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“Compelled to Connect: A Phenomenological Study of the Experience of Writing

Shannon D. Collins

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Shannon D. Collins entitled "Compelled to Connect: A Phenomenological Study of the Experience of Writing." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

Colleen P. Gilrane, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Charles H. Hargis, Theodore W. Hipple, Howard R. Pollio

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Theodore W. Hipple

Howard R. Pollio

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records)

COMPELLED TO CONNECT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF WRITING

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Shannon D. Collins
December 2003

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Susan,
my wife...my friend,
and
to Molly, Craig, and Maggie,
my children...my heart.

Acknowledgments

John, a participant in this research, said in his interview: “A writer doesn’t develop in a vacuum.” This is certainly true of a graduate student writing a dissertation. I am convinced that I could not have had a better committee to guide my work. Under my professors’ tutelages, I have not only grown as an academic, I have grown as a person.

I begin by acknowledging Dr. Colleen Gilrane, my dissertation chair and major professor. Through Dr. Gilrane’s guidance and modeling, I have learned the power of inquiry based learning and the necessity of community in education. I thank Dr. Gilrane for her clarity of vision for this research and for her constant encouragement.

I thank Dr. Howard Pollio for availing himself as a mentor in the discipline of phenomenology. Although I have spent three years sitting at his classroom and research tables, I feel I have only begun to understand the method and implications of studying lived experiences. Finally, I would be remiss not to thank Dr. Pollio for introducing me to pleasures of Fontina, Camembert and Havarti cheeses.

I first knew Dr. Theodore Hipple through his written works. Long before I met him, I was intimately familiar with his writing, which can be found throughout the professional literature of English education. His ideas and words continue to inspire me as an educator, researcher, and writer. Dr. Hipple is also responsible for introducing me to authors and titles within the world of adolescent literature that have become foundational to how I view other pieces of work.

From my doctoral committee, I have known Dr. Charles Hargis the longest. I was initially drawn to Dr. Hargis’s work in linguistics and teaching language to handicapped

children, specifically children who were deaf. He has also significantly influenced how I think about traditional practices of public education. Never short on ideas, Dr. Hargis was instrumental in helping me cultivate my research and subsequently to focus on topics in which I was most interested.

I also would like to acknowledge a few of my peers who have been instrumental to my Ph.D. program. First, I acknowledge Rénard Harris whose intellect, creativity, and wit have made my foray into doctoral study most powerful. Although we were often together in classes, our most powerful learning took place during our weekly lunches, sometimes lasting more than three hours. Before I wrote a word of the dissertation, I had discussed much of it with Rénard, who would give nods of approval on the strong points and question those points that could be made stronger.

Also integral to this research are the members of the University of Tennessee's Center for Applied Phenomenology. I thank each of them for their analysis and discussion of themes. Specifically, I would like to acknowledge group members Rhett Graves and Lance Fagan who also served as readers of early drafts. Always specific and honest with their feedback, they helped make the writing stronger and clearer. Rhett and Lance also were vital in translating obscure passages of Pollionesian script. They were my Rosetta Stone.

To my former students at the Tennessee School for the Deaf as well as my current students at Tennessee Technological University, I thank you for constantly reminding me that scholarship is only as important as the learners it serves. It is a privilege to serve as your teacher; it is an honor to know you as friends.

Finally, I would like to thank the participants of this study for graciously allowing me into their homes and for sharing their years of writing experience. As I began this acknowledgment section with the words of a participant, I end with the words of another: “It’s almost universal among writers, at least the writers that I’ve ever known. They are extraordinarily generous people (Grace).”

Abstract

Writing is frequently referred to as a process. Writing, in fact, is a series of complicated acts involving many processes, most of which take place in the writer's mind and, thus, remain hidden from the lens of the researcher. The purpose of this research was to describe the first-person experience of writing through use of a phenomenological method involving dialogic interviews and hermeneutic interpretation. In the course of this investigation, 10 practicing writers (6 men and 4 women) were engaged in open-ended dialogue in which they described various personal experiences of writing. The participants were a business owner, a physician, a technical editor, a government training specialist, a psychologist, one high-school teacher, one elementary/college teacher, and three college professors; however, the combined number of non-book publications (research articles, newspaper articles, editorials, columns, non-fiction essays, and poems) among the ten participants equaled more than 5,000.

From a hermeneutic analysis of the transcribed texts, a consistent pattern of four major themes emerged to characterize the awareness of meaning attached to the experience by all participants. These interdependent themes and sub-themes are as follows: (I) "The Self": (A) "Filling Up"; (B) "Stewing"; (C) "Insight Came"; (II) "The Other" : (A) "Community"; (B) "Validation"; (C) "Feedback"; (III) "The Words": (A) "Hard Work"; (B) "Mystical"; (C) "Discovery"; (IV) "Connection".

These findings were discussed with respect to the previous literature on composition research providing a more complete understanding what writers experience as they write. Contemplating the themes that emerged from this research enabled me to develop a more reflective understanding how writing is a linguistic process whose base

purpose is to connect people with each other. This study also discusses the pedagogical implications of what participants of this study reported as part of their experiences of writing and how writing is traditionally taught in kindergarten-college classrooms.

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Chapter One

Introduction

I suffer as always from the fear of putting down the first line. It is amazing the terrors, the magics, the prayers, the straightening shyness that assails one.

-John Steinbeck, novelist

Writing is unquestionably one of the most important skills schoolchildren learn in their twelve years of compulsory education. As with mathematical skills, writing is fundamental to negotiating life. People compose shopping lists, scribble reminders to themselves on crumpled pieces of paper, fill out job applications, and so on. Children, very early in their lives, have the capacity to write. By the time they are of school age, most children have acquired many of the adult forms of grammar and know a handful of letters, which is enough to begin writing labels and calendars, letters and stories, poems and songs, (Calkins, 1994; Sharples, 1999). Writing, at least in the early days of one's school career, is fun. Yet, by the end of high school, most students take a markedly different stance toward writing. By this time in their educational career many come to dislike writing, perhaps even fear it, and often avoid doing it when at all possible (Elbow, 1998).

One possible reason for such a dramatic shift in attitude toward writing is related to how writing is taught. Compared to the centuries of scholarship and criticism of English language and literature, the teaching of writing is a relatively recent venture beginning only within the last one hundred fifty years. Nevertheless, the writing students do is vastly different from that of their early nineteenth century contemporaries to whom "writing" meant handwriting (Schultz, 1999). The predominant pedagogical method of

past eras was learning by rote. Missing from instruction was any form of interactive learning, especially writing. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin advocated that the boys of his Philadelphia Academy engage in “Writing Letters” to each other whereby they would discuss daily events; discuss their reading; create stories; congratulate, compliment, express their gratitude to each other; as well as console each other in times of sadness (Schultz). According to the academy’s records this activity never occurred.

Toward the mid-1800s America was a burgeoning democratic society, which significantly affected the configurations of schools. Incentives for the citizenry to become more literate increased dramatically. The push for increased literacy resulted in compulsory attendance laws, allowing/forcing poor children to attend school, and school systems began teaching writing with more intent (Schultz, 1999).

Universities had a significant influence on how public schools taught writing. In 1876, Francis Child, a professor of rhetoric and oratory, became Harvard’s first professor of English and one of the first in the country to teach writing as an academic subject. Soon following Child’s appointment, college enrollment in the 1880’s and 1890’s, on the heels of mandatory attendance of children in the public schools, actually doubled compared to the previous quarter century. As a result, higher education was forced to yield to pressures of new learning, increased specialization, and to accept the idea that practical or useful courses had a place in higher education (Parker, 1988). Previous to this time, classics were largely the focus of most “English” classes. The classics taught students the art of rhetoric and were revered as models for writing. Writing, otherwise known as composition, was rooted in the study of Latin. D.G. Myers (1996) writes:

A student wrote a paper to apply the rules of grammar—or, at best, the principles of order and style learned in his reading of the classical authors...The motive in writing was to demonstrate mastery of the language. Writing as such was subordinated to grammatical exercises, spelling drills, and the memorization of rhetorical precepts. (p. 37)

As colleges rapidly expanded and increased their enrollments, the arriving student was ill prepared to study the classics; thus, there was an intense pressure extended on colleges to adopt scientific and technical courses into the curriculum as well as classes on English literature and modern languages. To satisfy pedagogical demands at Harvard, Professor Child instituted a writing program that emphasized correctness in mechanical matters. At the same time, the Committee on Composition issued to the Harvard Board of Overseers three reports in the years 1892, 1895, 1897 in which they indicted “secondary schools for failing to teach college-bound students to spell, punctuate, and observe properties of usage” (Stewart, 1988).

So began the teaching of writing as we largely know it today. Borrowing the term coined by Daniel Fogarty in 1959, Richard Young (1978) referred to the emphasis on mechanics and form as *current-traditional* rhetoric. Young represents the current-traditional paradigm to emphasize the following writing features:

... the composed product rather than the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis). (25)

Berlin and Inkster (1980) note that the current-traditional paradigm stresses expository writing to such an extent that all other forms of writing are practically excluded. Hairston (1982) adds that advocates of the current-traditional paradigm believe proficient writers know exactly what they will write before they begin writing, that the composing process

is linear and that teaching students to write has more to do with teaching “editing skills” than any writing processes.

The current-traditional paradigm also has provided the content for hundreds of composition textbooks. Young (1978) writes, “Textbooks elaborate and perpetuate established paradigms; they are one of the principal vehicles for the conduct of a discipline in a stable state” (31). Although various approaches to the teaching of writing have come and gone, students continue to be subjected to a type of instruction which creates a mechanically flawless piece.

The current-traditional approach to teaching writing, where writing is reduced to the sum of its parts, assumes that writing is a subject equivalent to chemistry or biology: It may be analyzed into an infinite number of parts then poked, prodded, studied, and taught one component at a time. Once students have received enough of the pieces, they are to reassemble them and produce written texts.

To treat the subject of writing as an object of analysis is to regard it as a specimen in biology, say a frog. To study a frog thoroughly, the frog must first be killed and pinned to an examining tray. Once dead it may be dissected and every internal piece plucked for observation. When each part has been exhaustively displayed and explained by the teacher, the frog’s innards may be carefully arranged back within its cavity, the skin sewn closed, pins removed and dropped upon the table; the frog that now sprawls itself before the student, however, is not the same frog previous to being studied—It is dead. Although complete in the technical sense, that which makes a frog a frog, is gone. Never again will the frog burrow itself beneath decaying flora, dine on unsuspecting gnats or contribute its throaty bass line to a summer evening’s chorus. In other words, a

dead frog is not a frog, except as an object of analysis. Similarly writing, when disassembled and taught in disjointed bits, becomes something other than writing.

The writings students produce when following such a lock-step approach to written composition are generally predictable and stale (Becker, 1986). When taught how to write any variety of descriptive essay (exposition, description, persuasion, etc.), students are given recipes starting at the sentence level with subject-verb-object utterances. Ultimately they arrive at a five paragraph/three main point essay consisting of an introductory paragraph (where there resides a topic sentence or thesis), main-point one paragraph, main-point two paragraph, main-point three paragraph, and a conclusion that usually summarizes what was written in paragraphs one through four. Stewart (1988) writes of the five-paragraph essay:

[It] is a formula, not a composition. It is rule-governed, hence easy to mark, but imposing it on every subject one writes about is the equivalent of trying to put a wiggling 100-pound dog, or a barrel of apples, or several gallons of fresh maple syrup, or the unassembled parts of a ten-speed bicycle, or three different typewriters, or a wardrobe for a Florida vacation all in the same size box. (p. 18)

Often absent from composition classes is the connection between what students are asked to do and innumerable examples of writing available to them, including classroom texts. Becker (1986) writes, “No one connected with schools, neither teachers nor administrators, tells students how the writing they read—textbooks or their own teacher’s research reports, for instance—actually gets done” (p. 45). Cordoning off students from authentic forms of writing interferes, and often prohibits, students from discovering any purpose for writing which interferes with their learning how to write (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994). Furthermore, if teachers and administrators are not

correlating the writing students do to writing found outside of the classroom, it is even less likely that those same teachers are doing any writing themselves. Having no writing models from whom they can learn, students, especially those who are beginning writers, are oblivious to how writers work (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Ironically, teaching imaginative forms of writing is often no less structured. Take for instance the case of poetry, a topic common in most school curricula across the grades. Teachers often present poetry as they would a five-paragraph essay. The pleasure that a poem is capable of delivering seems to be no more than a postscript, if aesthetics even become a part of the poetry lesson (Graves, 1992). America's Poet Laureate, Billy Collins (1988), lyrically summarizes the effect such instructional approach has on students:

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means. (p. 69)

When it comes to producing creative works in poetic form, often the same systematic approaches are employed: topics are assigned, rhyme schemes are given, an exact number of lines must be adhered to, and so on. Not only does this result in bad poetry, students walk away from the project glad it is over. Similarly, when fiction writing is taught, story grammar is emphasized (setting, characters, plot events, climax, and resolution) and students are asked to do little more than fill in the blanks when producing stories. Typically, there are few opportunities for these genres in traditional writing programs (Graves, 1989).

Assessment also contributes to the perseverance of the lock-step approach to teaching writing. Writing that is highly structured is easy to mark, and judgment rests in an audience of one—the teacher. By focusing solely on what students produce, writing teachers function more as critics than teachers. Their job is to dissect and analyze student texts, searching for flaws in grammar, sentence construction or spelling. Here is where the infamous red pen exposes frailties and conditions most students to feel inadequate in their ability to write. Emig (1971) describes this type of “teaching” writing as essentially a neurotic activity that offers little in the development of students’ writing abilities. Emig writes, “There is little evidence...that the persistent pointing out of specific errors in student themes leads to the elimination of these errors, yet teachers expend much of their energy in this futile and unrewarding exercise” (p. 99).

In many parts of the nation students’ writing abilities are determined by how well they can produce five-paragraph essays in a predetermined amount of time. Unquestionably, writing teachers are doing students a favor by preparing them for the type of writing assessment they will encounter (Hargis, 1995); however, the form of writing students are taught in school seem to be legitimate only within the context of school. If students are ever to improve their writing, it will probably be necessary to move away from the prevalent lock-step paradigms.

The words of Parker (1988) are as applicable to current teachers of writing as they were when he first wrote them in 1967:

Our research and criticism are old; our jobs are new. Our profession as scholars demonstrates richly the lessons learned from four centuries of experience; our profession as teachers is still wrestling strenuously and confusedly with initial problems that mass education has suddenly and

greatly aggravated. As scholars we have matured; as teachers we—the same people—are still children in our ignorance or innocence, still fumbling and faddish and lacking well-defined goals. (p.6)

Purpose

I suspect that how students are taught to write, whether writing is broadly defined as factual or fictional, is infinitely different from how most writers, for whom writing has become a part of their life, experience creating their work. Braddock (1974) was one of the first researchers to critically examine the product-centered orientation of writing. He closely examined nonfiction texts written by modern writers and found that topic sentences, which are a staple of the five-paragraph essay, appeared with little frequency and virtually never as the first sentence in paragraphs. I am interested in the disparity between how students learn to write in schools and how successful writers actually go about writing. The purpose of this research is to study what writers, be they essayists, poets, research writers, short story writers, novelists or creative non-fiction writers experience and structure the writing process. Cooper and Odell (1978) write:

Although most composition texts are concerned chiefly with matters of organization and style, the testimony of successful writers indicate that the basic problem in writing is discovering what one wishes to say, not simply deciding how best to present ideas that already exist, fully formulated, in one's mind" (p. xi).

Research Question

I use a phenomenological approach in this study. I asked participants about their *experience* of writing. My questions were open-ended so that I did not lead participants to a particular response. When beginning an interview I gave the participants the directive, "I'm doing a study on the experience of writing. Think of three writing

projects in which you have engaged. Choose one of those experiences and tell me what stood out to you.” I determined what follow-up questions to ask participants based on the information they divulged during their interviews.

Theoretical Perspectives

The primary theoretical perspective that informs my study is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of optimal experience based on the concept of *flow*. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), “(flow is) the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (p. 4).” An experience need not be necessarily pleasant for it to be optimal. The task at hand may be arduous on the mind or body or both; however, the doer of the task so engages the task that any mental or physical sacrifice is counted as minimal. Csikszentmihalyi writes, “The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile (p. 3).”

Optimal experiences are something people make happen. Csikszentmihalyi, in his 1997 book *Finding Flow*, suggests certain factors must be present before a person is able to engage in a flow experience. First, before a person engages in an activity he or she must have a clear purpose of why they are doing the activity. There must be goals present, even if such goals are unconscious. Furthermore, there must be immediate feedback regarding the progress of the attainment of the goals. For instance, video games that kids clamor to play always make clear their purpose (to rescue the innocent victim), segment the game into manageable stages (the goal is to complete each successive stage), and feedback is provided (messages of “good job” or “try again,” which is typically

delivered in popular vernacular) (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Another condition necessary for a flow experience is the task or activity is neither too difficult nor too easy to accomplish. In other words, a person must possess the appropriate level of skill necessary to meet the challenges that lead to success. If a task is too easy, it may be accomplished with a minimum amount of engagement. If a task is too difficult, frustration will occur and frustration often leads to disengagement. On the other hand, even if a task's difficulty level initially prohibits a flow experience, it is still possible to achieve flow with appropriate assistance. Continuing with the example of video games, most have settings to accommodate all players from the novice to the expert. What's more, video magazines that publish "cheat codes" have become a lucrative spin-off business. These codes provide kids with the assistance necessary to become successful at their chosen video game.

Also essential to the flow experience is a sense of control one must have in an activity. Most video games not only allow players to select difficulty levels, participants also often can choose which character they would like to be, which weapon they would like to use, as well select the battlefield on which they would like to fight.

A focus on the immediate experience is the next quality of a flow encounter. The participant must have a sense that the activity is relevant, and while engaged in the experience they must be doing or making something. Video games typically involve action. Even if there is no physical action, there are puzzles that stimulate the mind.

Finally, social relationships are necessary for optimal experiences. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) writes, "Even our primate relations, the apes that live in the African jungles and savannas, have learned that unless they are accepted by the group

they won't live long; a solitary baboon will soon fall prey to leopards or hyenas (p. 80).”

Cafeteria tables during school lunch breaks are often the meeting venue for several students whose social purpose is to talk about a video game common to the group.

Collectively the students rehash their greatest exploits, share what they learned and provide each other with assistance. Each person in the group finds compatibility between their goals and those of the other persons and is willing to invest attention in the other persons' goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The result is these people experience the flow that comes from optimal interaction.

In summary, the conditions for a flow experience are as follows:

- A clear purpose, goals and immediate feedback.
- A challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill and assistance to meet the challenge (as needed to be successful).
- A sense of control and developing competence.
- A focus on the immediate experience.
- An importance of social relationships.

I believe practicing writers satisfy these conditions more often than not. (Keep in mind this is not to say that to be a writer is to write effortlessly.) On the other hand, these conditions are not always present when students write within a composition class.

Students are not usually clear of the purpose for writing; seldom do they have explicit goals for their writing outside of receiving a grade. Feedback is often delayed due to the teacher having to deal with an inordinate number of student papers. When feedback is given, it is mostly cursory and terse statements scrawled in red throughout their papers. Furthermore, writing assignments are rarely compatible with students' abilities since they often are too easy or too complicated. With assignments that are too difficult, students

may receive little support. Also, seldom do students choose their writing topics or have the opportunity to write about subjects in which they are interested. Finally, most of the writing students do is done independently of any help or group input lest they be considered “cheaters.” Thus, a significant number of students complete their compulsory education with few, if any, optimal writing experiences; as a result, they develop little to no competence in writing.

Definition of Major Concepts

In this research I am interested in learning something about how practicing writers experience their writing. Terms such as “practicing writer” or “writing” seem innocuous enough as not to impede discussions of the research; however, depending on each reader’s culture, socio-economic context, even age can determine how the words will be interpreted (Warnock, 1984).

Writing.

For the purposes of this paper, I generally use the term writing to refer to *how* people write rather than *what* they write. I use the same definition of writing as Warnock (1984):

...the term writing means the least a machine or a person would have to be able to do to enable us to say truthfully of that machine or person that it was actually writing in the way we know all human beings are able to do in enabling situations... Writing, then, is not to be confused with the products of writing... (p. 4)

Therefore when I use the term writing, I intend for the word to mean the *process of producing a written text*, unless otherwise stated.

Types of Text

Next, a word about the texts people produce as they engage in the writing process: Writing curricula at the secondary and postsecondary institutions regularly delineate between writing that is factual and writing that is fictive by separating writing courses into composition and creative classes. But, the terms *composition* and *creative* can be confusing as they may be applied to all types of writing. Moffett (1968) defines *composition* as an activity rather than as a type of writing. Therefore one could compose a poem as well as a research report. Similarly, creative writing implies that only writing that engages the imagination belongs to the category; however, any writing one does is a creative act. For example, Kellogg (1994) writes, “To discover an interesting theme for an essay, to imagine a captivating plot for a novel, to organize a set of arguments that are compelling to the reader—all call upon a writer’s creative skills” (p. 15).

For the purpose of this research I use the adjective descriptors of *descriptive* and *imaginative* in hopes that these words more readily engage the reader’s understanding of the forms of writing. ***Descriptive writing is logical and its purpose is singular in that it is to impart information.*** For example, compositions, factual essays, and text books are descriptive writings. This type of writing typically incorporates the physical and human environment. The people, places, and things that serve as the subjects of descriptive writings are real and the writer tries to depict these subjects accurately (Berry, 1984). Lists and notes grow out of descriptive writing.

Imaginative writing may contain certain elements of reality; however, most of the people, places and things that are present in an imaginative work may exist only in the mind of the author. Imaginative writing may inform as does descriptive writing, but

imaginative writing also entertains. Short stories, novels, poems are all examples of imaginative writings. Another form of writing precariously balanced between descriptive and imaginative writing is currently being called creative non-fiction. This form deals with real subjects but encompasses all the conventions of literature. For example, memoir is a creative non-fiction work. Whatever the writing form may be, all genres deal with the problems and solutions of writing with clarity and grace (Murray, 1990).

