darted in front of me: "I believe

that the experience of never being heard is closely related to committing violence.” The sentence stunned me. Either I didn’t have the ability to imagine it or I didn’t want to imagine it. Never? Not a single encounter with a friendly witness? Not a parent, teacher, cousin, neighbor, or check-out person at King Soopers who waited for a reply to the question, “How are you?” The longer I sat, the more Joanna Macy’s words sunk in. She meant never.

I’m writing from my home in Boulder, Colorado, a three-hour plane ride from my family in Illinois and less than an hour drive from Columbine High School. The word “never” still haunts me.

Caring

Dave Waddell

It seems appropriate that my story took place at the 1999 Estes Park, Colorado, summer AEPL conference at which the “Connecting” section was conceived. I experienced there an inspiring communion of caring among teachers the likes of which I have not felt before or since.

At the conference, I conducted a workshop that asked participants to read and respond to a numbing paper written by a student I’ll call “Cindy” years before in a university writing class. The paper is about a girlhood experience with sexual assault. Its final lines are both shocking and haunting:

I was mad because I had let it happen to me. I should have ran when
I heard him coming up behind me. I should have screamed while he
was leading me to his house. I should have done something. I hate
myself more than I hate him.

I had a couple of reasons for wanting to lead a workshop built around this paper and its extraordinary ending. First, because I believe that since teachers who are empathic will inevitably receive such trauma-based papers, we should give continuous consideration to *how* we go about responding. And, second, I figured I could learn from the approaches taken by a group of teachers whom I knew to be sensitive to their students’ pain, teachers enlightened and perceptive enough to recognize writing and disclosure as conducive to learning and healing.

After workshop participants read the paper to themselves, they were asked to respond in writing as if Cindy were their own student. In the sharing that followed, most striking was the variety of approaches taken. Some teachers took great care not to step beyond the boundaries of what they considered their proper role as teachers of writing, not to delve into what could be viewed as amateur therapy. Yet, even among the most guarded, there was a sense that not to respond compassionately to such a painful memory was not only inappropriate but inhumane. One response in particular was especially memorable for its unbridled empathy and willingness to be reciprocally personal. The teacher wrote:

Dave Waddell teaches journalism full time at California State University, Chico, and English part time at Butte College.

I feel your hurt. I'm reminded of my own childhood demons that arise every once in a while to rekindle my own sense of hatred, self-hatred. Sometimes the only way I have of quieting my own guilt is to get it down on paper, oftentimes in two or three different versions. Then, I begin to feel better; I move the hatred and guilt out of my psyche and put it on paper where I can look at it as a story. I especially like your honesty and willingness to share what has been a haunting memory. Now your healing will begin. Thank you for your courage.

It is well established that writing about one's pain is cathartic. James Pennebaker's research has shown that the disclosure of trauma enhances mental and physical health. It is my further suspicion that for a writing experience to be truly therapeutic, the writer needs to receive from a reader the warmth of genuine understanding and acceptance. It is this empathic role that the careful teacher might sometimes fulfill.

The theme of the Estes Park conference was built upon Sondra Perl's discussion of Eugene Gendlin's theory of "felt sense," defined as something that "happens where writers pause and seem to listen or otherwise react to what is inside of them." One teacher who responded to Cindy's paper described our workshop experience as follows: "I felt a sense of communion in our caring about our student's pain as we seek the proper distance that enables us to best serve each student."

For my part, I left Colorado with a renewed felt sense that our most important work may well take place in the affective realm of teaching.

Ralph and the Unexpected Fix

Vic Kryston

Some days we gave evaluative feedback. "Class, what grade should I give Ralph so far?" And each person suggested a grade.

"I like how you're going to the library a lot," said Jane, "B!"

"You're interesting to talk to," said Bill, "B."

We did this for everyone, but Ralph's grade really startled him. "This is one hell of a crazy class!" he blurted out. Laughing. Grinning. Happy to have a good grade, perhaps the first one he'd ever earned in English. Feeling sure he was getting away with something. But more than a grade, Ralph was getting a kind of support I don't think he often got. The class said what they liked about him. I suspected that in most classes Ralph only received comments about his mistakes.

As Ralph said, "one hell of a crazy class." Specifically, it was a summer school gathering of people taking high school English. There were these students,

Vic Kryston connects with developmental reading and writing at Northern VA Community College. He is an Assistant Director of the Northern VA Writing Project and conducts Intensive Journal Workshops for the Ira Progoff organization, Dialogue House.

wonderfully awful at the game of school, whom I had gathered to propose a different way to play school. Each would set his or her own educational goals and be responsible and answerable to the group for achieving those goals.

And I couldn't even be with them most of the time. I had other duties, but I checked into class, staying when needed, suggesting books, viewing a skit, being an audience. I soon grew comfortable with leaving them on their own. They had claimed ownership in some very real ways. They loved this crazy way of going to school, being allowed to learn what they wanted. They didn't want to jeopardize what they had and kept each other in line.