Practicing Writer

A practicing writer doesn't necessarily imply a professional writer who depends upon her writing as a means to live. In fact, a practicing writer may be a person who does no more than write in a daily journal or regularly corresponds with others via letters. Simply, ***a practicing writer is one who spends a consistent amount of time writing.***

A problem with identifying many practicing writers is that much of their writing takes place in private and there is no way to verify the regularity of their writing. To ensure that the writers with whom I speak do devote a regular amount of time to writing, ***I limit my definition of a "practicing writer" to those who have established a publishing history*** (Berkenkotter, 1981). In her research studying how to enhance writing creativity, Susan Perry (1999) faced a similar challenge of selecting participants. She used a convenience sample of writers who were listed in *A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers* (1995-1996 Edition). To be listed in the *Directory*, writers must have published one of the following:

- twelve poems,
- three short stories,
- a book of poetry,

- a collection of stories,
- a novel,
- or a chapbook (a short, inexpensively produced book of poetry or prose)

I borrow from Perry her method of selecting participants; however, Perry's research involves only those writers who write imaginative genres (poetry and fiction). Since my definition of a practicing writer also incorporates those who write descriptive pieces, such as essays and research articles, I add the following publishing requirements to qualify as a practicing writer:

- twelve newspaper articles
- three creative non-fiction essays
- three research articles
- a textbook

Admittedly, this delineation of what constitutes a "practicing writer" precludes a much larger list of other legitimate forms of writing people do on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, by establishing these criteria, I can trust that the participants to whom I talk regularly engage in experiencing writing.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Use the literature, don't let it use you.

-Howard S. Becker, sociologist

Overview of Research on Writing Process

The teaching of writing is a somewhat recent occurrence beginning in the late 1800s. Research about writing, specifically that investigate the writing process, is an even newer venture. To date there are no universal methods or procedures to understand the writing process. There are a number of fields interested in the writing process: English, psychology, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, education, to name a few, and each discipline approaches the study of writing differently. In addition to the various disciplines interested in writing, there are the different methods of studying it. There are those who classify research based on the methodological approach of the researcher. Emig (1982) divides the three most prominent methods of doing research into the categories of positivistic, phenomenological, and transactional/constructivist. Similarly, Brannon (1985) believes that composition studies are dominated by strands of the empirical-experimental, the phenomenological-ethnographic, and the philosophical-historical. Hairston (1986), on the other hand, separates composition researchers into two general groups: The “literary” or “romantic school” and the “classical school.” What is confusing is that within any given academic field there can be several inquiry paradigms as well as several academic disciplines using the same inquiry paradigm (Emig, 1982; Elbow 2000). With all the methods available to study the writing process and the various

disciplines involved in studying the subject, researchers can become contentious of each other, each claiming their version of truth while discrediting others.

Instead of viewing the literature through a single methodological lens or through only one discipline, I believe it to be more helpful to gain a wider perspective of what has been done. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983) assert that a subject can be better understood when multiple approaches are taken and when each inquiry informs the other. Bereiter and Scardamalia propose that there are six interacting levels of inquiry through which researchers study the composing process. The levels range from *reflective inquiry*, which involves reflection on information the researcher possesses without structuring a study, to *simulation* where computer models test process theories constructed at other level of inquiries. Table 1 summarizes the questions and methods characteristic of each level.

Reviewing the literature on the writing process through the lens of Bereiter and Scardamalia's Level of Inquiry scheme not only presents what research has been done, it also provides a basis for my research on the experience of writing. Although the literature I present in this section cuts across several disciplines and an array of methodological approaches, it is by no means an exhaustive account of all of the research conducted on the process of writing. In fact, there are levels of inquiry Bereiter and Scardamalia discuss that contain no studies related to the writing process. Nevertheless, the studies presented here are among the most prominent in the field and serve as critical components of our current knowledge of the writing process. I will present the studies according to each project's inquiry approach as informed by Bereiter and Scardamalia.

TABLE 1: Bereiter and Scardamalia's Levels of Inquiry in Composition Research

<i>Level</i>	<i>Characteristic Questions</i>	<i>Typical Methods</i>
Level 1: Reflective inquiry	What is the nature of this phenomenon? What are the problems? What do the data mean?	Informal observation Introspection Literature review Discussion, argument, private reflection
Level 2: Empirical variable testing	Is this assumption correct? What is the relation between x and y ?	Factorial analysis of variance Correlation analysis Surveys Coding of compositions
Level 3: Text Analysis	What makes this text seem the way it does? What rules could the writer be following?	Error analysis Story grammar analysis Thematic analysis
Level 4: Process Description	What is the writer thinking? What pattern or system is revealed in the writer's thoughts while composing?	Thinking aloud protocols Clinical-experimental interviews Retrospective reports Videotape recordings
Level 5: Theory-embedded experimentation	What is the nature of the cognitive system responsible for these observations? Which process model is right?	Experimental procedures tailored to questions Chronometry Interference
Level 6: Simulation	How does the cognitive mechanism work? What range of natural variations can the model account for? What remains to be accounted for?	Computer simulation Simulation by intervention

From Mosenthal Research on Writing

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Writing Research Using Reflective Inquiry

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983) define reflective inquiry as involving “reflection on the information one already has or that is available from ordinary experience” (p. 5). An abundance of our current knowledge about the writing process has its origin in reflective inquiry. Reflective thinkers in this field draw from their experience as writers, teachers of writing, or both and they utilize data drawn from their personal experience such as informal observations, literature reviews, discussions/arguments with colleagues/students, private reflections, and so on. Reflective inquiry is fundamental to other types of writing research. In fact, the literature most often distinguishes people conducting inquiries at this level as writing theorists and not researchers. The essence of reflective inquiry is that it serves as a pointing finger directing the researcher’s investigative gaze.

Examples of significant contributors of research at the reflective inquiry level include James Moffett, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow. Moffett (1968) advances the theory that people learn how to write as they learn how to do most things: by doing it. Although Moffett’s theory speaks more to the process of teaching writing than to the actual process of writing, the method by which he develops his theory is interesting. He explains, “These essays [in *The Universe of Discourse*] represent one teacher’s efforts to theorize about discourse...” (p. xi). Moffett’s theories are rooted in his observations as a writing teacher and practitioner.

As Moffett discusses writing from the perspective of a writing teacher, Donald Murray (1968) discusses writing from the perspective of a practicing writer. Murray

insists that in order to teach writing effectively, the question of “How does the writer write?” must be answered. Specifically, Murray writes, “We must observe the act of writing itself to expose to our student the process of writing as it is performed by the successful writer” (p. 1). By observing his own process of writing and the processes of other writers, Murray theorizes that there are seven skills that most writers find they must practice, consciously or subconsciously: discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics, creating a design, writing, developing a critical eye, and rewriting.

More than thirty years later, Murray (1990) continues to call for researchers of composition to consider more carefully what they can learn from writers. He writes:

Writers, of course, do not know everything about the complex act of making meaning through written language, but neither do researchers from any of the many schools of research. To understand how writing is made so that we can teach it more effectively we need all forms of research and the testimony of those who produce the texts we read and respect. (p. xiv)

The words of writers about the subject of writing are plentiful: books about writing such as E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*; essays similar to the ones written by Margaret Atwood in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, personal letters such as the ones sent and received by John Steinbeck and collected by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten titled *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*; and, of course, autobiographies or memoirs like that of Stephen King (*On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*) or Eudora Welty (*One Writer’s Beginnings*).

Another source Murray (1990) suggests that is replete with the thoughts and feelings writers have about writing is the writer’s personal journal/diary. There are several published journals by noted authors: Franz Kafka (*Diaries 1910-1923*), Mary

Sarton (*A Journal of Solitude*), Virginia Woolf (*A Writer's Diary*), and John Steinbeck (*Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath*). Furthermore, writers often give lectures or interviews on television, on radio, in journals, in magazines, in newspapers or someone else's book about writing. But the most direct way to access what a writer knows about his or her craft is to engage in some form of dialogue with him or her, such as an interview or a conversation (Murray, 1986).

Echoing Murray's notion that writing is best learned by observing authors, Elbow (2000) advocates for teachers of writers to empower their students by helping them to trust themselves, working with others, experimenting with various voices, and being more forceful and articulate in using writing in their lives. Elbow identifies himself as both a writer and a teacher of writing. Ironically, Elbow's interest in writing – actually, his obsession with writing – grew out of his inability to write as a graduate student at Oxford and Harvard. He has spent his career trying to understand and control “the mysteries that often baffle or block us when we try to write” (1998, *Writing with Power*, p. xxii). At the beginning of his book *Writing with Power* (1998), Elbow acknowledges his fellow teachers, fellow thinkers about writing, readers, students, and family from whom he has learned much about writing.

One of Elbow's most powerful theories that has emerged from his reflective inquiry of his and others' writing processes is the idea of writing being a two-step writing process (1988; 1998). According to Elbow, writing requires the opposing skills of creativity and critical thinking. He writes, “[Though] there is obviously no one right way to write...it seems as though any good writer must find some way to be both abundantly inventive yet tough-mindedly critical” (1988, p. 231). Being caught between the creative

self and the critical self while composing can be paralyzing for a writer. To combat such writing paralysis, Elbow theorizes that writers could benefit from thinking of writing as simply a two stage process involving generation and revision. Elbow explains,

In short I am suggesting a writing process that is *artificial* compared to the back-and-forth recursiveness that most people naturally engage in—even skilled writers. Most people *don't* consciously force themselves to keep on writing-writing-writing during the early drafting or generating stages of a writing project; they *don't* force themselves to brush off self-criticism so that they can get more written and welcome more ideas. But if behavior is “unnatural” and unrecursive, that is no argument against it. It might nevertheless be helpful and desirable. Writing itself is unnatural for humans (unlike speaking), and most people avoid it when they can, yet that is no argument against writing. (1998, p. xxv)

Representing the field of social science, Becker (1986) advances a theory of writing similar to those of Murray and Elbow. Becker, who has more than thirty years of experience as a professional writer in sociology, began his reflective inquiry of the writing process when he started teaching seminars in writing for graduate students in sociology. He describes his first days of the class:

Being a sociologist, not a teacher of composition, I had no idea how to teach [the writing class]. So I walked in the first day not knowing what I would do. After a few fumbling preliminary remarks, I had a flash. I had been reading the *Paris Review Interviews with Writers* for years and had always had a slightly prurient interest in what the interviewed authors shamelessly revealed about their writing habits. So I turned to a former graduate student and old friend sitting on my left and said, “Louise, how do you write?” I explained that I was not interested in any fancy talk about scholarly preparations but, rather, in the nitty-gritty details, whether she typed or wrote in longhand, used any special kind of paper or worked at any special time of the day. I didn't know what she would say...The hunch paid off. She gave, more or less unselfconsciously, a lengthy account of an elaborate routine which had to be done just so. (p. 2)

After a few semesters of teaching the writing course, Becker noticed that many of his students exhibited similar attitudes toward writing and tended to produce similar

written pieces. Becker approaches academic writing as a social activity. He theorizes the writing processes experienced by students and professional academics are socially structured by educational organizations, requirements for publication, conditions for tenure, and so forth. Ironically, the audiences for whom the writing is intended often cause writers to develop writing styles that are ridiculed and loathed. Becker (1986) suggests that writers, specifically social scientists, can improve their writing processes in the following ways: by resisting the “One Right Way” mentality; by writing, rewriting, and revising again and again and again until what wants to be said is said (Becker is “convinced that scholars who write this way take less time to do seven or eight drafts than other people spend on one” [p. 167].); and by assuming a writing voice compatible with well articulated prose.

A final example of a reflective inquiry composition researcher is Maxine Hairston. Hairston relies extensively on her students (1984), her colleagues (1986b), and her own writing (1986a) to inform her thinking and writing about the writing process. One of Hairston’s significant contributions to the field of composition is her insistence that teachers of writing must have an adequate understanding of the writing process to teach writing effectively. She observes that for teachers to understand the complexity of the writing process, they must engage in the writing process. In other words, teachers of writing must write. When writing teachers do not write, they “cannot empathize with their students’ problems, and are in no position either to challenge or to endorse the recommendations and admonitions of the textbooks they are using” (1986b, p. 62).

Writing Research Using the Empirical Testing of Variables

Empirical variable testing and reflective inquiry represent opposite ends of the research continuum which are known also as qualitative and quantitative methods. Conventional thinking is that these approaches are in opposition to one another. On the other hand, Bereiter and Scardamalia insist that the premises reflected upon in reflective inquiry research can be validated by empirical variable testing inquiries that take those reflective inquiry premises and empirically test them as matters of fact. An example of an empirical variable testing inquiry that supplements a reflective inquiry assertion is provided by Scardamalia, Bereiter, and Woodruff (1980). The idea Scardamalia et al. test is the belief that people write best about those subjects they know the best. The study began by asking elementary school children to identify topics about which they knew much or little. Next, the children wrote two compositions: One composition on a high-familiarity topic, the other on a low-familiarity topic. Scardamalia et al., who used a variety of analysis, did not find any statistical proof that the students wrote better compositions on subjects they knew compared to the ones they wrote on subjects they did not know well.

Many composition researchers have repudiated the claims of the Scardamalia et al. (1980) study based on the variables used in comparing the compositions. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983) agree that “the objections are quite legitimate and they illustrate the range of objections that can usually be brought against particular variable-testing studies” (p. 8). (For a more in depth discussion of empirical variable testing limitations, see Bereiter and Scardamalia [1983].) Perhaps the inability to control for variables when studying the processes of writing is a significant reason why empirical variable testing

studies are largely absent from the literature.

Writing Research Using Text Analysis

Research using text analysis involves studying written texts to mine descriptive rules or principles (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1983). Because of its focus on the finished product of writing, text analysis inquiry has significant limitations for describing the composing process. The knowledge structures that direct the writing process can be extracted from studying written text; however, text analysis fails to provide an account of how this knowledge is used when writers actually compose (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1983).

On the other hand, there are links to be made between written texts and the composing processes that created them. This is especially true of texts created by children, unskilled writers, and writers whose predominant language is not English. Shaughnessy (1977) provides the best example of text analysis inquiry. When City University of New York implemented its 1970 admission policy that permitted all city residents, on the condition they graduated from high school, entry into one of its tuition-free colleges, many professors were not ready for the students who showed up. Aside from those students who were well prepared for academic life, aside from those students who had made it through high school and would perform passably in the college environment, there were those students who were so far on the outer fringes of education that it was unlikely they would ever be able to successfully complete a post-secondary education. Shaughnessy describes the “outsiders” as follows:

Natives, for the most part of New York, graduates of the same public school system as the other students, they were strangers in academia,

unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them. Most of them had grown up in one of New York's ethnic or racial enclaves. Many had spoken other languages or dialects at home and never successfully reconciled the worlds of home and school, a fact which by now had worked its way deep into their feelings about school and about themselves as students. (p. 3)

Analyzing approximately 4,000 placement essays written between the years 1970-1974, Shaughnessy found that many of the basic writing students shared similar difficulties. These difficulties, Shaughnessy insists, are not random, nor illogical. In fact, the difficulties are necessary. She writes, "They are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (Shaughnessy, p.5). Basic writing students are apt to make errors in handwriting and punctuation; syntax; spelling; vocabulary; and they will most likely commit familiar verb form miscues, inadvertently switch tense, confuse pronoun cases and so forth.

Writing Research Using Process Description

As with text analysis, writing research using process description also studies products. The difference between the two inquiry approaches is the definition of "product." Whereas *products* in text analysis research denote the final results of the writing process presented on the written page, the *products* of process description inquiries are "intermediate products, retained and further processed in the mind" (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1983, p. 14). In other words, process description inquiries search for descriptions of the writing process.

Since most of what happens during the writing process occurs "inside the mind" of the writer, collecting data can be problematic. If researchers simply watch writers as

they compose, the observational data they gathered will definitely be valid although their description of the process will be limited, obviously (Stallard, 1974; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1983). In order to describe the composing process adequately, process description needs access to writers' thoughts. To date, the most popular method of accessing the thoughts of writers in composition research is the thinking-aloud process. Using this method, researchers record on audiotape/videotape the spoken discourse of writers as they simultaneously compose and verbally report what they are thinking as they compose. Bear in mind, simply employing a "thinking-aloud" protocol does not constitute process description inquiry because it is possible for the same method to be used as a variable for empirical variable testing. The defining characteristic of process description inquiry, according to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983), is the "search for a description of the composing process" (p. 12).

In their seminal work of identifying the organization of writing processes, Hayes (a psychology professor) and Flower (an English professor) (1980) analyze thinking-aloud protocols produced by writers. In a later article, Flower and Hayes (1981) summarize their procedure of collecting the thinking aloud data:

To collect a protocol, we give writers a problem, such as "write an article on your job for the readers of *Seventeen* magazine," and then ask them to compose out loud near an unobtrusive tape recorder. We ask them to work on the task as they normally would—thinking, jotting notes, and writing—except that they must think out loud. They are asked to verbalize everything that goes through their minds as they write, including stray notions, false starts, and incomplete or fragmentary thought. The writers are *not* asked to engage in any kind of introspection or self-analysis while writing, but simply to think out loud while working like a person talking to herself. (p. 368)

The tape recorded data were transcribed and analyzed along with the writers' notes and

final manuscripts. As a result, Hayes and Flower (1980) produced a cognitive process model of writing that designates the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing processes (planning, translating, and reviewing) as major elements of the writing process. The central premise of the Hayes and Flower process theory is that writers are constantly coordinating several cognitive processes as they integrate planning, remembering, writing, and recording. Their theory rests on the following assumptions:

1. Writing is a set of distinctive thinking processes.
2. Writing processes are hierarchically organized with component processes embedded within other components.
3. Writing is a goal oriented process. In the act of composing writers create a hierarchical network of goals, which, in turn, guide the writing process.
4. Writers create their own goals in two ways: by generating goals and supporting sub-goals that embody a purpose; and, at times, by changing or regenerating goals according to what they have learned by writing. (Flower & Hayes, 1981)

Hayes (2000) later revised the model to emphasize the central role working memory plays in writing as well as substantially reorganizing the cognitive process section of the model; however, the revisions still rely on data gathered from thinking aloud protocols.

Using the same protocol analysis used by Hayes and Flower (1980), Berkenkotter (1981) investigated "whether experienced writers who have formal training in rhetorical theory think about their audience more actively than writers who do not" (p. 388).

Berkenkotter asked ten "expert" writers, five professors who taught and published in rhetoric and composition and five professors who taught and published in other disciplines, to think aloud as they composed a text describing their career or choice of career to an audience of high school seniors. Berkenkotter found that writers who

publish, at least the academics she used in her study, regardless if they had been formally trained in composition and rhetoric or not, knew how to make appropriate adjustments in their discourse, to evaluate, to revise, as the features of their intended audience became more distinct. Important to the literature is that Berkenkotter believes school writing actually stifles the development of audience representation. (See Emig, 1971, for more on the effect of teachers on student writing.)

Kellogg (1994), also a cognitive psychologist, in his effort to track the process of writing, eschews thinking aloud protocols in favor of a directed form of retrospection where “the writer is trained to identify her thoughts in terms of only a few experimenter-defined categories” (p. 52). Kellogg argues that thinking aloud protocols may actually interfere with the understanding the composing process due to the following reasons:

- Theorist are apt to select/interpret only those statements to support their theoretical point,
- Collection and analysis is limited to only a few participants, which does not provide for statistical power.
- The method is intrusive to the writing process
- Additional demands are placed upon the writer who is already under heavy demands required by composing.

Kellogg categorizes the writing process into broad classifications: planning, translating, reviewing, and other. The upshot of directed retrospection is that data are easy to collect and easy to analyze. Using a directed retrospection method provides researchers with the ability to interview a large number of participants, which satisfies the considerations necessary for statistical power. But to achieve statistical power the researcher using directed retrospection loses the rich detail gained from more extensive interviews; nevertheless, directed retrospection provides researchers an avenue of

exploring the writing process.

Another popular method composition researchers use is the case study. Creswell (1998) defines the case study as

exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. This bounded system is bounded by time and place, and it is the case being studied—a program, an event, an activity, or individuals. (p. 61)

Case study, as it relates to the study of the writing process, allows researchers to include a number of documents by a single writer or several writers. It may also include what a writer or writers “say about things, or the results of tests of attitude or apprehension, or socio-economic data—in fact anything hypothesized to cause variation in the products of writing” (Warnock, 1984, p. 7).

One of the most often cited pieces of composition research is Emig’s (1971) case study of eight twelfth-grade writers. It is worth reviewing Emig’s case study design in order to understand the varieties of data that may be used to track the writing process. To begin, Emig met with each subject four times. The first meeting consisted of an approximately twenty-minute conversation and a short writing exercise where the writer composed aloud (similar to Hayes and Flower’s thinking-aloud process) in the presence of Emig. As the student composed, Emig sat in position where it was possible to observe and make notes on the action of the writer. The topic and mode of the writing piece were left for the writer to decide.

At the completion of the first session, Emig gave each participant a writing prompt that the students would write about during the second session. In the second session, as in the first, the writers composed aloud. During the conversational portion of

the meeting, Emig asked the students to recall any thinking, planning, or prewriting they did between sessions.

The assignment for the third session was for the students to remember as much as they could about their past writing experiences. Emig encouraged the participants to, if possible, consult with their parents and former teachers and to bring in any writing they had ever done regardless of genre, their age when the writing was produced, the purpose of the writing, and so on. The purpose of the assignment was for Emig to develop a writing biography of each student.

Finally, Emig's fourth meeting requested the students bring a piece of imaginative writing such as a poem, story, or personal essay, which they were to write between the third and fourth meeting. They also were asked to bring any prewriting, outlines, and drafts they had done while completing their work. Once at the meeting, Emig discussed with the students in depth their process they engaged in while writing the piece. As with all the other sessions, all conversations between the researcher and the participants were tape recorded and converted into transcripts.

Emig's general finding (1971) was that twelfth graders engage in primarily two types of composing: reflexive and extensive. Reflexive writing, which involves contemplation and a significant time revising, is written with close friends or self as the audience. Genres of reflexive writing are often forms of poetry or personal writing. Extensive writing, otherwise known as school writing, is written with only the teacher in mind and involves little prewriting, rethinking or contemplation of the written text. Table 2 shows a few of the components of the writing process in which Emig found differences when the students' reflexive and extensive writings were compared. Most interesting

TABLE 2: Comparison of Writing Components of Twelfth Graders' – Emig (1971).

<i>Component</i>	<i>Reflexive</i> (Personal Writing)	<i>Extensive</i> (School Writing)
Context (Audience)	Write for peers or for self	Write exclusively for the teacher
Nature of Stimuli	“self” or “human relations” serve as prompts for writing	Pieces of literature serve as prompts for writing
Prewriting & Planning	More prewriting and planning	Less prewriting and planning
Contemplating the Product	Occasionally pause to contemplate	Rarely pause to contemplate
Reformulation	More readily revise	Seldom revise

about Emig’s findings is the students engage in writing processes more like those of established writers when they write on their own instead of writing for school. In fact, when the students engaged in school writing, components such as planning, contemplating, and revising—processes later understood as cognitive processes (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Kellogg, 1994)—virtually stopped.

Other examples of case studies that seek to describe at least some aspect of the composition process are Knoblauch (1980) and his study of intentionality in the writing process. Sommers (1980) compared the process of revision for student writers to experienced adult writers. Miller (1982) studied the process of how writers evaluate their own writing. Finally, Perl (1988) used a case study approach to help twenty teachers identify their own composing processes.

A final example of a process description inquiry is Perry’s work with creative

writers and her attempts to describe the “flow” process of writing (1999). Based on the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997), Perry describes flow as the inspired freedom and creativity achieved when writers lose themselves completely in their writing. Generally speaking, when the following elements of writing are in place, one enters a flow state:

- The writing activity has clear goals and inherently gives the writer some sort of feedback;
- the writer has the sense that his or her writing skills are well suited to the challenges of the writing task giving him or her a sense of potential control;
- the writer is intensely focused on what he or she is doing;
- the writer loses awareness of him or herself, perhaps feeling part of something larger;
- the writer’s sense of time is altered—time seems to slow, stop or become irrelevant; and
- the experience of writing becomes self-rewarding. (Perry, 1999)

Although Perry (1999) describes her work as qualitative, she also used what seems to be a case study approach. Employing a mix of questionnaires and personal interviews, Perry gathered data from 76 writers of poetry or fiction: Twenty nine of her participants responded to a questionnaire and 47 to a personal interview. Perry found that all of the “creative” writers she studied did not necessarily experience flow when they wrote; however, those who did experience flow reported similar processes in achieving the mental state. For example, many reported simply by consistently writing they could easily move into a flow state. Some authors discussed the importance of rituals and routines, others mentioned musical aids, and almost all talked about the tools they used to write (pen versus keyboard, yellow legal pad versus computer screen) that assisted in transitioning into a state of writing flow.

Phenomenology and Composition Research

To summarize, composition research is a relatively new field of study in academia. The majority of research has been conducted in the last thirty years. Because writing is fundamental to every academic discipline, there are a number of fields interested in studying the writing process. The fields represented in this review of the literature include English, psychology, sociology, and education.

The methods used to study the writing process vary from discipline to discipline and from researcher to researcher. Reflective analysis, empirical variable testing, text analysis, and process description are modes of inquiry that seem to be the most prevalent in composition studies, with the majority of studies falling into the categories of reflective inquiries and process description inquiries. At present, there are no universal methods or procedures to understanding the writing process, and composition research has mainly concerned itself with that which can be observed and recorded. Researchers have observed writers as they write, listened to them as they composed aloud, analyzed their written texts, and so forth. Absent from the research literature are studies that account for the writing process from the personal perspective of the writer; studies that explore what writers experience as they write. Research using a phenomenological inquiry would add to the literature in this respect as phenomenology is meant to explore the structures of consciousness in human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Although phenomenology is occasionally mentioned in the literature, there is some ambiguity as to what constitutes a phenomenological study. Emig (1982) asserts that phenomenological inquiry assumes many forms. She goes on to name case-study and ethnography as two of the best-known examples of phenomenological inquiries.

Elbow (2000) also uses the term *phenomenological* to describe a specific inquiry approach for studying the writing process. In his article “Toward a Phenomenology of Freewriting,” Elbow describes his personal experience of freewriting and mentions a few leads into the use of phenomenology in writing; however, his examples have more to do with affective experiences (Brand, 1989), feelings (McLeod, 1987), and creative discovery (Perl & Egendorf, 1986). Elbow does mention a dissertation (Flisser, 1988, *A phenomenological inquiry into insight in writing*) and a paper (Gleason, 1988, “The Phenomenological Study of Composing Experiences”) that specifically address phenomenology as a mode of research inquiry; however, to date this researcher has not been able to access these materials. Nevertheless, Elbow (2000) stresses the need for research studying the process of writing which focuses on the experience of the writer. He writes:

We’ve had a decade of protocol analysis and television cameras trained on writers, all fueled by a devotion to the facts about the writing process...When we get more careful phenomenological research, I suspect that one result will be to give us more respect for this suspect business of being excited, aroused, carried away, “rolling.” (p. 128).

Phenomenological research, as conducted in this project, has so far been almost absent from the field of writing research (Brannon, 1985). Exploring the phenomenological experience of writers will contribute to the literature of writing research and will provide a deeper understanding of the process of writing. Ultimately this understanding may lead to improvements in the teaching of writing or at least increase and enhance the research questions of other modes of inquiries.

Chapter Three

Method

Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long as we do not describe the action that breaks the silence. The spoken word is a gesture, and it meaning a world..

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, philosopher

Ideally, the method selected for a study should be determined by the subject matter to be investigated. Since in this study I was interested in what writers had to say regarding their experience as they create poems, text books, short stories, newspaper columns, novels, or creative non-fiction, a phenomenological method was deemed to be most appropriate. Van Manen (2001) explains that the aim of phenomenology “is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her lived experience” (p. 36). By conducting a phenomenological study, I was able to dialogue with writers so as to focus on their experiences of writing instead of the writing itself (Polkinghorne, 1989). This chapter provides an overview of phenomenology, the phenomenological interview, as well as the applicability of the phenomenological approach to the topic of writing.

Brief History of the Phenomenological Approach to Research

The practice of phenomenology lies primarily in description of how people experience their world and has its roots in the thinking of Edmund Husserl. Husserl hoped that phenomenology would allow philosophy to arrive at indisputable truths

(Dostal, 1993). To this end, Husserl developed the idea of suspending what one believed to be true about the world in order to be left with only the pure consciousness, which is equivalent to pure experience. This suspension of beliefs is known as epoché.

Heidegger expanded Husserl's philosophy by shifting the concern from knowledge to emphasizing what it means to be a person (Macquarrie, 1968). One of Heidegger's major contributions to the field of phenomenology was his notion of "Being-in-the-world." Heidegger used the German expression, *Dasein*, which literally means "there-being." In short, "there-being" implies that you always already are where you are—in a particular place, at a particular time, in a particular culture, etc.; in short, situated.

From Heidegger the discussion of phenomenology shifts to Merleau-Ponty, who wrote extensively about the topic. Merleau-Ponty sought to combine Husserl's approach to epistemology with an existential orientation derived from Heidegger (Madison, 1999). His phenomenology searched for descriptions of the objects of consciousness as they reveal themselves to direct experience. In the preface of his seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes:

Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their "facticity." (p. vii)

Merleau-Ponty's central premise in *Phenomenology of Perception* is to persuade his reader that objective thought distorts lived experience. The consequences of this distortion are that it estranges "us from our own selves, the world in which we live and

other people with whom we interact” (Langer, 1989, p. 149). One problem deriving from the work of Husserl and Heidegger is that the language they used seemed too remote from concrete human life. Subsequent existential-phenomenological philosophers—such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Marcel—attempted to focus on experience but failed to do so without relying, to some extent, on a leap of faith to an absolute deity or idea. Langer (1989) writes of Merleau-Ponty, “By drawing attention to the serious shortcomings of objective thought and discussing these in detail, Merleau-Ponty encourages us to abandon the traditional approaches [of philosophy] and return to the phenomena of our concrete experience” (p. 151).

By describing the “lived body,” Merleau-Ponty (1962) broke from Cartesian dualism by asserting that human beings not only “have a body, but are a body” (p. 5, Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). According to Merleau-Ponty, a person’s body is the means by which that person experiences the world. Using Merleau-Ponty’s existential philosophy as a springboard, Couture (1998) writes, “A self that remains separated from the world where it dwells can never hope to understand it fully” (p. 30).

Another critical aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy concerns his analysis of language and its relationship to consciousness. “For Merleau-Ponty, language is a vehicle for knowledge, communication, expression, and truth” (Bales, 1998, p. 52). In Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) own words:

We must recognize first of all that thought, in the speaking subject, is not a representation, that is, that it does not expressly posit objects or relations. The orator does not think before speaking, nor even while speaking; *his speech is his thought*. [Italics added] (p. 180)

The purpose of phenomenological research, as guided by existential-phenomenology is to “produce clear, precise, and systematic descriptions of the meaning that constitutes the activity of...consciousness” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45). These descriptions come precisely from the dialogue of the participant and researcher—both construct the meanings of a phenomenon in an ongoing spoken exchange.

The Phenomenological Interview

The primary research tool I used in this study was the phenomenological interview as described by Thomas and Pollio (2002). The goal of researchers using this interview technique is to learn something from a participant about their experience of the phenomenon in question and about the participant as the final authority concerning his or her own experience (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). Even so, since all knowledge is created discursively, even self-knowledge (Pollio et al., 1997), the phenomenological interview is a type of discourse or conversation entered into with the intent of eliciting or describing participants’ understanding of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989).

A phenomenological interview uses the language of participants to focus on their experienced meaning instead of relying on an “objective” researcher to observe and describe the subjects’ actions or behaviors (Polkinghorne, 1989). Within the context of a phenomenological interview, the interviewer acknowledges that the participant being interviewed is the authority on his or her experience; thus, the interviewer as researcher approaches the phenomenological interview from a respectful stance, making clear to the participant that his or her individual understanding of a phenomenon is what interests the researcher.

Data Collection

Researchers begin each phenomenological interview with an open-ended question about the participants' experience of whatever phenomenon is being studied. Because the interview is unstructured, subsequent questions arise from the content of the interview. These questions are intended to assist the interviewees in focusing on their experiences as they describe it (Kvale, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1989) and to help the researcher clarify what the participant means if he or she feels they have misunderstood something said. The interview concludes when both people feel satisfied that the participant's experience has been communicated as well as it can be.

Once the participant indicates that there are no more descriptions of their experience to be communicated, the researcher summarizes to the participant, as completely as he or she can, his or her understanding of the participant's description of the experience. This allows a participant to clarify any misunderstandings and to elaborate on any points he or she feels needs more description. Once the participant is satisfied that the researcher has summarized his or her experience accurately, the researcher provides the participant with a final chance to add any information by asking if he or she has anything more to say.

To conduct a successful phenomenological interview, researchers must ask questions that help participants describe their experiences. A phenomenological question avoids eliciting a theoretical explanation or statement. Instead of conceptualizing, categorizing, or reflecting on a topic, phenomenological interviews allow people the opportunity to discuss the world as they immediately experience it (Van Manen, 2001) in terms of their immediate awareness (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). Essentially,

phenomenological interviews engage participants in conversations that are “oriented to sense-making and interpretation of the notion that drives or stimulates the conversation” (Van Manen, p. 98).

The concept of engaging participants in conversations is critical to the ways in which phenomenological interviewing is useful to social scientific research. Conversations are always about “something” and within the grounds of a phenomenological interview the participant is not the object or focus. Instead, it is with the participant, through conversation, that the phenomenological researcher concentrates on the content of the conversation (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). Novelist Anne Bernays (2001) writes, “Whatever I knew about constructing a piece of fiction lay in an unsorted jumble in what a shrink would call the unconscious but I prefer to think of it as the cellar.” If Bernays agreed to become a participant in a phenomenological interview study, she and the researcher would discuss her experience as a fiction writer. Engaging Bernays in dialogue would allow her to describe her experience of writing – to sort through the “jumbles” of her writing mind. Bernays in describing her experience to the actively listening researcher might stumble upon new revelations as to what writing means to her. These revelations can take place because the conversation would focus on previously un-reflected experiences (Thomas and Pollio; Pollio et al., 1997). As a consequence of the clarifying components of conversation, it is assured that those issues which are central or important to a participant will emerge again and again throughout the dialogue (Polkinghorne, 1989; Pollio et al.).

Furthermore, every phenomenological interview yields something different

(Linge, 1976). What a researcher may learn from dialoguing with one participant will be something different when dialoguing with another participant. In fact, interviewing the same participant more than once may not yield identical information. The reason for this is that since knowledge is constructed discursively, and these discourses may be refined and clarified between/among participants and researchers, the contexts of the dialogues are ever changing (Pollio et al., 1997). The “truth” of what one experienced yesterday may be illuminated by talking about it today and, perhaps, affect how the person remembers it tomorrow.

Participants

The number of participants used in a phenomenological study is not nearly as important as the variety and quality of the descriptions provided by the participants interviewed (Polkinghorne, 1989). It is essential, though, that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998). Thomas and Pollio (2002) suggest that an appropriate sample size for phenomenological research can range from six to twelve participants provided there is thematic redundancy after hearing the narratives of six participants. According to the authors, “If redundancy is evident after hearing the narratives of six participants, the researcher may decide that it will not be necessary to interview an additional four or six (p. 31).” The main criteria for selecting participants are: 1. They have had relevant experience, 2. They want to talk about it, and 3. They are articulate enough to talk about it (Pollio, Henley and Thompson, 1997).

Phenomenological Interpretation of Data

Van Manen (2001) describes “data” as descriptions of a participant’s lived-experiences; however, obtaining descriptions from participants is only the beginning of the interpretive process. Descriptions of lived-experiences to be interpreted are gathered through phenomenological interviews; however, before researchers can begin analyzing and interpreting participants’ descriptions, spoken descriptions must be transcribed into written texts.

Completed interviews are transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The names of people, places, and other data that might serve to identify the participant are removed or are assigned a pseudonym. Transcribed interviews serve as the data for interpretation.

Bracketing

Before the researcher engages in any interviews, though, it is important that he participates in his own interview to “bracket” (Moran, 2000), or become aware of, any theoretical beliefs, preconceptions, or presuppositions he has about the topic (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). Bracketing is a process of the researcher locating, interpreting, and determining the key phrases that describe the essential recurring features of his experiences with writing: It is a subtractive process seeking to remove conceptual biases that could distort the researcher’s interpretation of the phenomenological data (Pollio, et al., 1997). When researchers are more aware of their own biases, they can be more present to what participants speak about in the phenomenological interview.

The Hermeneutic Circle

A phenomenological-hermeneutical approach is used to analyze the transcripts once participants’ descriptions are collected and transcribed. Van Manen warns that this

type of analysis should not be confused as a “mere variation of well-known techniques of content analysis, or as identical to analytic-coding, taxonomic, and data-organizing practices” (p. 29) common to other research approaches. Whereas these methods specify beforehand what they want to know from a text, a phenomenological-hermeneutical analysis of the data is discovery oriented, wanting to find out—as nearly as possible—what a certain phenomenon means to a specific person and how that phenomenon is experienced. Meanings emerge from the participant’s transcribed interviews in the form of themes or topics, producing a general description of the experience. The emphasis is on describing, not testing hypotheses.

The hermeneutical approach to mining the transcript for reoccurring themes or topics involves a continuous process of reading and relating a part of the text to the whole of the text (Pollio et al., 1997). This moving from part to whole and back again—the hermeneutic circle (Valle et al., 1989)—is critical to gaining a more complete understanding of a person’s experience. To emphasize the importance of the circular practice of using the parts to understand the whole to better understand the parts, Bales (1998) writes:

When we approach a text (or a person’s experience) for the first time, we see only part of it; therefore, we lack a sense of the whole. With this lack, we are open to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. As we gain an understanding of the whole, we have a more lucid understanding of the parts. (p. 58)

Theoretically, explicating themes using the hermeneutic circle could be an infinite process. Kvale (1983) suggests that once the analysis is free of inner contradictions, the process may be concluded. The meaning that has emerged from the text is, at this point, is as much a product of the interpreter’s work as the initial dialogue between researcher

and participant.

When using a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach to analyze text, the researcher identifies passages in each transcript that relate to similar themes related to the phenomenon being studied. The structure of the relationship between and among the themes is reviewed and refined by an interpretive research group. This group assists the researcher in establishing a *Gestalt*, or a complete picture, of participant experiences. Diagrams often are used to represent structural relationships among and between themes while a descriptive text is written to describe each theme in the participants' experiences of writing (Reitz, 1998).

An important final step is presenting the thematic structure to each of the participants. Thomas and Pollio (2002) write, "Participants are asked to consider the overall findings and to judge whether the thematic structure reflects their own individual experience" (p. 38). If there are any disagreements, participants may suggest alternative wording or participation. Only then is the final report prepared.

Trustworthiness of Phenomenological Research

A potential criticism of phenomenological research, at least from the standpoint of positivist science, is that phenomenological research does not satisfy the requisites of hard science in terms of reliability, validity, and generalizability. Before responding to this argument, one must consider if even hard science can produce unquestionable results. Quoting Albert Einstein, "If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?" Berliner (2002) makes the point that a distinction should be made between the discipline of science and methods or techniques used in research. Quoting

Percy Bridgman, Berliner writes that science is no more than individuals “doing their damndest with their minds, no holds barred” (p 18). Methods are no more than a means to knowledge and though scientific research has acquiesced to the methods of positivism as the only way to knowledge, there are a multitude of unexplored paths to understanding. The research problem should determine the method, not the other way around—in the latter case, one ends up with what some researchers have called “methodolatry.”

Positivists sometimes argue that because phenomenological interviews do not rigidly adhere to strict lines of questioning when gathering data, results are not to be trusted; however, the absence of inflexibility does not preclude rigor. Husserl’s aim of phenomenology was “the *rigorous unbiased* study of things as they appear so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience [italics added]” (Valle & Halling, 1989, p. 6). Though the discourse of phenomenological interviews will vary, the processes involved before and after the interviews are to be carefully observed and scrupulously executed. Methods in phenomenology offer general guidelines and change according to what is best suited to understand the particular experiential phenomenon now the object of study (Polkinghorne, 1989). Once the researcher decides upon the phenomenon to be studied, only those participants who have experienced the phenomenon are contacted and interviewed.

A term often used in qualitative research in lieu of reliability and validity is trustworthiness and verisimilitude. As mentioned previously, the phenomenological researcher arrives at trustworthiness through rigorous analysis of data on the basis of hermeneutic procedures. The hermeneutic process connects between the familiar world

in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of the world (Linge, 1976). The method yields “descriptive interpretations noting prominent meaning relations, and patterns in each interview” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 51) and is a “continuous process of relating a part of some text to the whole of the text, and any and all passages are always understood in terms of their relationship to the larger whole” (Thomas and Pollio, 2002, p. 35). This circular movement from a segment of the text to the whole helps ensure that any assertions of interpretation are warranted by constantly weighing what is interpreted back to what is in the text. But what all of this comes down to is the researcher, the participants, and the readers of a study saying: “Yes, that describes the way I experience it” or “I see how a person can experience it that way.” This is verisimilitude, or life-likeness.

To deepen the trustworthiness of the analysis, a hermeneutic approach is best implemented through group, idiographic, and nomothetic interpretations (Pollio et al., 1997); however, before any analytical process can begin, the researcher must undergo his own bracketing interview to become aware of potential biases that might influence the direction of participants’ interviews. Once such bracketing is complete, the researcher is ready to conduct phenomenological interviews, transcribe the dialogue, and analyze the data. The analytic process begins with an interpretive group who collectively works to extract “meaning units” that serve as a basis for themes (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). Using the hermeneutic process of moving back and forth from interpretations to text, the interpretive group will thematize approximately three to four of the protocols; enough to provide an adequate thematic base for subsequent interpretations of interviews. The researcher then individually interprets the remaining protocols alone while, again,

utilizing the hermeneutic circle and supporting interpretations with references to the text. Thematic patterns typically develop after reading three to five interview transcripts; however, the interpretive process does not end (Pollio et al.) and idiographic findings are regularly presented to the research group as well as to the participants for purposes of “verifying” interpretation. After all individual transcripts have been analyzed, “the hermeneutic circle expands to include more general, or nomothetic, thematic descriptions and the seek commonalities across interviews” (Thomas and Pollio, p. 37). If the nomothetic interpretation is done outside the interpretive group, the results are presented and discussed within the group.

Validity

Behavioral scientists generally distrust interview methods citing that only what can be observed and quantified is to be considered valid data. In other words, they may consider data deriving from self-description to be inaccurate due to subjects distorting their internal representations or the interviewer distorting the linguistic message during the interpretative process. But Pollio et al. (1997) argue that where else is the “real” to be found if not in the context of an interview where the participants’ perspective on his or her experience emerges: “The description of an experience as it emerges in a particular context is the experience” (p. 31).

A “valid” phenomenological interview study succeeds in investigating what the researcher intends to investigate. Concerning the validity of phenomenological research Thomas and Pollio (2002) write, “Validity is not determined by the degree of correspondence between a description and some external reality criterion but by whether convincing evidence has been brought forth in favor of the description offered” (p. 41).

Otherwise stated, the validity of a phenomenological research has more to do with whether or not convincing evidence has been collected to support the properness of the interpretation. Pollio et al. (1997) explain that evidential support (validity) can be evaluated by resolving the methodological and experiential concerns of a phenomenological study. Methodologically the researcher must provide evidence of rigor, such as discussed in the analysis of themes, as well as in terms of how participants are selected and interviewed. The researcher must also show that her methods are appropriate for yielding the type of understanding claimed by the study. Experientially, the researcher must demonstrate a strong relationship between her data and her interpretation (plausibility); furthermore, the interpretation should allow a reader to see the researched phenomena with a new understanding (illuminating). Pollio et al. maintain that once all criteria are satisfied—that the methodological concerns are shown to be rigorous and appropriate and the experiential concerns are demonstrated to be plausible and illuminating—then and only then is it possible to judge a given topic of phenomenological research as valid.

Reliability

The bottom line for reliability as it pertains to a phenomenological study is whether or not the study achieves relevance by opening new avenues to understanding the researched phenomenon. To accomplish this, the researcher's thematic analysis must identify "general structures and processes of experience despite changes manifest in the unique patterns defining individuals and settings" (Thomas and Pollio, 2002, p. 40). When reliability is viewed through this lens, exact replication of any phenomenological study is impossible. In other words, a researcher will never be able to duplicate a study

of a phenomenon and obtain exactly the same findings, even if the same participants are used; however, replicability is not the aim of a phenomenological study. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that the “phenomenological concern is with the nature of the experience itself” (p. 48). To involve more than one participant in a phenomenological study is to generate variations, and having a variety of narratives can make discerning the essential structure of a phenomenon much easier (Thomas and Pollio). Replicating a specific piece of phenomenological research will serve to extend the themes and connections achieved in the original study.

Generalizability

Pollio et al. (1997) stipulate that any thematic descriptions, be they idiographic or nomothetic, are for the purpose of improving the researcher’s interpretive vision, not for the purpose of describing the characteristics of a population. From a positivist’s point-of-view, generalizability of a study’s findings back to the larger population is critical. Yet, in education the experience of one may be considerably different from another’s. Not only is each student an individual, there exists a multitude of possible contexts for each individual’s experience; thus, making generalizations about larger populations from small samples in educational research may prove faulty. Berliner (2002) states, “In education, broad theories and ecological generalizations often fail because they cannot incorporate the enormous number or determine the power of contexts within which human beings find themselves” (p. 19). On the other hand, Thomas and Pollio (2002) make a case for phenomenological generalizability:

The “proof” [of phenomenological generalizability] does not depend solely on purity of method but also upon the reader of the research report.