We used the circle to talk about our topics and projects. Keeping in touch with each other's interests made it easier for us to help each other. I was determined that, if nothing else, I would do what I could to establish an atmosphere of help, of caring, of community. Not just for humane reasons: there was no way I could teach twenty different topics. I needed these kids to need and help each other.

"What're you into, Ralph?"

"Um...I'm doing this paper, see..."

"Yeah, what about?"

"Um...well, heroin. You know? Drugs. You know there's a lot of dumb stuff being said about drugs. You know? You hear it all the time. On the radio. About heroin especially. People don't really know about it."

Somebody. Was it me? Or other class members? "How come you're so interested, Ralph?"

"Yeah, Ralph, how do you know so much about it?"

Ralph's usually heavy lidded eyes snapped suddenly open. His voice lost the mocking tone he often affected, grew serious, grew real. "Because I'm hooked, man!"

The room got real quiet. Ralph went on. Telling us about how long, and what it was like, and how he felt trapped, but that how "someday" he was going to do something.

We sat, spellbound. Listening, really listening. Ralph needed listening to just then.

I was worried; not just about Ralph, but about myself. What was the right thing to do? We had no policies written about addiction in our mostly white, mostly middle class, mostly insulated suburbs.

I went for help. The counselor, the school psychologist, and I talked it through. We were in agreement that Ralph should be the one to tell the world, that he needed to face this problem himself. Only that approach could give him access to the integrity he would need to deal with his addiction. Should I or anyone else make Ralph's addiction public, Ralph could just continue to stay dependent, would be less likely to assume responsibility.

The first step had to be telling Ralph's parents, and Ralph had to be the one to tell them. In our next group meeting, I told Ralph I hoped he'd tell his folks about addiction.

"You're kidding, man!"

"They need to know, Ralph," said Bill. Heads nodded all around the circle.

"Yeah, ok," said Ralph, "but it's gonna kill 'em."

"It'll really kill them if you OD, sucker!" someone snapped.

Maybe it was because we had listened to him that Ralph listened to us. "Ok. Ok...will you be there, Kryston?" He looked at me hopefully. I assured him that I would be there.

So I called his parents and set up a conference for the following morning.

Next morning his parents, used to being called, dutifully and resignedly appeared in my office. But that morning the rumor was Ralph was meeting a friend in the parking lot, bound for Canada. I sent the entire class out to find him and carry him back if they had to.

They didn't need to carry him, but they did surround him. They insisted that Ralph turn away from Canada and come back to my office. And this big, hulking, tough teenager found in their caring the strength to return, to face his parents and himself. He broke into tears and confessed. And cried. And begged their forgiveness. And hugged and cried some more. And his parents hugged him back and spoke lovingly of how they'd all face it together. Ralph turned and hugged me once, "You're a great teacher, Kryston."

But I never taught you anything, I thought.

The Abraham Dream

Richard L. Graves

In May, twelve years ago, I had a dream that changed the direction of my life. It was one of those rare, once-in-a-lifetime dreams which is at once both intriguing and baffling. In the dream a person I hardly knew and had not seen for thirty-five years made a strange appearance. He told me something important, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. For the next few months I tried all kinds of ways to understand what Abraham was telling me. The resolution finally came after a long struggle, a struggle which included writing along with several other efforts. Here is a description of The Abraham Dream:

A busy street in Tampa. Four lanes of traffic. Cars going in both directions. A small grassy island separates the lanes. The day is usual, warm and balmy. I'm dressed casually, a short-sleeved shirt and slacks.... I start across the street. Halfway across I see him coming toward me, Abraham in his wheelchair, going in the opposite direction.... Once again I see his face, old and unshaven. Glasses make his eyes look large. Brown coat old and shabby, hangs on his shoulders. He looks and smells like a beggar.... We pass, Abraham and I. He turns and says something to me, whispers in my ear. We are at the same level. He is gone. Pulled off into his infinity, I into mine.... Heavy traffic. Noise everywhere. I have to watch for cars. Couldn't hear the words. What were they? I want to hear them. He is gone.

Dick Graves is professor emeritus at Auburn University, where he taught English Education and writing. He is one of the founders of AEPL.

It is a shocking experience when someone you have not seen in years appears in a dream. Out of nowhere, or out of somewhere, some mystic place, he appears once again, vivid and real. This was indeed a compelling experience, a strange and unusual visitation. But less than a week later the same dream occurred again, exactly as it was the first time. Abraham was trying to tell me something important, but I couldn't make it out. What was it that Abraham was trying to tell me?

Soon after the dream occurred, I wrote it down to remember as many details as possible. I realized that if I told my family or friends about it, they would worry about me. I knew the journey to find the answer would be a lonely road, but I had to take it. Abraham was telling me something important; I had to know what it was.