In this case, when and if a description rings true, each specific reader who derives insights from the results of a phenomenological study may be thought to extend its generalizability (p. 42).

That is to say, the decision to generalize a phenomenological study becomes a matter of professional judgment (Thomas and Pollio).

Phenomenology as a Method for Studying the Experience of Writers

Participants

In this study of the experience of writing, I interviewed a total of ten participants. These individuals were recruited through my involvement in writing organizations, writing conferences, graduate studies, and network sampling. Table 3 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. I asked that the participants choose their own pseudonyms in an attempt to humanize the research. Coded determinants such as “Participant 1” or “Female 4” are used regularly in phenomenological studies; however, such terms are sterile and season the research as clinical. Writing is a linguistic process as is oral language; the purpose of language is to communicate; communication allows for connection between people to occur. In the words of the participant with the pseudonym of *John*, “Without connection we aren’t human.” To refer to the writers in this study numerically or by scientific code names would disconnect the writers from their words, thereby distancing the reader from the writers’ experiences. According to Van Manen (2001) the more research pulls its readers in, the more likely those readers will reflect on the data presented.

Ages of participants ranged from 44 to 67 with a mean age of 57 years. All participants were white although they represented a variety of professions. Two more

TABLE 3: Summary of Participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Yrs. Writing for Pub.</i>	<i>Onset of Interest</i>
Journeyman	Male	Professor of English	63	38	4
Grace	Female	Teacher	65	27	16
Roger	Male	Editor	44	19	21
Baroque 2	Male	Physician/Pathologist	66	50	30 (16)
Bookworm	Female	Professor of Education	58	40	8
John	Male	Business Owner	63	5	16
Nora	Female	Clinical Psychologist	45	10	8
Will	Male	Teacher	54	20	16
Bubbles	Female	Gov. Training Specialist	61	5	7
Fugitive	Male	Professor of English	50	27	21

males (n=6) than females (n=4) participated in the study. Also Table 3 includes a column titled “Onset of Interest” that provides the age participants began to recognize that they were interested in writing or that writing was something they wanted to do. This differs from how long participants had actually been writing because some of them recognized they were compelled to write a while after they had actually been writing or long before they began writing.

I employed *criterion sampling* in this research project to insure all participants were practicing writers (i.e. all participants met a certain criterion to be considered a

practicing writer and was eligible to serve as a participant). As mentioned in the introduction, I sought writers who had published at least one category of the following:

- twelve poems,
- a book of poetry,
- three short stories,
- a story collection,
- a chapbook (a short, inexpensively produced book of poetry or prose)
- or a novel.
- twelve newspaper articles
- three creative non-fiction essays
- three research articles
- a textbook

Using these criteria to judge potential participants assured me that they had experience writing.

All participants interviewed in this study met the criteria of publication. Also, they were willing to talk about their lived experiences of writing. Table 4 categorizes the publications of each participant. Although participants were recruited based on the researcher's knowledge of their publishing history and their ability to satisfy the study's criteria in at least one genre, it was apparent that none of the participants wrote in only one genre.

Procedures

Bracketing. Prior to conducting interviews with participants, I was interviewed about my own experiences of writing. The purpose of being interviewed was to make me aware of the presuppositions I had about writing, or, as Moran (2000) describes, “[to] uncover the inner core of our subjectivity (p. 151).” A member of the phenomenological

TABLE 4: Participant Publications

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Research Articles</i>	<i>Newspaper Articles</i>	<i>Editorials</i>	<i>Columns</i>	<i>Non-Fiction Essays</i>	<i>Textbook Chapters</i>	<i>Poems</i>	<i>Book(s) of Poetry</i>
Journeyman	5+				7		150+	7
Grace	8	12		1,200	5	4	100	
Roger	1	2,500	1	20				
Baroque 2	200	2	30		5	10		
Bookworm	41	5	31	23		5	5	
John	2	1		72			1	1
Nora	3			2				
Will	3	3	1		5	12	300+	4
Bubbles		2		32	16		5	
Fugitive	30		50+	50+	20+		200+	2

(table continues)

TABLE 4 (*continued*)

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Short Stories</i>	<i>Book(s) of Short Stories</i>	<i>Novel(s)</i>	<i>Textbook(s)</i>	<i>Children's Book(s)</i>	<i>Reviews</i>	<i>Technical Manual(s)/ Psych. Tests</i>	<i>Editor of Text(s)</i>
Journeyman	3				1	10+		
Grace	4		2					
Roger	1							
Baroque 2				1				
Bookworm	1			44				
John							2 (Manuals)	
Nora							2(Psych. Tests/Profiles)	
Will	1			1		3		
Bubbles								
Fugitive	10		2	3				1 (Literatue Text)

research group from the University of Tennessee's Center for Applied Phenomenology conducted the interview, and the text was analyzed by the entire phenomenological research group in a process identical to that used for participant interviews. The research group derived themes from my experiences of writing. With explicit knowledge of my own experiences, I was less likely to ask leading questions or impose my beliefs about writing while conducting interviews with participants. Pollio, et al. (1997) explain:

...the intention [of the bracketing interview] is not to have interviewers become objective—only to have them become more attuned to their presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon and thereby sensitize them to any potential demands they may impose on their-co-participants either during the interview or in its subsequent interpretation. (p. 48)

My bracketing interview was only one way of attempting to see as clearly as possible the participants' experiences of writing. Another form of bracketing I used was to have the research group assist in the interpretation of transcribed interviews (Thompson, et al., 1990; Pollio, et al., 1997). The two-fold purpose of utilizing an interpretive group as a way to "bracket" my presuppositions was (1) to allow individuals within the group to "question the adequacy of any proposed description of the interview data" as well as (2) "make figural what might otherwise remain a background assumption (Pollio, et al, p. 49)."

Collecting Data. Informed consent was obtained from the ten writers who agreed to participate in the research (see Appendix A). All interviews took place in a location chosen by the participants to maximize their comfort level. The locations ranged from participants' homes to their offices to local bookstores. The length of each interview ranged between one to two hours, and each interview was audio-taped.

All interviews were conducted without complication except for the final interview, which was with Nora. Whether due to mechanical error or human error, my tape recorder failed to record the interview; however, Nora graciously agreed to redo the interview. We began the second interview with me acknowledging the departure from protocol. Nevertheless, by the end of the second interview both Nora and I agreed that the interviews were essentially the same. There was one topic I recalled from the initial interview that did not surface in the second. Nora and I agreed to stop the discussion in order to turn back on the cassette recorder and capture the dialogue on tape.

Each interview began with me asking participants to think of three experiences in which they were involved with a piece of writing and to describe what stood out to them during one of those experiences. The opening question was purposefully open-ended to allow participants to talk about experience. Participants dictated the direction of the conversation, and I only interrupted when I sought to make certain I understood the meaning of the words (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). As participants described their experiences of writing, I would ask subsequent questions based on the content of what had been said to help participants in focusing on the experiences they were describing (Polkinghorne, 1989).

As the interviewer, when I asked follow-up questions, I took care not to ask “why” questions since Pollio, et al. (1997) warn, “Such questions shift the dialogue away from describing an experience to a more abstract, theoretical discussion (p. 30).” Instead, I asked questions such as “What was that like for you?” or prompted participants to “Tell me more” to ensure participants described their experiences in as much detail and depth as possible. Another technique I utilized to facilitate participants in providing complete

descriptions was to frame questions in participants' own words (Pollio, et al., 1997). For instance, Roger described an experience of submitting several short stories and a chapter from a novel to regional contests but didn't receive any feedback from the contests. He had mentioned "feedback" several times previous to using it in this particular context, but his use of the word seemed to be different. For clarification, I rephrased Roger's statement: "You say, 'I didn't get feedback.'" This resulted in Roger explaining that feedback, in his experience, included receiving an award. He said, "That's the only feedback you get from contests—as far as I know [chuckles]."

As previously stated, the interviews ranged between one and two hours. The length of each interview depended on how few or how many experiences the participant chose to describe. Following the advice of Thomas and Pollio (2002), I made certain that participants had nothing else to add to their descriptions by asking, "Is there anything else you would like to say about this experience (p. 26)."

Occasionally a participant would ask if he or she was talking about what I wanted. Again, using Thomas and Pollio's (2002) advice about interviewing, I reassured those participants that I was interested in whatever they were comfortable sharing.

I transcribed the audiotaped interviews making certain any identifying information was removed or altered to maintain the anonymity of the participants, especially when protocols were shared with members of the phenomenological research group. I provided participants with a copy of their interview transcript to ensure I captured an accurate account of their experiences. More importantly, I wanted to make certain the participants had not omitted any important points they had wished to make, therefore, I invited the participants to add further comments. Several participants did add

comments; however, these comments mostly expressed how positive the interview experience was for them. They felt as if they had gained access to more of their life and were appreciative (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). For example, the poet who chose the pseudonym “Journeyman” responded, “Reading the interview brought back good memories of that day. My thanks to you for involving me in your project.” Others extended the description of their experiences. Grace, for example, added more information about the importance of reading in her life. She wrote in a note:

It was reading that made me want to write, and reading still has the same effect on me. Not so much an *I-can-do-that* attitude when I read (though there’s a little of that), but more of a *that-makes-me-remember* identification.

The transcribed, edited, and revised interviews served as the data of the analysis.

Interpretive Analysis. The interpretive analysis began with the assistance of a phenomenological research group, which met (and continues to meet) on Wednesday evenings at the University of Tennessee’s Center for Applied Phenomenology. Between ten to fifteen members were present to participate in protocol analysis; however, on one occasion there were as many as twenty people present. At the beginning of each analysis session I distributed printed copies of transcribed interviews to all members of the group.

Since the interview data for this study was gathered and transcribed during the summer months and due to several participants in the phenomenological research group needing protocols analyzed, only two of the ten interview transcripts were analyzed by the entire interpretive research group; however, an additional transcript was analyzed by a smaller, ad hoc group of five to bring the total of protocols analyzed in the group setting to three.

Research group members and I noted what themes were figural in each protocol, making certain that all suggestions were supported by specific passages. Once three of the interviews were thematized with the assistance of the group, I thematized the remaining seven. The interpretive research group reviewed and refined the various themes that emerged from the analysis, as well as the relationship between and among the themes, and rendered an understanding of the Gestalt of the experience of writing. In the following chapter I describe each theme in the writer's experience of writing. Furthermore, I also present the thematic analysis in diagrammatic form in an attempt to represent the structural relationship among themes.

Chapter Four

Results of the Phenomenological Analysis

Connection is the core of humanity. Without connection we aren't human. It's probably the thing that distinguishes us from all the rest of creation.

-John, participant

General Overview of the Results

Perry (1999) cautions that any study of writers that includes interviews or dialogic components may not be efficacious since writers, she assumes, prefer to respond through the medium of writing instead of talking, especially if participants are strangers: Writing not only allows writers to ponder their answers but also permits them opportunities to edit before answering. It was my experience, though, participants in this study—all writers and some of whom were strangers prior to the interview—were more than willing to talk about their experiences of writing. In fact, participants had much to report about their experiences of writing.

When I quote participants in this chapter and other places in this research paper, the words are strictly those of the participants. Since texts were originally transcribed speech, which differs from standard written English, I made minor edits to make certain participants' words satisfied standard written English protocols. Also, to maintain the anonymity of the participants, I changed any potentially identifying references to become general in nature. For example, if a participant talked about Kroger's, I printed it as "grocery store." Finally, when quotes had only the pronoun "it," I substituted the pronoun's referent for the sake of clarity. Originally I had placed any edit I made to the quote in brackets; however, early readers of the text found the brackets interfered with

their reading, which interfered with the participant words. In order to make the words of the participants as accessible as possible, I removed the brackets.

Generally speaking, the writers reported experiencing writing as a way for them to connect with others through words. Obviously this is an oversimplification of their experiences and may not suffice to describe any one of the writers' experiences; however, the statement does include the fundamental components which each of the writers mentioned in their interviews: The self (who writes), the other (who reads), and the words (which connect the self and other). Figure 1 diagrammatically represents the triadic relationship of self, other, and words.

The Self

When participants in this study talked about themselves within the contexts of their writing experiences, most described themselves as “a person who writes” rather than “a writer.” Although the interviews did not bear out distinctions to warrant a theme between “a person who writes” and “a writer,” it is apparent from the discussions with participants that they did experience a difference between the descriptors. Nine out of ten of the participants consistently referred to themselves as “a person who writes.” One participant who did elucidate on their experience of the distinction was Journeyman. He said:

There's a big difference between those two terms. I think if we use the term “writer,” the tendency is to think professional writer; therefore, any number of assumptions will come into play if you go that way. “Someone who writes,” to me, is a much more acceptable term because it has in it, I think, a kind of humility, which I think is important in living a certain kind of life. I would prefer to be thought of as someone who writes. In other words, I make this a part of my life as much as I can day to day.

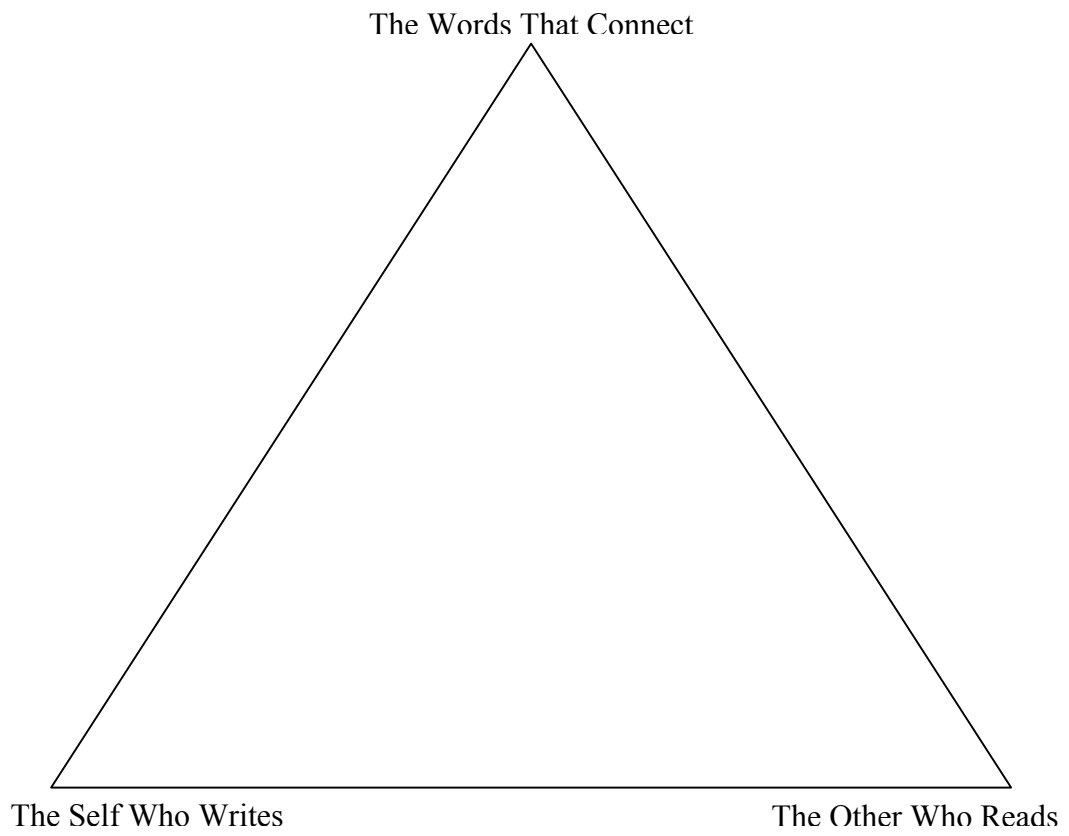


Figure 1: Overview of Themes in the Experience of Writing

Writing, as evidenced in the participants' list of publishing accomplishments, is obviously something at which they are adept. As Roger described his aptitude for writing, "It's what I do. I can't paint, can't draw, I'm not a musician, I'm not an actor. I've dabbled in these things over the years, but the one thing that I know I'm strong at is writing." But for some of the participants writing is not so much an act of doing as it is an act of being. Fugitive said, "Writing is an act of being; it is a way of life...it *is* a life. Writing is inseparable from who I am. It's as close to me as my skin."

With writing being such an intrinsic part of who the participants experienced themselves to be, they often described writing as an activity that they "have to do" rather than "want to do." They often described their need to write as a "compulsion" or an "obsession." Will, who is primarily a poet, reported:

I have this obsession with defining and somehow shaping experience. I am finding ways of coining it in the language of—for right now—small poems that barely go over three or four pages. Sometimes they are only half a page.

Similarly, while reporting the struggles he encounters while writing, Roger contended that *not* writing was not a viable option for him. "Writing, for me," reported Roger, "is more of a compulsion than it is a joy. I have to do it no matter what."

When the urge to write is not satisfied, some participants reported a change in their physical well-being. For example, Journeyman began his interview talking about the effect writing has on his body:

I feel better when I'm writing, or when I have been writing, and I mean feel better in a very literal, physical sense. Um, I have I think a greater sense of energy, a sense of being much more alert and aware, uh, a kind

of, um, heightened physical sense of being in the world [I: Hmmm.] And it, it is literally very, um, [pause] sensuous to me and in the sense that I seem to see things more clearly, um, have a greater sense of, um, the dimensions of things. [I: Right.] Um, so if I'm not writing, if I go for long periods without writing, I feel a lack, uh, I feel that something's missing...It's really the writing that I need.

Several of the participants' experienced being compelled to write from an early age. Some described being as young as four years old when they experienced the impulse to write. For example:

I seem to have always wanted to write. My mother, as we were moving her from her house, said, "Here, I want you to have this." She took me into a closet and had me go upon a shelf and pull out a box that had a folder in it. Inside were some things that I had written down when I was in the first and second grade; there were three poems in there. Now they were childish poems, but she had saved them over all these years. You know, I've been writing things down for a long time. Why? I can't tell you why. Why was it important to write something down at such an early age? I have no idea. (John)

There seems to have always been a pull to write down things, even since I first started school. Writing things down has always been a natural thing for me. I've always kept journals and that kind of stuff. (Bubbles)

I must have been either four or five years old and did not know how to read, and, of course, I could not write. But I remember distinctly—this would have been either 1944 or 1945, somewhere in that time period—I was lying on the floor where we were living in an apartment in Detroit, in a housing project. I either had a pencil or it could have been a crayon, and I had a magazine open before me looking at words. Somehow I had this concept of words being powerful, wonderful, exciting, energizing things. I want to be able to make them...I had a sensation that's almost like hunger in that I wanted to make those words! I mean, I can still feel that as strongly right now as I did when I was that four or five year old kid! Now, I have no idea where it came from, but I had a hunger, a yearning, and a longing to be able to write. I knew there was something locked in those words that I wanted...I have been a long time in fulfilling that strong yearning that first hit me sixty years ago. But, it was so real and so vivid. Every time I write, in some way or another, whether I'm conscious of it or not, it's a fulfillment of that moment. (Journeyman)

There's a statement that writers write because they have to, and I think that's true for me because I just always did. I don't write because early on I figured I would get anything published. As a matter of fact, that poem that won the contest, I didn't send in; my teacher sent it in. I didn't even know that she had done it. It got first place in the Beta Club writing contest. I was just floored because I had no idea that she'd sent it in. (Bookworm)

The Other

The second point of focus participants described, against which another set of themes emerged, was a sense of other people. Although writing is traditionally thought of as a solitary act, one that disconnects the writer from others, writers in this study often described others being present in their experience of writing.

Participants referred to “the other” using words that signified that “other” meant “reader.” Several participants in this study described that one of the reasons they wrote was to have their work read by other people. For example, Grace said:

There are readers and that's the reason you are writing it. Even though while you're writing it you are writing it for yourself and for the story, but, ultimately, it doesn't do anything except cause you to kill more trees if nobody else reads it. Writers need readers.

Bubbles echoes Nora's experience of wanting an audience. She said, “My goal is to have people read my work. I want them to read my words. Part of my writing is I want people to read my words.” Other participants who mentioned wanting their work to be read by others included Fugitive (“It's always apparent to me, at least in the back of my mind, that I'm writing for people. I'm not trying to create clever exercises.”), Roger (“When I write, I want what I write to get out...I want it to be read. Having a reader is what I'm after.”), and Will (“That's a really neat feeling—to have an audience. And to have an audience that is human and that's not just academic and critical, in an academic sense, is

really, really special.”)

Some participants discussed not only how they wanted their work to be read by others, but also how they thought of others as they wrote. Consider Nora’s description of her experience of others when she writes:

I’m almost always writing for someone even if it is a journal entry. Even if I am writing in my personal journal, someone’s face is before me. When I was writing papers in high school they were love letters for my teachers, you know, really. My teachers’ faces were before me.

In Baroque 2’s experience of writing chapters for medical textbooks, knowledge of the potential reader is imperative before writing. According to Baroque 2:

The first thing you want to know is who is this textbook being written for? If it’s being written for medical students, that’s one thing. If it’s being written for specialist in your field, then the process is quite different in that you could presuppose a lot of knowledge that you can’t presuppose of medical students, who pretty much have to start from the beginning. But, if I’m writing it for my fellows, then I assume they know a great deal.

Then again, although “others” seem to be a significant focus in the experience of those who write in this research, “others” did not seem to dictate what the participants in this study wrote. To do so would diminish the writing. Explained Will:

If you let an audience define the subject and reason for your writing, then you end up being a prostitute. A lot of people do that for success. I know what sells; I know what publishes; I know what wins prizes; I know what gains recognition. If all of that is going to determine what I do with poetry, then I don’t see how that is any different than a banker selling bad stock. I think a lot of people gain recognition that way and...some relative early success and fame. But, I don’t think they will last the way John Keats has lasted or William Blake or William Wordsworth or Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson, who never wrote to an audience. Never. They didn’t write *for* an audience for any reason whatsoever.

Similarly, Fugitive described his experience of not allowing an audience, be it an imaginary or real, influence his writing although it is an audience for whom he writes.

That doesn't mean, by the way, that I cater to this imaginary audience that I've created. On the contrary, I don't at all. It just means that I'm aware that I'm writing for other human beings.

The Words

As often as the participants mentioned themselves in their experiences of writing, as often as they mentioned others, all of them talked about “the words” they write. The phrase “the words” serves as a metaphor for language in general, which not only includes singular lexical entities but also clauses, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc.

For some participants, such as Grace, the act of writing—the act of putting words on paper—is the genesis of her enjoyment of writing. Although writing provides benefits to self and other, there comes a satisfaction of simply getting words on the page. Grace stated:

I think writing is a far more satisfying sort of endeavor if you find your satisfaction while you're doing it, if you find your enrichment in the process of doing it...I write just for the fun of getting those words down and seeing what sort of a shape they make.

Similarly, Will described how his satisfaction with writing is dependent upon actually doing the writing and not becoming recognized for doing the writing:

Once you get to be fifty-four and you've published four books, and you've had enough rejections from good magazines to paper the walls of the Empire State Building, you need to learn to write for the sake of the writing...It's the WORK; it's the WORDS. [Will's eyes became wider with each phrase while his voice steadily rose.] It's rolling the ball up the hill. It's *NOT* getting it *UP* there as in the myth of Sisyphus.

Other participants spoke of language as if it were an organic creature: something that breathed, maintained a steady heartbeat, and possessed a soul. Consider Nora's description of her experience of language: “I have the sense that words are living things.

They felt alive to me and still do. They carry things in them.”

As words become personified to take on human characteristics, they grow in power: they possess the ability to change the person who writes. For example,

Journeyman stated:

It is language that you're trying to shape, and, paradoxically in trying to shape that language, it shapes you, too. There's a reciprocal relationship going on between you and the language always. You're trying to make language work in ways that will sharpen perception, sensitivity, and awareness. But, in trying to make it do that, it's molding you at the same time.

As words change the writer, the words may also change the reader. Again, to quote

Nora:

Words can make a difference in somebody's life...I talked before about discovering that I could get at what is inside of me—"a blooming, buzzing confusion" as Williams James would say—that I could get what's inside me onto the page where I could look at it and walk around it. But words are also the means by which I can get what is inside of me to inside of you? I can change you; I can change your world with words. I always think about...to me that is just so powerful.

In addition to “the words” having a direct effect, at least potentially, on the writer and the reader, some participants experienced language as having the power to affect the lives of third parties. This was most evident in the experience of Baroque 2, the physician, who equated language with communication. The pathologist elaborated on the dire consequences of using language carelessly or, at the least, imprecisely. In a discussion regarding the education of residents training to become physicians whereby the residents are required to write extensively, Baroque 2 revealed:

I think it's important to communicate exactly what you intend to communicate. It's important in the practice life of these residents to be able to do that because everything in pathology is written. We generate

reports. I can call up on this computer and show you some I generated today. On the basis of that report, doctors are going to do things to patients: take off a breast, withhold therapy, give therapy, do this, do that. And we know all day, every day, in hospitals and in medical clinics all over the country, mistakes get made because of poor communication.... Writing a paper is the *best* way to begin to make the residents understand that, by God, what they say is different from what someone reads. They do not have the opportunities on the written page that they have in one-to-one or one-to-a-group kinds of oral communication. All those lovely things that go on when you and I talk to one another, you don't have it when you read something that pops up on a computer screen.

Participant concern and care for accuracy were not limited to Baroque 2.

Bookworm, who has published more than forty textbooks related to literacy and who also writes fiction, pays close attention to the preciseness of her words regardless of the genre in which she is working. While discussing this topic Bookworm related:

I am exceedingly concerned with accuracy in my textbooks, but I am concerned with accuracy in the fiction, too. I want to research the period, I want to make sure that they don't use things that are anachronistic, and I want to be sure that the things that are going on in the world at that period of time mesh with what I'm writing.

Even some who write mainly poetry agreed on the importance of using precise and accurate language if successfully communicating. John said:

The quality and level of communication is directly dependent upon the language used in writing... We have to be very precise. We have an obligation and a duty to try to be both artful and technical so that you are choosing words and phrases accurately to fit what it is you are trying to communicate.

Connection

Central to the triadic configuration of the self who writes, the other who reads, and the words used in writing is connection. The act of connecting ties together all three points of focus (See Figure 2). Most of the participants in this study experienced writing

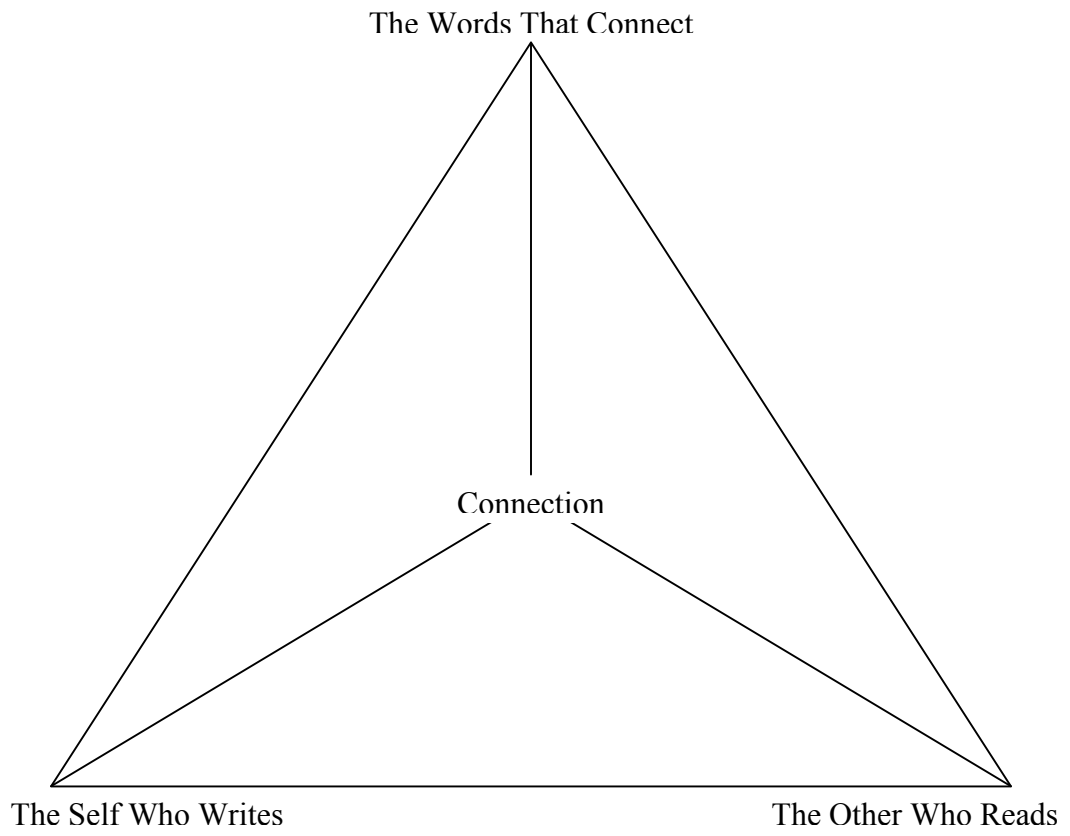


Figure 2: Connection

as a form of connection. In fact, connection is what fueled some individuals' compulsions to write, for others to read, as well as fascinations with language. Journeyman described how in his experience the connections made through writing benefit society: "A person enters into this lonely, private act, but it ultimately benefits others in that once the poem is written and published, it becomes an experience for others to enter." For some this unifying nature of writing is spiritual. In Grace's experience, writing allows her to connect with others on a more transcendent level. Said Grace;

I think writing is spiritual. I think when I have written something, even a column—and heaven knows I can be accused of cranking them out—but every single time I write a column, I have this sense of being in touch with something else, which is what spiritual is anyway. Whether you call it a cosmic consciousness or whatever you like to call it in your own dealings with spirituality, I have that sense of touching upon something "greater than."

Similarly, Fugitive talked about how the person who writes has no choice but to connect due to the collective consciousness. The participant asserted that there are times when connecting has less to do with the writer and more to do with the work itself. Fugitive's words were as follows:

Any work of art reveals not just the spirit of the person that composed it. Sometimes a work of art takes on a life of its own. The writer or painter are simply vehicles for some larger expression, some communal expression, that *needs* to be said or *needs* to be seen. It seems to me that art certainly anticipates, but it also taps what's already there but unspoken in the collective psyche.

Even when participants did not refer to the collective psyche, most still desired connection. John asserted, "I think anybody who writes has in mind that somebody, somewhere, someday will read this. You are trying to connect with whoever the reader is." Fugitive concurred that connection with others through language is fundamental to

his writing:

I think you must speak to “*other*.” I think you have to connect through the miracle of dialogue with other people for your work to be significant. Who wants to write solipsism? Who wants to write something that has no meaning for anybody but the writer locked in his or her own head? For me, it is connection...I see writing as an engagement, an engagement with “*other*.” So, I want my reader to be engaged. I’m not writing simply for myself.

Other participants spoke of the contentment they experienced when they knew they had connected with another person. Take for example the words of the following two participants:

Having those full days of working, going through ten revisions, loving doing the work, loving the work itself then letting someone else love it. I did a reading at a local university about a month ago for a poetry series. A couple of weeks later I get a call from some woman out in the country who was visiting her daughter and came to the reading. The woman was from a small, rural town—it hardly has a zip code. She wanted to know where she could get these two poems because they weren’t in the books that I was selling. Realizing that book was out of print, my knowing she had connected with the poems, knowing that I was going to copy those poems off for her and put those in the mail as soon as I could, and thinking about her being surprised that I would be willing to do that, I was thrilled. Making connections like that are major to me as being a writer...I don’t know, those things make me feel like a writer. (Will)

I just write about everyday life. But I think that’s why people enjoy my writing; they all understand it, and they identify with it. People are always coming up to me and trying to tell me their stories. They all say, “Your column reminded me of something that happened to me. Let me tell you about it.” People are always doing that to me, which I appreciate. They treat me like I’m their family friend even though they really don’t know me at all, you know (Bubbles)

The temporal descriptions of connection in the experiences of the participants were not limited to the present or future. Some participants explained how writing connects them to their past. One particular description was personal in nature.

Journeyman recounted how he loves to write with a fountain pen given to him by his mother who used the pen for years to correspond with family members:

The fountain pen is one of my most treasured objects, I think. It's as though when I hold that fountain pen, I'm in touch with my mother's life and with all the words that she wrote to friends, family back home, etc. So, I think the act of writing itself is, for me, a vital connecting act. Not just connecting ink to paper but connecting memories to language and connecting lives of the past to my present moment of writing. It's as though I bring back into the present moment all those memories, experiences, feelings, etc. that could be lost, that could be gone, that could be never passed on to another person or to the page.

Reading the writing of other writers connected some of the participants of this study to the past. To quote Journeyman again:

I think I came to a realization about how writing could link us over time, primarily through reading Chinese poetry...I was standing at one of those little revolving book racks in this drug store, and my teacher was paying for something at the checkout. I was looking at a collection of poems called "*The White Pony*" *Chinese Poetry* by Robert Payne. My teacher said that's a pretty good book. That book was the beginning for me of realizing *here* is a culture physically far removed; *here* is a time far removed from mine. But, I felt so connected to these poets who were writing hundreds of years ago, and I felt so connected to that spare but simple language. I thought, this is really wonderful; this connects with me in some way that I'm not sure I quite understand, but I sure feel it. That was such a [pause] significant moment for me and the moment has not stopped. That experience is still going on.

Nora described a similar phenomenon:

I read this thing by this man whose name is Samuel Ototi. This is the time connection really became the most clear to me. He's a Masai warrior and he wrote this book called *Masai*. [Nora describes Ototi's description of a puberty rites ceremony, which the researcher edited out for space.] I thought Ototi's description of the Masai ceremony was so marvelous. Through the power of language I can map that experience on to my experience. I am about as far from a Masai warrior as you can get. I'm kind of a middle age, middle class, WASP-type. Yet, I can understand what it is like through my own experience—even though it is not ritualized in our culture—I certainly know what it is to lift my chin and

expose my throat to a man, you know, just even in flirtatious conversation. Now, I didn't know that I knew until I read Ototi. Then, I realized, (voice lowers to a whisper) "Oh, I know that. I know that."

Finally, the ultimate power of connection some participants experienced in writing is what John called the "human distinctive": the notion of using language to communicate with another person—to connect with another individual—defines our humanity. John described his experience of language and connection:

It is the ultimate...it's the core of humanity. Without connection we aren't human. It is probably the thing that distinguishes us from all the rest of creation. We don't have identity without it...Without it, we don't exist; we're completely alone. I don't exist without you or somebody else.

Language and connection being a "human distinctive" also surfaced in Nora and Journeyman's interviews.

For most of us *hell* is the absence of the others, which is what makes shunning so effective as a form of punishment...For most people that's hell—to not exist with the others—and I'm real aware of words as the way we bridge this hell. (Nora)

One of the great values of humanity and one of the humane qualities of writing is how it connects, not separates...Writing gives us the ability to link human souls across time through language...through something as flimsy as a word on a little sheet of paper. (Journeyman)

Still, it was John who best summarized the connection of self, other, and language. In an exchange where I was exploring for more information by simply giving John's words back to him, he concluded:

John: No words, no communication.
 Researcher: No communication...?
 John: No connection.
 Researcher: No connection...?
 John: No humanity.

Within each of the general themes of “self,” “others,” and “the words,” a series of sub-themes emerged. The labels for these sub-themes are terms taken directly from participants’ interviews and are mostly metaphors. According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), “Metaphors compel attention because they occur in conversation when ordinary words fail to adequately express the intended meaning (p. 36).” Figure 3 diagrammatically represents the major themes and sub-themes. The reader should be aware that although the chart appears linear in nature, there is no definite order as to how participants experienced “self,” “others,” or “the words.” In other words, participants did not describe their experiences in terms of first being aware of “self,” second being aware of “the words,” and finally being aware of “others.” Nevertheless, it does appear that “the words” are at the center of the participants’ experiences. As previously stated, all three areas converge in a “connection,” which undergirds the three areas in Figure 3. It appears it is the “the words” that make “connection” possible.

Themes of Self

“Filling Up”

As participants discussed their experiences of writing, most talked about from where the content of their writing came. Fugitive described his experience of collecting ideas as letting “the well fill up.” Similarly, Will said, “I’m either reading or writing or sitting on the front porch talking to my cat or bird watching or working with my hands on something. All of those things lend themselves to ‘filling up’ the way Louise Glück said.”

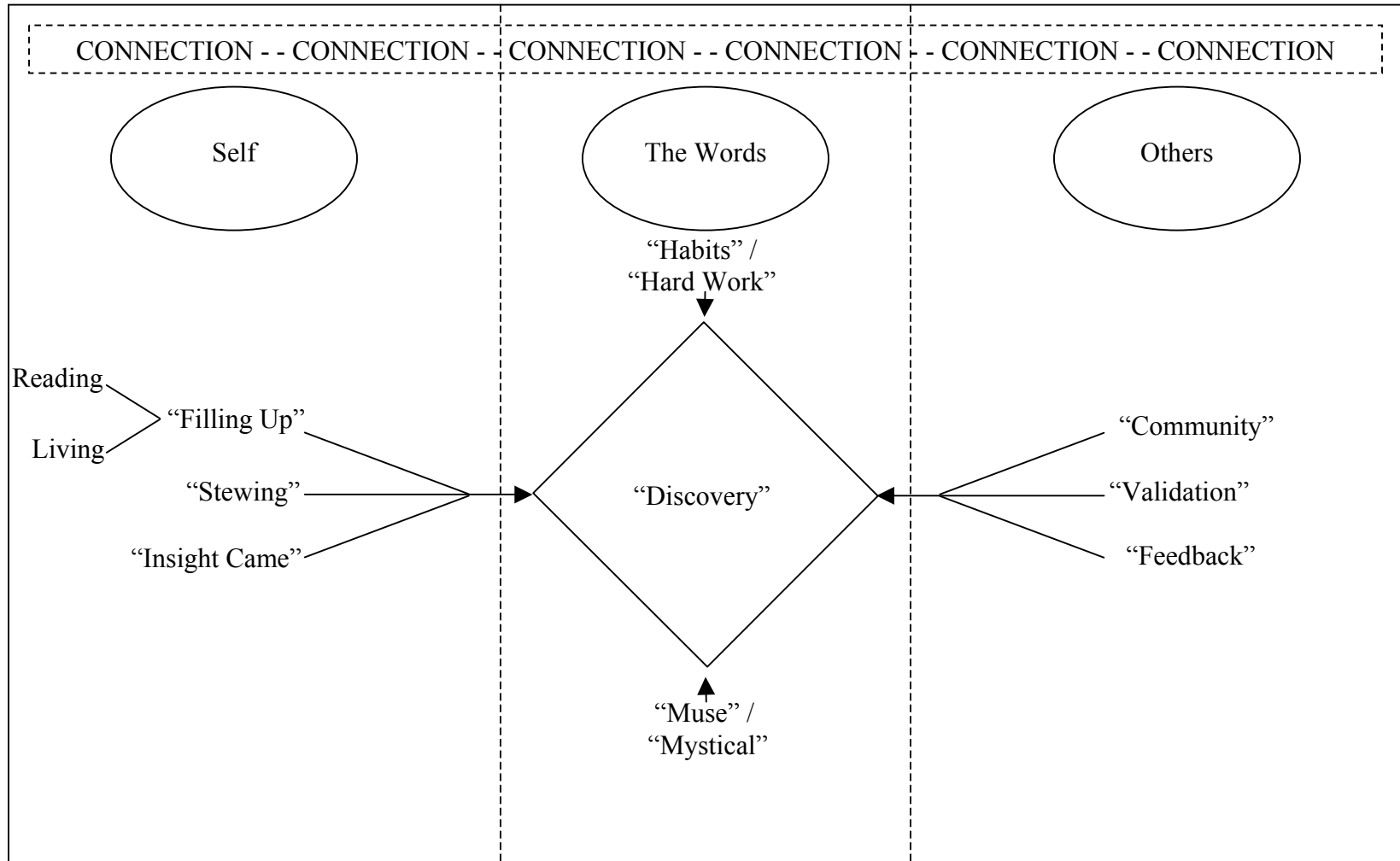


Figure 3: Sub-Themes in the Experience of Writing

The metaphor of “filling up” serves to demonstrate how participants, in the words of Murray (1968), “spend part of their time in a state of open susceptibility (p. 2).” For the participants in this study, “filling up” was achieved through their reading and going about their daily lives. Once “filled,” “the raw material will visit your dreams, it will visit your daydreams, it will visit everything you do...it just informs what you write about (Will).”

Reading. Frequently as participants discussed their experiences of writing they would quote other authors or reference writings of other writers. Fugitive remarked, “Your history as a writer is your history of what you’ve read...I keep quoting writers not because I’m dropping names, but because they mean so much to me.”

What participants write seems to depend on what they read. Grace believes her experience with reading as a little girl is connected to her writing for children:

When I was ten, eleven, twelve I read. We lived about a block from the public library, and I could read a stack of books every day or two...I think that’s the child that is always there when I am writing things for young people.

Roger described how his writing is influenced by writers he enjoys reading. In fact, he uses the works of these other writers as a benchmark of sorts for his own writing. Roger said:

One of my definitions of a writer is anyone who writes as well as I want to write. They are the people I enjoy reading most. For example, John Steinbeck wrote the way I would like to write; Calvin Trillin writes the way I would like to write; David Sedaris...; A. A. Milne...; Dr. Seuss... They don’t write like each other, but I hang on to what they’ve written. I read their stuff and I think, “Oh my god, this is good.”

Will reported reading as many as four or five books of poems a week and reading up to

twenty periodical journals of poetry on the weekends as he prepared to write his own poetry. He discussed how the voracious reading changed his writing: “Other writers placed me in parts of my own emotion that I wouldn’t have thought about writing from. Reading opened doors for me...” Interestingly, at the time of the interview Will was considering writing fiction. He discussed that the first thing he was going to do was get in the habit of reading more fiction. Will said, “I will read fiction that speaks to me before I find a way to dig into my own life or find my own characters or create or draw from my own experience.”

Another way participants used reading as a way to “fill up” was researching. Bookworm, whose primary genre is literacy textbooks, reported:

If I’m working on a reading book, I read *The Reading Teacher*, *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Reading Research Quarterly* and find related articles to the chapters I’m working on and make me a little bibliography.

Bubbles also described reading as a way of researching. Her research was more skill-directed than content-oriented as Bookworm described. Bubbles reported that she read a lot of writing magazines for anything that she could see was going to be helpful to her. “Subsequently,” said Bubbles, “I would take it and use it.”

Interestingly, it was the pathologist and medical researcher, Baroque 2, who described the aesthetic advantages of reading for purposes of “filling up.” Baroque 2 discussed how many physicians, in his experience, did not read much outside of science and, consequently, were typically not very good at expressing themselves in writing. Baroque 2, on the other hand, described as much research reading he had to do to stay apprised of the developments in his field, he read even more away from his work. He

said:

I read. I read. I read continuously; it is one of my major hobbies. Every night I go to bed to read. I have another whole office at home. You'll notice in this office that everything in here is medical. If you were to walk into my office at home, nothing is medical there. There are more books there than there are here—many more books by a factor of maybe ten. Some of them may be scientific philosophy but most of them are art history, literature, philosophy, theology, and things like that. I read a lot.

As turn-about is fair play, the poet Will acknowledged that he read poetry to self start; however, Will related that he also read a lot of science, nature, and biology stuff, which, in the words of Will, “just gets me down to the quick of things. The reading of science becomes a metaphor for a lot of different things.”

Living. In addition to reading, many participants described simply living among people and nature as way of “filling up.” According to John, “A writer can’t write in a vacuum... You can’t be a hermit; you have to be involved in the world.” In other words, as Will emphasized in his description of being present to life, “YOU HAVE TO BE OUT THERE TO HAVE ANY EXPERIENCE.”

According to several participants, “filling up” doesn’t occur simply by “showing up.” The person who writes must also be attentive to the life he or she is living or “live in a sense of wonder (Will).” If one pays attention, even the most mundane daily occurrences regain significance; however, this requires a type of “dual vision.” Fugitive explained “dual vision” as the “quality of deliberation that a writer takes to every experience, realizing that there are two experiences going on simultaneously: the one he is having and the one he may create from the one he’s having.” John described a similar experience: “I’m observing life around me, but I’m in the midst of it at the same time. It’s almost as if I’m recording things for future reference... I come at things on more than

one level: a level of involvement and a level of detachment almost at the same time.”

Journeyman also discussed simultaneously being in and out of the world. For him it was another one of the paradoxes, or complexities, of being a person who writes. He described his experience as follows: “Part of complexity is that there are opposing things that can exist simultaneously. For example, while you’re in the world, you’re also out of it. That’s how complicated the act of writing is for me.”