The first breakthrough came scarcely a month later at a professional meeting. About five o'clock, at cocktail hour, I was visiting with two close friends. When I mentioned the dream, they encouraged me to talk about it. We were sitting by a large window facing west, looking out over the Bay. They listened. For reasons I still do not understand, it was very difficult to talk about it.

"Perhaps the name Abraham is symbolic," one suggested.

"No, I don't think so," I responded, "I haven't told you the whole story." I realized from our conversation that in order to comprehend the dream, I had to come to terms with the whole story, the time I knew the real Abraham.

The first time I saw him was a Friday evening in the spring, thirty-five years earlier. I was in my early twenties and single. My date and I were on the way to a downtown movie in Tampa, and we passed him. He was in his wheelchair on Franklin Street, selling pencils. He was dressed then the way I saw him in the dream. As we passed him, I sensed a shadow of revulsion pass through my date. I knew then that somehow she and I were different.

During that time I was a member of a large downtown church which sponsored a mission on North Franklin, the skid row section of Tampa. The young people from the church provided the Saturday evening service that Abraham attended. I saw him almost weekly throughout that year.

One Sunday morning something unusual occurred that involved Abraham. Even though he was a regular at the mission, he had never attended the sponsoring church. Several friends and I agreed to help him get there. That Sunday we went over to his apartment to pick him up. While my friends were inside helping him, a bizarre thought crossed my mind. Why not perform a miracle, I asked myself, and just say, "Abraham, walk on down here"? As soon as the thought occurred, I dismissed it. Abraham was paralyzed. To even think such a thing is cruel beyond words.

After that I saw Abraham a half dozen times or so, either at the mission or at his regular corner on Franklin Street. Then, thirty-five years later, he made the unexpected visit to my dream.

Reflecting on that period of my life showed me the overall shape of the dream. The cars and the noisy street represented the pressures and responsibilities of my present life, the work of a university professor, the responsibilities of home and family. Abraham represented a time when I had been more spiritual. If I were ever to understand what Abraham was saying, then I had to find a better balance

in my life, less priority on materialistic success and more opportunities for nurturing my spiritual life.

Later in June I was visiting near Tampa with my family. I considered going back to North Franklin Street to find whether Abraham were still there. "No, I won't do that," I told myself. "The key to understanding the dream is in me. The real Abraham and the Abraham of my dream are two separate people."

Weeks passed and still no resolution. My wife and I had planned a trip to England for early September. For some unexplained reason I had a feeling, or perhaps just a hope, that during the trip I would finally hear what Abraham was telling me. As we planned visits to historic places, I gave the highest priority to Hyde Park Corner on a Sunday afternoon. Listening to those street preachers might remind me of something about the mission on Franklin Street. Maybe something would jar the words loose.

On a Sunday afternoon in early September we were there, my wife and I, moving among the crowd. It seemed so strange. For an hour or so we went from speaker to speaker and listened, but the experience was a disappointing failure. Nothing happened. I didn't know that within two days the long quest would be over.

We visited the little town of Witney, near where I had been stationed in the military service thirty-five years earlier, close to the time I had known Abraham. Several friends and I had attended the Methodist church in Witney. Now I was back again. We went inside, and it was all so familiar, just as it had been years ago, and memories came flooding back. It was cool and dark and quiet inside the church, and I finally heard what Abraham was trying to tell me, what was so difficult for me to comprehend and accept and yet so important. He said only four simple words: "*You are a healer.*"

If the answer came on Tuesday morning in the Methodist Church in Witney, confirmation occurred six days later in Wales, high on a hill overlooking the little town on Llangollen. Once I understood the words of the dream, I began to see how they fit into my life. The words Abraham said to me were like the single missing piece of a puzzle. I realized that all my life, for reasons I can't explain, I have been drawn to situations where people needed help, as though some force had guided me there. At the conscious level I would have denied it or, had someone pointed it out, would have been embarrassed by it. The episode outside Abraham's apartment, for example, was not so much a bizarre thought as it was a wish for his well being. Throughout my life as a teacher, I have been interested in the overall well being of my students as much as their acquisition of factual information. Recently when a friend described a bout of depression, I responded, "Why didn't you call me?" Later, I wondered why I had responded like that, having no clinical knowledge of depression.

In Llangollen that morning the wind was blowing hard out of the west up the valley. We started out early, first going by the school and a scattering of houses on the edge of town, then through a broad meadow, and finally up the hill. The wind was fierce, and rain showers came intermittently. At the top we huddled behind the stone ruins for protection.

But the wind subsided. Far down the valley to the west, high in the clouds overhead, appeared a magnificent double rainbow. It was one thing to hear the

words of the dream but still another to embrace them for myself. On the hill that morning I acknowledged and confirmed that part of myself. “*I am a healer,*” I said quietly, under my breath. The long journey was over—and just beginning. ☺

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