Participants discussed a variety of life situations in which they had the opportunity to “pay attention” and be “filled.” Bookworm discussed professional conferences as a place of endless opportunities to cultivate ideas for writing. Fugitive described how he would come across ideas he didn’t have when researching for another writing project. Roger often had similar experiences. He explained, “As a beat reporter, I would regularly come across things that I thought might make interesting topics for columns that wouldn’t necessarily fit into the news stories.” Other participants, such as Bubbles, “fill up” by listening to stories of others. For example, Bubbles said, “It’s usually a humorous story, an anecdote told by someone in my family or someone else. That triggers something in my mind and...I do a column from that.” Will regularly uses the events in the restaurants at which he takes lunch to “fill up.” He described, “I will go to a coffeehouse or a pub for lunch, places I like to eat and observe people. There I’ll watch, think, and write about the person at the next table who is having black bean soup.” Will also talked about how he can do the same type of observing from the front porch of his home or walking near his place of work:

Just sitting on the porch and listening to the night come in sometimes is a religious experience...I am also fortunate to work in a place where I am

three blocks from the state capital, two blocks from a world-class library, and have experiences where I run into ten men in the winter asleep on the grate over here by the convention center trying to keep from freezing to death, whose pants are stained with urine.

Some of the participants' experiences were extreme, to say the least. Bubbles described a time she had emergency gallbladder surgery and was aware that she would write about the experience:

It's like my gallbladder surgery...I didn't like having my gallbladder out, but I knew right away that a column could come out of it. That's all I was thinking in the hospital. Nobody will have a perspective from this side...As soon as I was coherent enough after the surgery, I had my little paper and pencil and started jotting down how they kept flipping the lights off and on and asking if I was awake?

“Stewing”

Another sub-theme that emerged from participant transcripts was the ability to “balance between the intuitive and the deliberate (Fugitive).” Most of the participants used the metaphor of “stewing,” although some referred to the same process as “simmering” (Bookworm), “gestating” (Fugitive), “brewing” (Journeyman), or “daydreaming” (John and Bubbles). According to participants' descriptions of this phenomenon, “stewing” occurs once the writer has been “filled up” with ideas, whether from reading or living or both, and before writing occurs. Nora described the experience as “All of this stuff is in there like this big stew...I hold all of that until it comes out of me when it comes out of the pen.”

Grace described “stewing,” which she said was important to her writing process, as a “real laid back sort of nonchalant sort of thing.” On the other hand, “stewing” seems to be when a lot of thinking occurs—it's just that the participants reported not being aware of their thinking. Roger discussed this phenomenon as “the experience of the

writing was actually fairly easy because the ideas had been bouncing around in my brain for a while.” According to Fugitive, allowing the mind to think on its own requires the writer to do nothing: “You can’t have an outcome at all. You can’t predict where it’s going to go, where the mind, the unreflected mind will take you, at what point it meets the reflected mind.” On the other hand, Fugitive joked that the casual observer may mistake a writer’s stewing process for the writer being a “good-for-nothing” for “one of the criteria for being a writer is having some leisure” to allow for “stewing” to occur.

Participants reported “stewing” at all different times of the day and in many different circumstances. For some, sleeping was the time in which “stewing” occurred.

This was especially true for Roger:

Time to stew is very important to me in the writing process: the time in between when I have the material and when I sit down to write. When I was writing for a local newspaper especially, I would often review my notes, my research last thing before I went home at night. I would begin writing early the following morning after I had a chance to sleep on it. I write better when I have a chance to sleep on the material.

Bubbles agreed that sleeping provided “stew” time. She said, “I just think about it before I go to bed at night. I give it a chance and it will solve itself. Something will pop out—a quote or something will pop out in the morning.”

According to participants, driving was another popular time to “stew.”

Bookworm said, “I take all the information and just think about it. I drive forty-five miles to work. Driving time is good simmer time.” Will reported that he keeps a pad and pencil inside of his truck because so many ideas come to him while driving: “My wife gave me something to stick on the dashboard so I wouldn’t run off the road—something will occur to me, and one image will lead to another, will lead to another, and will lead to

another.” Will also said, “If I didn’t have that forty-five minute drive through the country to come to the middle of the city every morning, a lot of poems wouldn’t get written because they are formed there. I keep the radio off, and, uh, I think and things build.” John described his experience of stewing as daydreaming while driving. He said, “I may be actively engaged in something else like driving my car. I’m concentrating on staying alive and driving defensively, but I’m daydreaming about this other thing or this other event or this conversation that I had whatever it is.”

Participants reported a variety of opportunities in which to “stew.” Grace discussed washing dishes or vacuuming or doing “anything that didn’t require much mental capacity.” Will mentioned gardening, cooking, or any activity that required him to work with his hands. Fugitive said that doing anything unrelated to writing would usually serve the purpose for “stewing.” Taking a shower and walking were two activities he mentioned. For Bubbles, “stewing” occurs when she experiences being confined. For example, she described a typical situation while at church:

Every Sunday, I do the same thing. The sermon begins, I listen for about five minutes, and then, click, click, click, click. (Bubbles taps her finger against her temple to indicate thinking is occurring.) I get the bulletin, turn it over, get my pencil, and start jotting ideas of things that have come to mind. I’m sitting there, trapped, and I just can’t quit thinking.

Interestingly, two participants described the actual act of writing as being a “stewing” time. Journeyman, the poet, described his experience of writing his poetry by hand rather than using a word processor because “writing it out with a fountain pen...makes me meditate. It’s slow; it’s not fast. Poetry for me is never fast writing... Writing by hand is about the right pace for thinking.” John, who is also primarily a poet, said, “I can be trying to casually write down something, almost like I’m practicing

writing, and be hit with an emotion I wasn't expecting.

"Insight Came"

Closely related to "stewing"—and often as a result of having time to think about the writing without directly thinking about writing—several participants described a common phenomenon of "insights coming." This experience occurs before writing takes place and is closely related to "discovery" that occurs during the writing process.

Nevertheless, the metaphor for this sub-theme comes from Fugitive's interview as he talked about working through a stall in his writing. He said:

I just came up against a wall...I just did not know where these two characters were going to go with this conversation. I fretted and fumed and tried to wrench words out of these characters, and I realized that the writing wasn't any good. So, I left it, and I went out walking; I was playing with a stick and walking. Suddenly the two insights I needed *came* to me. They *came* to me; I didn't go after them.

Roger described "insights coming" as his brain making connections that he might not otherwise make. Will's had similar experiences with his writing poetry. Will said

Einstein said you can work on something for months and while reclining on the couch eating an apple the solution presents itself—quite often that's what poems do for me...I find out that I knew something I didn't know I knew.

Themes of Other

Writing necessitates that the person doing the writing spend large chunks of time being alone. Conventional wisdom would suggest, then, that a large part of a writer's experience would be isolation. Will suggested that simply because writing requires being alone, it is not necessarily isolating. He said in his interview:

I know a lot about other past writers, and they always had readers and they always had people that they read. They always had people they

corresponded with, and some of those correspondences are the most wonderful letters that we have in all of our literature today. Take for instance Fitzgerald and Wolfe. I think that others have always been there.

In the same way, all the participants in this research project mentioned other people as they described their experiences of writing. The sub-themes that emerged within this were “community,” “validation,” and “feedback.”

“Community”

Nearly all the writers discussed the importance of others in the context of a writing community. A general type of community takes the form of a writing group. Grace described her experience of a writing community as writing group as follows:

I was just really fortunate to have a good writing group. They are constructive people and people who wanted each other to succeed, which I find is true of ninety-nine percent of writers. I find that writers sincerely want other writers to succeed. There’s not this sense that “If you win, I lose.”...I think that’s almost universal among writers, at least the writers that I’ve ever known. They are extraordinarily generous people.

Journeyman’s description of community was similar to Grace’s: “Community, at its best, is when people recognize the value of something and they band together to encourage it and support it.” In Roger’s words, “The goal of the group is really explicitly to help each writer accomplish what he or she has set out to do.”

The writing group seems to be especially important to the beginning writer. Will said, “If you don’t have that expectation out there to share your writing to someone that matters to you, chances are you won’t do it. Quite often as a beginning writer you’ll find other ways not to do it.” In fact, were it not for a writing community, Roger, the journalist turned short story writer, did not think that he would be as productive in his writing. He said:

I personally find that a community of writers is absolutely necessary to me as a writer. I'm motivated to write, but I'm not motivated enough. I wouldn't produce as much as I would like to produce without a community of people. For me the community keeps my love of writing at the forefront of my mind. It reminds me that writing is something that I want to be doing because writing is not something that I have to be doing, especially creative writing.

Writing communities were not always made up of other writers. Bookworm, Journeyman, and Fugitive, described how their spouses often serve as early readers of their work and encouraged them in their writing. (Spouses also provided “feedback,” which is another sub-theme presented below.) Baroque 2 reported that he found community in colleagues who did the kind of medical research writing he did. Nora, explained how she found community in a group of anonymous editors that helped her publish one of her first academic articles. Nora said:

I'm real grateful to them. The editors were extraordinarily gracious, and they gave me a gift. They essentially said, “We want you to join us, and we'll put out a hand to do everything we can to help you join us in this writing community. But you will have to change.” ... They *were* saying that I would have to change, but they were willing to help me and show me where the changes were that I needed to make. The subtext of that was, “We think you can do it.”

Community was not only a place where some participants found encouragement; it was also a place where they found ideas. Will, who taught writing to high school students as well as writing extensively for publication as a poet, was privy to seeing writing communities form in his classroom. Will described how the communities developed the writers:

When you have students sharing their work, a lot of times it's something that a fellow student shared that is the occasion for someone else starting a piece, not the assignment you gave. That's why the community is so important—things happen. They start things...if they see another student

that's an author, and they admire that quality in that person, then they want to see themselves as an author...If you got that going on in your classroom, then, man, when they start swapping papers and saying, "See what you think of this" or "What should I do with this," you see the glow like no other type of learning.

Bookworm discussed how attending conferences and establishing relationships with writers she respected prompted her to new ideas. Said Bookworm:

When I admire somebody's writing, I like to meet him or her. When I go to conferences, I tend to seek out sessions by people whose writing I respect. After I hear them speak, I usually go up and talk to them. I've developed a number of friendships and close relationships that way. It's a very good way to infuse new ideas. I find conferences very motivating and invigorating for my writing.

Belonging to a community, though, requires reciprocity of responsibility. As Bookworm attended conferences and became "infused with new ideas," she also discussed the importance of attribution: "The important thing, of course, is always giving credit...That's an important thing for me; if you use somebody else's ideas, you always give them credit. I keep my friends that way." Journeyman contributed not only to his writing community but also to his local community by founding a literary magazine. Journeyman said, "I wanted to know what other writers were doing. That's partly why I decided in 1973 or '74 to start a magazine. I founded a literary magazine. I wanted it to be a community of like minded writers." Nora contributes to her community by assuming the responsibilities of helper/encourager that once welcomed her into her writing community. She talked about her role as a mentor to university students entering the field of counseling psychology:

I really want them to become part of this community, but it's up to me to uphold the standards of this community. I can't just blithely say, "Oh, you're wonderful." No. They are going to have to improve some things,

change some things, and learn how to do some things differently in order to be part of this community because this community has important work. This writing community may be able to help a child in a particular way...I have to uphold the standards although I'm thrilled to pass them into the community.

Similarly, Baroque 2 works side-by-side with his medical residents in order to help them enter their writing field more easily. He said:

In this residency program, I work with residents and many times they will publish small review articles or small case studies. It's their first time out of the gate, and I work with them to give them the experience of learning—of going through that process of sitting down, thinking it out, writing it, going through the twelve, thirteen, fourteen drafts that I keep handing back with red ink all over them and then sending it in, getting it back from the editor: "I want this then that and other." Just to go through that you've got to get through that the first time to understand that critique is not personal; this is the way it is. The reason we do this is that we want their writing to be clear and unequivocal and instructive. There's enough crap in the literature out there right now. Even with all of that (the entire review process) there's still a lot of crap out there that never should have been published in the first place...I'm helping young physicians learn how to do this—learn how to go through this writing process.

"Validation"

"Others" were often described as the source of validation that participants experienced. John described validation as a type of affirmation achieved when he accomplished his main objective in writing: to successfully connect with another person:

There's affirmation if you're trying to hit at a certain point, and people like it and get the point you were trying to make. That means your communication is accurate. You are connecting; your language is doing what you wanted it to do. You're achieving your purpose through language.

Bubbles agreed that others are necessary to fully know if her writing is succeeding in accomplishing what she intends. If her writing connects with someone else, then she can

be more confident that she is writing well. She said, “If I hear other people say the writing worked, that validates the writing...If someone doesn’t validate it, I don’t always know if it worked or not.” For Roger, one experience of validation came when a friend simply told him how much she and her husband enjoyed one of his stories. He described the experience as follows:

A friend of mine and her husband were driving to North Carolina that weekend, and she told me that they laughed all the way to North Carolina reading my column. That’s about one of the best compliments I’ve ever gotten.

For Baroque 2, validation comes with recognition from his colleagues:

The best kind of validation, of course, you could possibly get from something you published is somebody references it. You pretty well know that you’ve been understood, then, if they reference it and reference it appropriately. That’s the best kind of flattery and the best kind of validation.

In the following passage, Fugitive described at length an experience of validation regarding a passage in his latest novel about a patient in a mental hospital:

I couldn’t have had a better moment than one I had at a local book store back in the fall when a friend who is also a clinical psychologist, who had formerly been head of the clinical department at the local university, got up and said to me, “You got it! How did you get this so carefully?” He said, “I was in state mental hospitals at this time, and I want you to know that you have everything—there’s not a detail out of place here.” Well, I couldn’t have received a better compliment than having someone who had worked in those facilities at that time tell me that. I felt like I did my homework well. If a clinical psychologist can say, “You got it,” then I must have had it; he confirmed that.

Participants reported that publishing per se served as a type of validation. Roger said, “When the editors told me they accepted my story, I experienced a sort of validation. I wrote something that somebody I don’t even know thought was good. That

was validating.” For Grace, it was publishing a novel that provided her with validation. In her words, “Validation, for me, came when I got my first book published...I felt better about myself as a writer than I ever had even though I had published short stories and poems and the weekly newspaper column.” And the more some participants published, the more validation they experienced. Said Bubbles, “Each year I’m having more fun because each year I’m having a little more success with getting my work published. I feel more validated.”

Other writers experienced validation when they helped, touched, or inspired another person with their writing. Will experienced validation when his readers experienced new depths in their lives. Journeyman’s experience of validation was tied to energizing others to write. Similarly, Bookworm associated validation with her textbooks being considered helpful. These participants own descriptions are as follows:

My goal is to write pieces with a beginning, a middle, and an end, with language and music and imagery that’s bigger and more important than the sum of its parts. Writings that contain the emotion, the story or the occasion, in the narrative power and structure that can evoke in someone else a similar experience or meaning that I had as the writer. In one way or another, hopefully, I enrich the readers lives emotionally or intellectually. (Will)

It is validating to have people come up to you and say I read your poem such and such, and that really struck a note with me and I realized some things about it. And then the ultimate compliment is “You’re writing makes me want to write.” Then you know you have energized somebody to go on their own journey to discover, and hell, that’s, that’s the key to teaching. (Journeyman)

My books are used all over the country and some foreign countries. People recognize my name when I go places. I consider that success--to have a reader and for someone to say that what I wrote was helpful or valuable. (Bookworm)

“Feedback”

The most prevalent sub-theme in participants’ experiences of others was as a source of “feedback.” As participants finish pieces of writing, they enlist the help of a first-reader or readers depending upon the individual. Feedback, as participants described their experiences of feedback, is neither necessarily a negative nor a positive response from a first reader. Feedback simply seeks responses that allow writers to see the strengths and weaknesses of their work. Take, for example, the following quotes:

What you want to do immediately, though, is to get that into the literature so that other people who look at the same thing at which you look—your other colleagues—can have a look at it and either agree with you or, what is much more likely, disagree with you. (Baroque 2)

Feedback is essential because you’re blinded to your own faults...you can’t be objective. (Bubbles)

Feedback is very important...It tells you where something is confusing...I don’t think that anything I write is infallible...The people who like the writing just say it’s good. People who don’t like it pick it apart and you often can get more information from them than you can from these other people. (Bookworm)

The reviewers thought that there were problems with my article that I hadn’t even seen. They knew how to look for problems that weren’t causing any problems in my rhythm section. They were more concerned with that than the places where I thought there were problems...I’m real grateful to them. (Nora)

Even if the feedback received was gratuitously negative, some participants still experienced that as being better than not receiving any feedback at all. Take, for instance, descriptions supplied by Baroque 2 and John:

I hate getting negative responses. I still have trouble taking it. I wrote it; that’s a piece of me on that paper. I never get away from that. Now, it’s much less so than when I was thirty-five years old, still that writing is a part of me...On the other hand, the worst thing would be—no question about it—the worst response would be apathy. That would be terrible. I

would rather have somebody say, “This is shit!” then to say nothing, not even comment about it. (Baroque 2)

Even when I get a negative comment back, I feel like something has been accomplished and communication has taken place and we have connected. I now know my technical approach, or as a technician, I missed the mark on that particular thing... There’s nothing wrong or bad at all about that, but it demonstrates—and this is the fascinating thing about it—it demonstrates how hard it is to connect with another person. (John)

Some participants discussed the necessity of feedback to be specific in nature.

Bookworm talked about the effects of receiving specific feedback for a fictional story she wrote:

I sit down, and the critiquer has written all kinds of stuff in the margins with tight little writing all over it... He sits down and goes over each one of his comments with me. He doesn’t smile the whole time. I’m thinking he hates it, he hates it... I showed no reaction, but I went back and went over his comments and made all the revisions he suggested because they were *wonderful*... When I met with him the next time, he still didn’t smile, but he looked at me and said, “You really took my suggestions seriously, didn’t you?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “You made all the changes that I suggested.” “Yes, sir.” He said, “You got a really good start here for a novel. I think that I will see you published some day.” ... He made me feel like I was floating ... I mean he gave me very specific feedback.

When the feedback isn’t specific, Bubbles said it’s not helpful: “Some people write personal comments that have nothing to do with the writing like ‘This is boring and it stinks.’ Those I don’t pay attention to... That’s not helpful to me.” Grace, on the other hand, talked about receiving feedback that was so specific it consumed several typed pages.

After I had written this book for seven years or eight years or whatever, and my editor says, “We need to revise.” She sent me a letter in which she told me all the areas that needed to be revised. That letter was six pages long, single spaced! Now, this was a book she liked—she liked it enough to buy it. Yet, she as a reader could see all these things that still didn’t work... She was absolutely right, of course.

Grace pointed out that the result of the meticulous feedback was a published book.

Other participants described the importance of honesty in the feedback they receive. John talked about honesty being at the center of feedback that made a difference in writers' writing. He said:

I would say there has to be honesty...Over time you get the sense of whether the feedback is consistent. In my particular experience of my writing group I'm talking about, honesty has come fairly quickly. I think that it's an amazing happenstance to me that I don't see any mincing of words, and yet everybody is supportive at the same time. They have the ability to say what they think and yet be supportive at the same time. It's, it's an uncanny thing. You don't find it in everybody. I'm kind of happily surprised and delighted that we've pulled together this little group, almost every one of which is able to do that. That's wonderful.

Will discussed a similar experience with honest feedback in a writing group:

I was able to take my writing and get honest feedback. Not just a friend reading it and saying, "Oh, that's really nice" or something like that, which you would like to hear but doesn't really get you anyplace. These were people who would read it and say, "Well, it's nice BUT...you know, it doesn't work here and this character isn't believable and nobody would do this" and so on. We were always just extremely honest with one another...Not destructive but honest with one another. We would never let one of us send out something that was less than what it could be. We kept each other going, and everybody in that group ended up being published multiple times.

Honesty is a proviso for trust. According to Grace,

When you trust the other reader and the reader tells you what works and doesn't work, and you work on that and get it to the point that it satisfies that other reader, then it gives you a great deal of confidence... to send that manuscript off someplace.

According to participants, the quickest way to erode trust is to receive cheery platitudes in the place of feedback. Roger talked about one fear that he had when he joined his current writing group is that the members would be so focused on being

supportive that they wouldn't be willing to say, "Hey, you know what? That was a swing and a miss." Bubbles insisted, "Good feedback...that's what I'm looking for. I don't want them to please me and tell me how pretty my writing is; just tell me how it can be improved." Will was more forthright. "I don't need praise," he said. He continued by discussing his experience of receiving praise when he needed feedback:

I don't need someone who needs my approval critiquing my work. I'm afraid, whether they mean to or not, it's liable not to be exactly honest...I don't trust it. Richard Hugo said, "Don't trust anyone who really praises your work." He said, "Keep your crap detector on."

Journeyman also mentioned the "crap detector" when receiving feedback:

I started off writing by first seeking approval and then realizing it doesn't have anything to do with approval. It has more to do with *you* adopting some standards and then shaping your life and your writing life to achieve those standards. It has a little to do with a comment that Hemmingway once said and that is that every writer better have a good built-in shit detector.

Themes of The Words

At the center of participants' experiences of self and other are their experiences of "the words." As discussed earlier, "the words" serve as a general metaphor for the phrases, sentences, paragraphs, stanzas and such that participants write. Language allows the writer to communicate with a reader. Once the writer has communicated, a connection is established. As John said, connection through communication is what makes us human. Said otherwise, "the words" are at the center of humanity.

"Hard Work"

Participants often discussed how difficult they experienced writing to be. "Writing is hard work," said Roger. He continued, "I don't especially enjoy writing...the

process is kind of like the process of having a baby.” Although Fugitive ultimately experienced writing as a “joyful activity,” he simultaneously experienced writing as difficult: “You just work very hard...I can’t think of anything harder than writing and more potentially disappointing than writing.” Fugitive went on to explain that he experienced writing as difficult because it was such an enormous activity of engagement. He said, “You have to keep so many things in mind simultaneously—things that are often contradictory...and that takes a mind that is alert and active and aware...” Journeyman suggested that the difficulty of writing prohibited many from becoming writers, at least “powerful writers.” In his words, “Writing that is most powerful is probably going to be done by few because many people, I think, don’t want to pay the price, make the sacrifices, spend the time cultivating their abilities, and learning the craft.”

On the other hand, Journeyman discussed that given a level of dedication and discipline he believed it was possible for anyone to write. Similarly, other participants talked about the disciplined required for their writing. For example:

I’m very disciplined. I don’t write only when the mood suits me... (Bubbles)

I’ve never been on a vacation when I didn’t write. (Fugitive)

Several hours each day I would go out there and work. (Grace)

I cannot make writing appear. It does not spring full blown from my head. A journal article isn’t going spring full blown. What I can do is put pen to page and get started. (Nora)

It’s tough to sit down for minute after minute or hour after hour...My mind wants to take me in other directions. My mind wants me to get up and go to the bathroom. It wants me to get up and go get another cup of coffee. It wants me to go read one more magazine. It takes discipline not to do those things. (Roger)

“Mystical”

Interestingly, as much as participants discussed writing in the context of it being hard work, requiring discipline and stringent habits, they also described writing as a mystical act as if they had little to do with the works they created. Some attributed their writing to a muse (Fugitive) while others talked of writing gods (Nora). Will said, “Writing is all a mystery...that’s why it is always so exciting when you actually accomplish it to a high degree where you have actually shaped a bit of experience.” Grace used similar words to describe her experience of writing: “Writing begins to sound sort of mystical when you think about it.”

The mystical experience seemed to be rooted in some of the participants’ description of not being present when they were actually writing. For example, John described the following experience as “typical” when he writes:

Writing lets me get outside myself; I can actually escape. I find that sensation frequently when I’m writing. I will get through with writing something and suddenly come back to myself. I almost think, “Where have I been.” I mean, I really leave myself. It’s almost like what I imagine somebody describing as an out of body experience.

Grace described having similar experiences of going somewhere else when she writes. She said, “When I’m writing something, I just sort of get lost in that world... Writing puts you in a place that you aren’t ordinarily when you are doing routine things.”

As mystical as is the “writing going” somewhere, is the experience of “words coming” as described by participants. Journeyman insisted that a “poem could not be willed into existence.” Instead, he said, “It has to come to you on somewhat of its own terms.” Nora talked about the phenomenon of words appearing. She said, “Personal writing remains a kind of writing where the words just appear for me. I don’t often even

know what I'm going to come up with; I just start writing." Words also appear for Nora when she writing diagnostic reports of clients: "This is another instance where the words kind of appear." Bubbles discussed how she writes her columns: "When an idea hits me and I start writing, I realize I've got the flow...The column comes easily—the words will come easily." Finally, Fugitive described how he experiences "words coming" when he can place himself in a consistent and quiet location. He said, "My preferred writing location is a place where I can center myself and let the words come to me instead of trying to wrench them out of the air."

"Discovery"

Whether through "hard work" or by virtue of a "muse," all participants extensively experienced the act of writing. Several reported that through their writing they were able to "discover" something they didn't know they knew. Will described his experience of discovery using the words of another poet, Robert Frost: "The initial delight of writing a poem is finding out I knew something I didn't know I knew." In fact, one of Journeyman's reported reasons for writing was "discovering." He said, "Writing is a journey. It isn't a journey in which you go in knowing the destination. You go in to find out!" Similarly, Fugitive said, "I've noticed that a lot of my writing is solving problems." Nora described an experience of "discovery" as a young writer:

Words were really powerful in getting my internal whatever out onto the page where I could see it. I think words do a good job of taking things that are amorphous and unshaped and giving shape to them...But I think they are most important...with "I" communicating with "me." I ended up knowing something from getting it out onto the page and taking it back in.

Discovery of this type can be exciting. Baroque 2 provided an example from his own writing experience:

One of the most joyous times in my life is at the completion of a project when I have a little piece of information, and I really can honestly say nobody else in the whole world knows this yet except me. That's a great high.

Discovery isn't only for the writer; discovery is also for the person who reads the words of the writer. Fugitive described how he as a reader of other writers experiences discovery in the same way those writers probably do when they wrote their stories: "You as a reader still have a sense of discovery when you read Eudora Welty's stories as if you and the writer are discovering the same thing at the same time." Journeyman described his experience of his reader making discoveries as a type of "gift." Said Journeyman:

Discovery is ultimately the gift that you offer. It's a gift to you in the first place. That doesn't mean that it's easy or that you don't have to work to create the poem. I've found that the gift is often [chuckling] very hard work. But, because it is a gift to you, then I think your obligation is to give it back. You don't hoard it; you don't keep it; but, you keep it in circulation.

Grace also reported that it was her experience that a completed piece of writing and the discovery it provided eventually belonged to others: "After it's published, the writing and what you discovered doesn't belong to you anymore because you have gone through the growth process, the learning, or whatever you want to call it."

Chapter Five

Reflection of Results

*Writing has to be learned in school very much the same way
that it is practiced out of school.*

-James Moffett, writing teacher and researcher

Overview

The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of practicing writers using phenomenological interviews and hermeneutical analysis. Ultimately, I am interested in determining if the writing experiences of these particular participants in any way correspond with what K-12 students experience as they write or are taught writing.

I excluded the writing experiences of K-12 students in this research because in order to study the experience of writing, I had to be certain that each participant frequently experienced sustained writing. Thus, all participants who volunteered for this research met certain publishing criteria. (The specific publishing criteria are discussed in the introduction as well as the methods chapter.) Generally speaking, outside of a publishing history, determining whether or not students regularly engage in the practice of writing would have been difficult to establish.

It is also well documented that the type of writing instruction taking place in today's schools is similar to how it was taught as many as fifty years ago. In those days, priority was given to usage; students only wrote in genres/on topics assigned to them by their teachers, who would be the only reader of the paper but who were autonomous in their authority of deciding the quality, rather the grade, of the paper (Murray, 1968). Little, if anything, had changed twenty years later. Hipple (1989) writes, "Tradition

carries the day. Unquestioned, it repeats itself like some schoolhouse kudzu, strangling the efforts of those teachers creative enough to want to do something different (p. 19).” Arthur Applebee (2000), director of the National Research Center on English Language Achievement, explains that current practices of teaching writing, especially in the younger grades, focus mostly on penmanship.

A review of the literature regarding composition research indicated that there were no studies concerning the phenomenological experience of writing. Exploring the phenomenological experience of writers allows for a deeper understanding of the process of writing. It is my hope that this study will support and extend findings of the various research studies reported in Chapter Two. The more we understand writing and how it is experienced by those who engage in it, the better our chances become to improve the teaching of writing or, at the least, ask better research questions about it.

In the following chapter I will reflect upon and discuss various results of the thematic analysis of the interviews conducted for this research project. I will not, necessarily, reflect upon each sub-theme. Based on this reflection of results, I will offer my recommendations for ways in which teachers of writing may facilitate their students to achieving similar experiences to those who regularly and consistently engage in writing. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by offering new questions for future research projects.

*Reflection of Results**Connection*

As indicated in the title of this dissertation, the gestalt of the participants' experiences of writing is that they are compelled to connect with others through their writing. The relation of "self" (the one who is compelled to write) to "others" (those for whom the writing is done) using the vehicle of "words" can be visually represented as a triangle. This triangular structure is similar to what Charles S. Peirce, founder of the modern discipline of semiotics (the science which deals with signs and the use of them by creatures) referred to as triadic behavior (Houser & Kloesel, 1992). Percy (1983) describes triadic behavior as man's discovery of the sign, which includes symbols, art, spoken language, written language, and so on.

The importance of triadic behavior is that it is purely social. Again, according to Percy (1983), people are not like other items in our world—cats, dogs, and apples. These objects have only environments. Similarly, we (humans) have environments made up of elements that significantly affect us such as the sun or a hungry lion, but we have something much more than cats, dogs, and apples. We humans have a world. According to Percy (1983), to have a world "all perceived objects and actions and qualities are named (p. 99)." Our unique property is that we are co-namers, co-discoverers, co-sustainers of our world. Without each other, we have no world. Triadic behavior is socially constructed as people make connections with each other for the purpose of making meaning. Without triadic behavior, without us (people) interacting with each other, without us constructing meaning, we are no more than ants responding to the dyadic signals of the environment: we either react or ignore.

As discussed, the participant known as John believed that connection is what defines our humanity. Similarly, Journeyman said that “one of the humane qualities of writing is how it connects.” Citing a counter example of connection, Nora described how the absence of connection not only diminishes the world to simply an environment, it changes the world altogether to become an undesirable place. Nora says, “For most people that’s hell—to not exist with the others—and I’m real aware of words as the way we bridge this hell.”

The Self

The sub-themes that emerged within the larger theme of “the self” were “filling up,” “stewing,” and “insight came”; behind the participants’ descriptions of their experience of writing, however, was an urge compelling them to write in the first place. Although I don’t think the topic of “being compelled to write” or “the urge to write” surfaced enough throughout all the interviews to be considered a theme, I do think that it is worthy of reflection.

Some participants described writing as an activity that they “have to do” rather than something they “want to do.” As discussed in the previous chapter, they often described their need to write as a “compulsion” or as an “obsession.” Fugitive framed his experience of being compelled to write as having a “monkey on his back.” He explains, “There are these reoccurring themes in my work. It’s not that I set out to make them recur. It’s that they won’t let me go.” Two participants who are primarily poets, Will and Journeyman, both used the word “haunting” to describe that which compels them to write. Will described that much of his writing “starts with a haunting...sometime it’s an image haunting. Sometimes it is an emotion. Sometimes it’s something else: a

statement, a story, or something someone said.” For Journeyman, the haunting acts as an anodyne siren call tantalizing him into a journey of exploration. In Journeyman’s own words, “It’s haunting, and I’ve got to pursue it...It might be one word, one image that’s starts me off on a poem. It can be a memory or a color. It can even be a smell.”

The compulsion, urge, haunting, or monkey-on-my-back phenomenon that participants describe incidentally can also be viewed as purpose. Because participants have a purpose to write, they write. Prior to this study, I thought of writing with a purpose or purposeful writing to mean that the writer had a specific, pre-planned, fully thought out, idea or message to express. I believed purpose to mean that the writers knew most everything about their eventual product; however, according to the experiences described by the participants of this research, purpose may be nothing more than a nudge to write: a reoccurring theme, feelings or emotions, an image, a word, a phrase—anything that could lead to an essay, a thank-you note, a letter, a poem, or any other genre of writing.

For most of the participants, their interest in writing began when they were young. Four of the participants were eight-years old or younger when they became interested in writing. Another four were attracted by age sixteen, leaving two who reported their onset of interest occurring at age twenty-one. For Grace, writing was a form of play as she and friends convened to produce dramas: “I had several girl friends who liked to write plays, and we would all get together and write these crazy little plays.” Grace also acknowledges that writing, though it seemed like play, also served as a vehicle for “growing through certain things at that stage.”

Another topic worth reflecting on within the theme of “the self” is the manner in

which several of the writers described they “filled up” before they wrote: they read. Within the transcripts of the ten interviews conducted in this study, the word “read” was mentioned more than five hundred times. Judging from how often participants talked about reading, they read as Gary Paulsen urges his young readers: “[To] read like a wolf eats.”

Reading not only provided participants with enjoyment and their own writing ideas; the books, poems, essays, research articles, textbooks become models for their own writing. Arana (2003) introduces her collection of essays by writers about their craft by writing:

If you strive to become a real writer, an original, you need to be told clearly: There is no magic formula...But if readers carry away one lesson from this book it should be that writers learn their craft, above all, from the work of other writers. From reading. They learn it from immersing themselves in books. (xiv-xv)

As participants discussed their experiences of writing, they often mentioned books related to their genre. For example, Bubbles, who was a humorist, talked about the writings of Dave Barry and Erma Bombeck. Baroque 2, a medical researcher, had shelves filled with medical journals and medical textbooks. John, a poet, referenced several poets such as Louise Glück, Seamus Haney, and Mary Oliver to name a few. Roger, who is a journalist as well as a short-story writer, discussed creative non-fiction writers such as Truman Capote, Hunter Thompson, Terry Southern, and Tom Wolfe.

A majority of the participants discussed the importance of letting ideas or information “stew” before they committed to putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. According to participant descriptions, “stewing” occurs once the writer has been “filled up” with ideas, whether from reading or living or both, and before writing occurs; it is the

process by which the “subconscious” assumes the writing process and makes connections otherwise inaccessible to the writer. Although half of the participants used the metaphor of “stewing” some referred to the same process as “simmering” (Bookworm), “gestating” (Fugitive), “brewing” (Journeyman), or “daydreaming” (John and Bubbles). By whatever name they called it, all terms referred to the mind working out the writing while they were otherwise engaged in a cognitively light activity such as walking, driving, gardening, cleaning, and so on.

When writers “stew” they consider writing options that they may not have thought of otherwise. Many writing problems are solved when writers enter this unmindful state of contemplation. In fact, most of the participants integrated “stew” time into their overall writing process. Grace cleaned her house, washed dishes, or weeded flower beds; Roger, after reviewing his notes for an article he was writing, slept and drove silently to work; Fugitive preferred showers and took walks; Bubbles used the time she was trapped in a business meeting or church to let her mind wander; Will worked in his garden or drove along country roads. Worth noting is that in each example the participant was alone. Even Bubbles, who “stews” in the midst of a congregation is mentally separated from what is happening around her. It may be said that “stewing” conditions, then, require that the body be engaged in some solitary, automatic activity. Although writing is a social act and the writer can benefit from interacting with other people, “stewing” seems to be a time when the writer needs few to no people around.

The Other

“Others” was another significant theme in participant descriptions of their experiences of writing. Within the context of “others,” participants described belonging

to or being involved with a community of writers. They discussed the validation experienced when others read their work. In this context “others” may refer to those in the participant’s writing group or the general public. Although most participants would agree that publication leads to validation, this is not necessarily true for all. Journeyman and John both described experiences of validation when they were able to craft their language to such extent that they connected with someone else through words. For them a work need not be published to connect although publishing would allow for more opportunities to connect. Finally, all participants discussed the importance of “others” and feedback.

Feedback is crucial to the writer who wants to improve his or her writing. Without others, feedback is impossible. Inversely, feedback allows writers to know whether or not they are connecting with other people. Not only is it helpful to receive feedback, giving feedback is just as valuable. For instance, Bookworm said, “Feedback is something I value so I give it back.” For Roger, giving feedback to someone else allows him a more objective view of his own work:

It’s very helpful for me to read stories and give feedback to other people’s work. As I look at something that somebody else has written, I look at things that I don’t understand and look at things that may be problematic. It helps me look at my own work and avoid similar problems... You can be a little bit more objective with somebody else’s work than you can with your own.

Participants described “wanting” or “needing” honest feedback on their writing. Feedback did not mean flattery nor unsubstantiated criticalness. What the feedback must be is specific: Participants were interested in know what worked in the piece as well as its specific weaknesses. When Bubbles received a written comment to an essay she had

written that read, “This is really boring and it stinks,” she said, “That was not helpful to me at all.” Similarly, excessive praise diminishes the effectiveness of feedback. Quoting Richard Hugo, Will said, “Don’t trust anyone who really praises your work. Keep your crap detector on.”

Although it is possible to write primarily for the self (in journals or diaries) and therapeutically connect with “the self” through such writing, most of the participants in this research experience writing as a way of connecting with others. Without others, writing becomes detached and mechanical. In an article exploring the use of computers evaluating student writing, Herrington and Moran (2001) describe their experience of writing for a non-human. The authors write, “As we wrote to the machine, writing became reduced, degraded, just a demonstration, not words that might have an impact on another person and in some small way change the world (p. 497).” Without having another human to create meaning, writing is reduced to a dyadic act. Again in the words of Herrington and Moran, “writing matters only in a very narrow range: its length, its vocabulary, its correctness, or its congruence with the mathematics of a semantic space (p. 497).”

The Words

A final theme present in participants descriptions of writing had to do with “the words” that were written. Participants noted that to produce the words was hard work and required discipline and established habits. Simultaneously, participants experienced the production of words as mystical: veritable gifts from some muse. Always at the center of the participants’ writing was “discovery.” According to Journeyman, writing is “a way of experiencing life.” In other words, writing is a way of thinking on paper; it is

problem solving (Lindemann, 2001). In Fugitive's words, "a lot of writing is solving problems. Nobody wants to think that, but it is...It is very practical."

It was interesting to listen to some of the participants talk about the writing muse (Fugitive) or the writing gods (Nora) or how the whole process of writing is experienced as mystical (Grace); however, these same writers put in many hours observing their world, reflecting (both consciously and subconsciously), and consistently made time to sit many hours and write. Fugitive describes his process of "summoning the muse" as follows:

I do a lot of hard work to get the muse to come and stay for a while and to make myself hospitable. That's part of our bargain together. I'm personifying this, you know, but that's an easy way for me to think of it.

Nora, too, describes that although she acknowledges she diligently works to produce her writing, she still feels as if "words" are given to her:

I do not believe that there are the gods of writing, but I experience in that way as if it is from "other." I am "blessed" in some way with the words to write down: They are "gifted" to me; I can't do it by myself...I didn't ask to be a good writer. This is not something that if I could have chosen my talent, this may not have even been the one I would have chosen, you know. I just was one; I just am one.

Later in her description, Nora suggests that the mystical experience of writing the words, which several of the participants discussed, may be explained as a mental state Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as flow. She says, "It's almost like being in a trance; it isn't quite, but it is this intense state of flow where I don't know what's going to come out at the bottom of the page." Csikszentmihalyi writes, "(flow is) the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience

itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (4).” This would describe participants’ experiences of their bodies “going” and the words “coming.”

Interestingly, achieving a flow state, also called an optimal experience, is something people can make happen. Conditions for a flow experience are as follows:

- A clear purpose, goals and immediate feedback
- A challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill and assistance to meet the challenge (as needed to be successful)
- A sense of control and developing competence
- A focus on the immediate experience
- An importance of social relationships

Note that an experience need not be necessarily pleasant for it to be optimal. The task, such as writing, may be extremely challenging for the mind or body or both; however, the doer of the task so engages in the task that any sacrifice is counted as minimal. This would explain how the experience could be remembered as mystical. Csikszentmihalyi writes, “The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile (p. 3).”

In addition to the conditions listed above that are necessary to achieve a flow state, an ample amount of practice is required. Will said, “The more you write, the easier it is.” But, the writing participants did wasn’t always what they considered to be good. In fact, writing badly seems to be just as important as writing well for it is the ongoing, regular writing that allowed the participants to become better writers. Take for instance the words of several participants:

It’s as if you’re moving along some sort of a continuum... You’re just

moving on and on....That's not to say that those early things are ever going to be publishable; but, I couldn't have written something later if I hadn't written that first...I just finally gave myself permission to write badly. (Grace)

I tell my students that if you want to write something that's really good, you have to willing to write something that's really not good...If you want to write brilliantly, you gotta be willing to write crap. (Roger)

You get better at writing by doing a lot of it and failing a lot in order to succeed. (Will)

I don't sit around and wait until I have the perfect idea or until I have it all worked out in my head. You don't sit around and wait for that; you begin writing. You do the dirty work of putting pen to page because that's the thing I can do. (Nora)

In this residency program, I work with residents and many times they will publish small review articles or small case studies. It's their first time out of the gate, and I work with them just to give them the experience on learning—of going through that process of sitting down, thinking it out, writing it, and going through the twelve, thirteen, fourteen drafts that I keep handing back. (Baroque 2)

Recommendations

The recommendations I make to teachers of writing culled from the experiences of the writers in this research will probably not seem original. In fact, I can assure the reader that my recommendations are not original. Most of what we know to be best practices for developing the ability to write has been around as long as there have been writers. For instance, the kernel philosophy of the workshop approach to teaching writing is writers write: a dictum similar to the one put into writing by Epictetus around the year 100 C. E.-“If you be a reader, read; if a writer, write.”

On the other hand, as I stand on the shoulders of teachers, researchers, and writers that have gone before me working against the institutionalization of writing instruction, I

add another voice to the literature advocating for the teaching of writing to become more closely aligned to how writers actually experience (develop) their writing. Taking a cue from researchers such as Murray (1968), Graves (1992), Emig (1971), Britton (1975), Shaughnessy (1977), Flower and Hayes (1981), and many others who have worked with or studied writers engaged in their work, the phenomenological approach used in this research has provided another facet through which to view writing. Though the inferences I draw from the data may repeat what exists in the literature of composition research and the teaching of writing, simultaneously the data further confirm what others have said and have been saying.

Effective Teachers of Writing Write

Although it may be considered redundant and nonsensical to say that the reason the participants in this study had so many experiences with writing is because they often experienced writing, nevertheless, it is true. They could talk about writing because they had spent a great deal of time engaged in writing: the basis of my first recommendation for teachers of writing.

Teachers play an important role in the development of their students as writers; however, the most effective teachers of writing are subtle in their pedagogical approach and look vastly different from traditional instructors (Smith, 1994). As far back as 1968 Murray stressed, “The writing teacher who teaches least usually teaches most if his students work in an environment which allows them to teach themselves (p. 103).” This type of teaching is rooted in helping students “discover” how to produce written language much as they discovered how to produce oral language in their first years of life.

Arana (2003), points out that the Latin root of “to educate”—educere—literally

means “to bring out.” The job of the writing teacher, then, is not to fill the heads of students with prescriptive rules of how to write. Instead, the writing teacher is to stand beside students and help them realize their individual purposes for writing. When professor/researcher/writer Katie Wood Ray discusses writing with her students, she does not talk to them as a teacher but more as another writer; she talks to them as an insider of the writing process. Ray (2002) writes,

I know that my experiences as a reader and writer directly inform so much of my instruction in writing workshops, and I have also been privileged to watch so many others anchor their teaching of writing in their own experiences as well. (xiii)

Smith (1994) suggests, “The most direct and relevant way for a teacher to demonstrate the power of writing is to write with the student.” This doesn’t mean, necessarily, that teachers and students write together simultaneously, although there should be times when students are privy to see teachers modeling the composing process. It does mean that teachers need to have sufficient knowledge of what writing feels like. In order to stand beside and guide, teachers of writing must know something about writing themselves.

Keep in mind that by my suggesting that teachers of writing should engage in the process I am not advocating that they become writers in the professional sense. Teachers’ primary expertise should lie in the development of their students (Power & Ohanian, 1999). Nevertheless, when we enter into our personal streams of writing, we realize that sometimes the current is swift, sometimes slow; there are times the water is pristine allowing us to see clearly the depths; other times the bottom is so churned the murkiness hides even the largest obstacles. Washington Post Book World editor Marie

Arana (2003) writes, “ For all the experience I had had with writers, I could not appreciate the full contours of a writing life until I had gone into my study, closed the door, sat down and tried to write a book myself (xv).” According to Brenda Powers (1999), “At the very least, when you try to write well yourself, you begin to get a sense of what constitutes good writing. It gives you a compass (however weak at the start) to guide you...(Power & Ohanian, p. 251).”

On the other hand, simply because teachers’ focuses should be on developing their students’ writing abilities should not prohibit them from becoming quality writers capable of publishing. Keep in mind that none of the participants in this study identified themselves as a professional writer. The participants were a business owner, a physician, a technical editor, a government training specialist, a psychologist, one high-school teacher, one elementary/college teacher, and three college professors; however, the combined number of non-book publications (research articles, newspaper articles, editorials, columns, non-fiction essays, and poems) among the ten participants equaled more than 5,000. This doesn’t include all the non-published writing (early drafts, notes, letters, etc.) completed and shared with other writers, family members, students, and so on, not to mention the personal writing which participants did. Although not professional writers, the participants are certainly worthy ambassadors of the writing community. Teachers guiding students from their own experiences with writing affords them the ability to do so with authority and wisdom (Hairston, 1986b).

Reading: The First Step Towards Writing

As listening is to speaking, reading is to writing. Long before writers become writers, they are readers. Murray (2004) writes, “It is possible to teach a reading or

literature course without writing, but it is impossible to teach writing without reading (p. 58).” Reading others’ writing is where we see what writing looks like. Reading allows us, in the words of participant Nora, “to learn our way around a sentence.” We become inspired from reading, become filled with our own ideas. If we are lucky, and all who read seriously become lucky, we experience the power of connection with another human being—the writer.

Said another way, writers do not write material they do not read. Again and again, participants in the study talked about books and other writers. The writers of poetry discussed poets and poetry, the writers of fiction talked about pieces of fiction and fiction writers, those engaged in writing text books or research related material mentioned articles and researchers in their field. When participants endeavored to write a new genre, they began by immersing themselves in the reading of the targeted genre. Will, for instance, discussed that after having spent the last several years focusing on poetry he wanted to venture back into writing fiction. “The first thing I’m going to do,” he said, “is get into the habit of reading more fiction; finding some contemporary work that I really like, things I consider successes.”

The material students of writing read need not be heavy literature. The point is they read and it is the responsibility of the teacher to get them reading. Some of the problems associated with students developing as writers concern the reading they are encouraged (forced) to do. In many classrooms classic literature is the *litteratura du jour*...only it’s served every day. If the classics are not what keep students from reading, then our outmoded styles of teaching classic literature can be prohibitive. Hipple (1997) asserts THAT students read is far more important than WHAT they read as long as what

they read be “a living, breathing, meaningful, powerful, and potentially life-changing force (p. 16).”

In her teenage novel *Love that Dog* (2001), Sharon Creech depicts the power of reading in the development of a reluctant writer, Jack, into a willing writer. Jack’s teacher leads him in a discovery of writing topics, voice, genre and so on, primarily through using literature to teach writing. In the following passage, Jack not only becomes inspired by a prominent author’s work, Jack uses the poem as a model for his own:

I was very glad
to hear that
Mr. Walter Dean Myers
is not the sort of person
who would get mad
at a boy
for using some of his words.

And thank you
for typing up
my secret poem
the one that uses
so many of
Mr. Walter Dean Myers’s
words
and I like what
you put
at the top:
Inspired by Walter Dean Myers.

That sounds good
to my ears.
Now no one
will think
I just copied
because I
couldn’t think
of my own words.

They will know
I was
inspired by
Mr. Walter Dean Myers.

Not only does writing begin with reading, students' writing should reflect what they have been or are reading (Emig, 1971; Larson, 1982; Wesley, 2000). Ideally, students should have control over the genres they write; however, if teachers are making the decisions about what students write, they must provide students with ample access to read targeted genres. Again, reading helps assemble mental structures that are reinforced by practice. To use an immediate example, before beginning this dissertation, a form of writing that exists only within the walls of the academy, I read several other dissertations. Dissertations, as they are read and approved by doctoral committees, are not found on the shelves of local bookstores or community libraries. Most people outside the academy have never seen, much less read, a dissertation; however, ask any doctoral student what he or she did to prepare to write their own dissertation and infallibly the response will be, "I began by reading other dissertations."

Similarly, the three-paragraph essays students write in elementary schools, the five-paragraph essays students write in middle and high schools, the traditional research papers college students write in their freshman composition classes, are all examples of genres that exist only in the classroom. For the purposes of this discussion, I am not arguing the legitimacy of these genres; they have been, are, and will be a component of traditional writing instruction for years to come. With that being the case, in the mean time I suggest that plenty of examples of these genres be available for students to read before they begin writing them.

Nunnally (1991) suggests that although the five paragraph theme is helpful in developing solid principles of composition, it is contrived. He goes on to suggest that it would behoove students to read short thesis/support essays by professionals in order to realize that the familiar functions associated with the parts of the five-paragraph-theme are present, although the essays are not bound by a contrived format. Perhaps students should skip the reading and writing of the contrived formats altogether in favor of genres that abound outside the classroom such as research articles, essays, personal letters, etc. If the goal eventually is to be capable of writing at will outside the walls of the classroom, why not start with reading genres that exist outside the classroom? According to Hipple (1984):

Students who develop some comfort and confidence in writing different kinds of writing will become more competent writers, no matter that their task...Students who can write catalog copy or T.V. Guide-type announcements will be able to write other kinds of compositions, including the five-paragraph theme. (p. 53)

Finally, the more reading students do, the more they stand to learn about writing. Simply, quality writers are always quality readers. On the other hand, it must be said that the inverse of the preceding statement is not always true. Being able to read well or being a voracious reader does not guarantee development as a writer. Although one pre-requisite, or co-requisite, to developing as a writer is being a reader, the developing writer must also have a purpose for writing. In other words, the developing writer must have some reason for wanting to write.

Students Develop as Writers When They Have a Reason to Write

Perhaps one of the most powerful moments I've had in my ephemeral stint as a father was when my six-year old daughter produced her first poem. The previous

evening we had scuttled onto the lower portion of our roof where we reclined to absorb the enchantment of a harvest moon. That night we not only saw the moon, we also noticed bands of chalky cirrus clouds trailing across the illuminated sky. She pointed out how the stars scattered across the sky were not yellow nor were they five-pointed as depicted in books. Copernicus could not have been more mystified by an evening than we were on that roof. Once back inside, I briefly wrote in my journal explaining to my daughter I may use parts of the evening's experience in a poem on which I was working.

The next afternoon she came to me and handed me a toffee colored piece of construction paper with a poem mostly made up of the words "I," "see," "the," and "moon." Each of these words was part of her writing vocabulary, but she had played with the arrangement of the words to produce interesting and unpredictable two word lines. I thanked her and read aloud the poem a few of times playing with articulation and phrasing. Being an incipient phenomenologist I wanted to know more about what she experienced as she wrote the poem. "I just didn't want to ever forget what we saw last night and," she continued, "I wanted to write words like you."

My daughter wrote because she had a purpose. As Robert Penn Warren once said, she had an itch that was annoying enough that she had to scratch. Most of the participants in this study mentioned that part of their experience of writing was feeling compelled to write. Described as a "haunting" or a "monkey on my back," participants talked about how writing was more of a case of *having* to do it rather than necessarily *wanting* to do it. Interestingly, all the participants became interested in writing at early stages in their life. Keep in mind that the age of onset of interest in writing and when participants actually began writing were not necessarily the same time. Nevertheless,

some participants described being as young as four years old when they experienced the impulse to write. For example:

I seem to have always wanted to write. As we were moving my mother from her house, she said, “Here, I want you to have this.” She took me into a closet and had me go upon a shelf and pull out a box that had a folder in it. Inside were some things that I had written down when I was in the first and second grade; there were three poems in there. Now they were childish poems, but she had saved them over all these years. You know, I’ve been writing things down for a long time. (John)

There seems to have always been a pull to write down things, even since I first started school. Writing things down has always been a natural thing for me. (Bubbles)

I must have been either four or five years old and did not know how to read, and, of course, I could not write. But I remember distinctly—this would have been either 1944 or 1945—I was lying on the floor where we were living in a housing project apartment in Detroit. I either had a pencil or it could have been a crayon, and I had a magazine open before me looking at words. Somehow I had this concept of words being powerful, wonderful, exciting, energizing things. I wanted to be able to make them. I had a sensation that’s almost like hunger in that I wanted to make those words! ...I have been a long time in fulfilling that strong yearning that first hit me sixty years ago, but it was so real and so vivid. Every time I write, in some way or another, whether I’m conscious of it or not, it’s a fulfillment of that moment. (Journeyman)

There’s a statement that writers write because they have to, and I think that’s true for me because I just always did. I don’t write because early on I figured I would get anything published. As a matter of fact, that poem that won the contest, I didn’t send in; my teacher sent it in. I didn’t even know that she had done it. It got first place in the Beta Club writing contest. I was just floored because I had no idea that she’d sent it in. (Bookworm)

The early writing experiences of the participants seem natural and enjoyable.

Likewise, writing experiences within the context of classrooms should be natural and enjoyable. Grace described that writing was a form of having fun as she and her friends would gather to write plays. Grace’s early experience with writing corroborates

Moffett's claim that "For children of elementary years...writing is a form of play from invented spelling to story dramas, that literacy is sorcery (Graves, p. 30)."

On the other hand, although writing for Grace was play, the writing was also "a way of growing through certain things at that stage." It was through writing that a deeper life was developed, even at an early age. Likewise, for developing writings, writing should be a way to learn, explore, and communicate those topics that are significant to their lives (Hairston, 1992). Grace, who has also taught writing to audiences from elementary to octogenarian, has faith that young writers will discover their own purposes for writing, if they are given the chance. Specifically, she said:

Kids find plenty of reasons to write when they free themselves up enough to do it. When they don't have this sense of somebody standing over them who's going to judge what they've written. You somehow have to get them to look at writing as play the same as they would do with finger paints. They have to get in there and mess it up and have fun with words. Let whatever happens, happen; they don't have to be judged for it.

The more children experience writing as play and exercise choice in what they write and how they write, teachers will begin to recognize recurring themes in their work. Just as the first words in oral language development are objects (Pinker, 1994), the earliest themes in student writing are concrete items of everyday life (pets, family members, items found in nature) (Calkins, 1994). Similarly, participants discussed they found their topics or their "inspiration" in the routines of life. They didn't venture to exotic locations but paid attention to life around them. Participants learned how to pay attention to their worlds and describe them honestly. Will Said, the truest emotion comes FROM those domestic details, FROM the call of the wren on your porch before it goes to the barn and needles a grub out of a rotten piece of wood."

The more writing teachers allow students to decide their own purposes for writing, the more students will become invested in their writing. Traditionally, only teachers decide students' purposes for writing. This includes the duplicitous act of veiling student choice where the teacher supplies several writing options and the student chooses from the list. The more choice students have in establishing their own purposes for writing, the more powerful writers they become. The more powerful they are as writers, the more flexible their skills will become. According to Hipple (1984), "Students will commonly do better if they are involved in the selection of their own writing tasks, at least some of the time (p. 53)."

When developing writers are not allowed to set their own purposes for writing or choose their topics, there is little chance that they will be interested in engaging in any activities (feedback, revision, editing) to improve their writing (Smith, 1994). Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) write, "Why is choice so important? Let's get right down to it: while the teachers may determine what gets taught, only the student can decide what will be learned."

The ultimate purpose for most of the participants in this study was to connect with other people. Thus, writing in schools must be socially meaningful. Writing, as spoken language, connects people, and writers, at least the participants in this research, desired connection. As writing is traditionally taught, it seems to foster more dyadic behavior than the signifying triadic behavior where meaning is negotiated between two people (Percy, 1983). Smith (1994) suggests that one way teachers can improve "institutionalized writing" is "by ensuring that there is as often as possible an interested reader for anything that students write whether it is the teacher personally, other adults, or

other students (p. 223).” Writing only for the teacher produces a version of solipsism where the teacher alone confirms the existence of writing.

The writing community at large is diverse and tremendously inclusive. Teachers should offer students opportunity to write in a variety of ways for as many purposes as they can. Purpose allows for more engagement and engagement helps insure that writing is an enjoyable process.

On the other hand, a student’s purpose for writing need not be completely figured out before the writing commences. Furthermore, once developing writers have experienced sufficient growth in establishing their own purposes for writing and exercising choice, they are better equipped to transfer their skills to writing assigned on genres or topics. This is a similar process as using writing to find out what one actually knows about a topic as some participants discussed. In the preface to his revised second edition of *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Murray (2004) writes, “I am still apprenticed to the writer’s craft. Each morning I come to my writing desk and write what I do not expect in ways I had not planned (p. xiv).” Nora describes writing for the purpose of discovery as “finding the thread.” In school she would begin essay assignments as personal letters to her teachers. In other words, she assumed control over the genre in which she was writing, at least to get started. That’s where Nora would often find what she had to say about the assigned topic although it wasn’t necessarily one of her chosen topics. She describes the experience as finding the right thread like the ones found on the top of dog food bags:

If you pick the right thread, the whole thing unravels and you just open the dog food bag and feed your dog. Otherwise, you’re there for ten,

fifteen minutes pulling little pieces of paper, pulling little pieces of thread, pulling little pieces of paper, pulling little pieces of thread...it's just a pain. Then, you get mad and you tear the whole bag and the food spills out; it has a bad outcome. But, if you can find the thread end that you're supposed to pull, it unravels easily. For me that was what was always hard about that kind of impersonal, expository persuasive writing was that I couldn't find the thread. But, if I could somehow just write it in a letter to my teacher, it helped me find the thread, and I knew where to begin writing.

Developing Writers Need Plenty of Time

While some writers are prolific, others take much more time to arrive at a finished product. Fugitive said that it once took him nine months to finish a single poem.

Bookworm, on the other hand, who has been publishing for 40 years, has published alone or with a co-author more than 44 textbooks (as well as 41 research articles, 31 editorials, and 23 columns, and other publications not mentioned here.)

The same disparities in production rate can also be seen in professional writers whose only job is to write. Stephen King manages to publish nearly a novel per year, most of which are in excess of five-hundred pages, while it requires novelist Aidan Chambers up to five years to complete a two-hundred page work. Former United States Poet Laureate Billy Collins reports that sometimes he can write at least a poem a day and other times it takes him months to finish a single verse.

With writing paces of participants and professional writers varying so widely, we, as teachers of writing, should not assume that all our students will write at the same pace. The actual act of writing takes time and the ability to write occurs gradually. Time, rather the lack of it, is one of the tyrannies that deleteriously affect writing instruction (Hipple, 1984).

The first reason teachers need to provide writing students with as much time as possible has less to do with the actual act of writing and more to do with the “filling up” and “stew” time participants discussed. “Filling up” is where the writer gathers ideas or purposes for writing. This is done through simply experiencing everyday life on the basis of a writer’s lens and/or reading. Although some of this may occur within the writing classroom, especially reading, these are activities that will largely take place on the developing writers own time. As Fugitive said, “I am never not a writer.”

Conversely, I recommend that an allocation be made for “stewing” time in developing writers’ schedules. To “stew” is to become engaged in an activity unrelated to writing and allowing the person to work at making connections or making sense out of a piece of writing. Smith (1994) writes:

They need time for reflection as well as for research; the incubation of a text may take days of reading, talking, or simply daydreaming. Few professional writers would claim that all thinking about writing was done while actually writing, or even during deliberate thinking about writing. (p. 223)

Admittedly, leading students to develop their thinking skills and providing the time necessary to do this is antithetical to traditional education. Thinking before or during writing can look a lot like one is doing nothing. Schools are traditionally places where frantic productivity is the equivalent to learning. There must be action, although, ironically, the action must also be orderly and quiet. Nevertheless, teachers of writing would do well to cultivate the time and opportunities for students to become lost in their thoughts by establishing areas where students could engage in solitary, autonomic activities: gardening, sculpting, painting, walking, and so on. There could also be listening or viewing areas to stimulate thought (Hipple, 1984). Whatever the

accommodation, the students certainly need time to, as Walker Percy describes, be a good-for-nothing and have some leisure

The second reason teachers need to provide students with plenty of time to write is that consistent writing habits must be established. Even if participants in this research did not write every day, they wrote frequently and consistently enough to maintain their habits of writing. Journeyman, for example, said, “Writing to me is not exactly a daily exercise, but it is a frequent exercise...” For most of the participants, however, writing was an everyday activity. Fugitive not only writes every day, he writes a certain number of words.

To develop appropriate writing habits, students need “regular, frequent chunks of time they can count on, anticipate, and plan for (Atwell, 1998, p. 91).” Donald Graves is cited most frequently for suggesting that students write no less than three days a week—preferably four or five days a week—about an hour each of those days. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) relate the following story: “One day a teacher asked Don (Graves), ‘How should I teach writing if I can only sandwich it in one day week?’ ‘Don’t bother,’ Don replied bluntly. ‘One day a week will teach them to hate it. They’ll never get inside writing (p. 8).’”

But even for several of the participants in this research, finding time to write every day was a challenge. For much of her writing life Grace juggled full-time jobs and a full-time family:

Every day in the summer I would take my typewriter and my books and go to my log cabin. For several hours each day I would go out there and work. The rule for my teenage kids was they were to call me if—and only IF—there was a fire or someone was bleeding about the

head.

Will described how while he's driving and an image or idea for a poem occurs to him, he pulls off and gets a cup of coffee at a fast-food restaurant and does a fast write. Later he adds to the poem at another fast food place. By the time he arrives home he has a finished draft, which he transfers to the computer. He will continue to carry the writing around in his pocket for the rest of the week or weekend until he has maybe ten or twenty drafts of the poem. Although his writing time is not consistent, it is frequent.

Developing writers need to be guided in how to find time to write even when there seems to be little to none available. As teachers, we have traditionally given students the impression that writing is something that is done all at once—in a single setting, in a set amount of time. That is, after all, how states and school systems assess writing. Murray (2004) writes:

I continue to battle for quiet time, for hours without distraction so that I can be productive. But I am a productive writers, not because I have success in achieving many such hours, but because I have learned to make use of fragmentary time—five minutes here and five minutes there. (p. 67)

Students need to know that writing can be done on pieces of napkins or post-it notes at the end of class or at their locker. Helping students understand that most of the work of writing actually takes place outside of the regular writing time they have in the classroom allows them more control over the process. Again to quote Murray (2004), “I really need an insulated chunk of time only for writing a first draft, and that's a central but small part of the writing process. Most of my time is spent planning, and most of your students' time should be spent planning (p. 67).” As with “stewing,” which is similar if not the same as planning, participants reported that this can be done while driving, walking,

running, reading, eating, gardening, mowing, cooking, cleaning, even sleeping.

Simply having or finding the time to write is not enough, though, for students to develop their writing abilities. They must also have the expectation to write. Time to write is useless without an expectation to write. When students show up to write without any expectations of their writing, they begin to believe in the unmitigated power of the muse; they believe they can write only when inspired. Too much talk of the muse can dupe students into believing that they have no control over their ability to write (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Participants in this study talked about the muse or the writing gods; they also acknowledged they did an awful lot in preparation for the muse to show up. I believe the muse experience is when the writer enters what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as “flow”—“the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter (4).” Take Nora for example. She described approaching her writing time with expectation as follows:

I know the extent to which I can control it and the extent to which it is dependent on what I call “the writing gods.” I can summon the writing gods, and I summon them by putting the pen to page. I don’t sit around and wait until I have the perfect idea or until I have it all worked out in my head. You don’t sit around and wait for that; you begin writing. I do the dirty work of putting pen to page because that’s the thing I can do.

Just as establishing their own purposes for writing and making choices about topics and genres, the more students develop expectations of what they intend to do in their writing time, the more they will become prepared to write outside the classroom. Developing such skills requires teachers who not only can serve as models, but also as mentors capable of scaffolding developing writers to independence.

Developing Writers Need Feedback More than Grades

Stephen King (2000) writes, "... while it is impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one (p. 142)." From King's words I take that while not everyone will write at the same level, it is possible to improve one's writing ability. Within the realm of traditional education I believe we are more concerned with how to grade what is produced by the writer rather than with how to develop the writer.

Enter the unwavering, often sacred, component of public education: assessment. Stalwarts insist assessment insures accountability among students, teachers, and administrators. Certainly, to learn effectively requires that we be aware of what we know as well as what we need to know. Assessment used in this sense is beneficial. The meaning of assessment, however, for many, has devolved to become synonymous with grades. The word "assessment," as language in general has succumbed to the Second Law of Thermodynamics where everything wears out (Fugitive). The word has been so overused and misused that it no longer signifies that which it was created to and approaches the status of cliché.

As stated in the introduction, assessment contributes to the perseverance of a lock-step approach to teaching writing. To assess writing, it must be easy to assess. Thus, school writing tends to be highly structured, which lends itself to being easily marked and assigned a grade. Teachers who function in this role are little more than critics of writing rather than teachers. Emig (1971) writes, "There is little evidence...that the persistent pointing out of specific errors in student themes leads to the elimination of these errors, yet teachers expend much of their energy in this futile and unrewarding

exercise” (p. 99). So, how do people who write outside of classrooms develop their writing abilities? How do they assess their growth as a writer?

I used to be of the opinion that the single form of assessment available to professional writers was whether or not publishers or magazines bought their writing; however, this logic is just as faulty as believing that only “A” students are the only good students. Keeping in mind that few writers are ever able to support themselves solely on selling their writing, this includes such masters as Charles Dickenson, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Frost, it seems laughable to judge writers based on the single standard of sales receipts.

Again, how do writers assess their progress? From discussions with participants in this study, writers assess their progress frequently mainly through self-evaluation and feedback from others. As I stated before, it is interesting that writing, which is the ultimate solitary act, is only solitary when writers are actually putting their words on paper. Authors are typically intricately involved with people before and after they compose. In the period before they write they mull about in the world to collecting ideas, refining old ideas and playing with possibilities. After they write, authors ultimately seek feedback from someone, be that person a confidant, member of a writing group, or agent. Even if the writer doesn’t interact much with people, he or she has in his mind an audience and makes decisions about his or her writing based on the intuitive feedback received from a phantom gallery.

Hargis (1995) suggests that in order for students to achieve academically, they must experience success. This approach, known as curriculum based assessment, depends upon finding a level in the curriculum where the student can succeed and

incorporating assessment practices in daily teaching activities such that success is continual. Here the focus on assessment is on students' strengths as learners, is constant, and directly tied to student learning. The curriculum based assessment approach ensures that students are working on levels that are instructional to them. The material is not too difficult or frustrating, but also not too easy. Using this method students are engaged in learning most of the time, even when they are assessed. Interestingly, the factors inherent to Hargis's curriculum based assessment (a clear purpose, goals and immediate feedback; a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill and assistance to meet the challenge; a sense of control and developing competence; a focus on the immediate experience.) are identical to the prerequisites of experiencing Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow state.

Participants used the term "feedback" to delineate the manner in which they learn about their writing. Participants were interested only in feedback that was specific as to what worked or didn't work in their writing. Banal or empty adjectives such as "good" were disdained by participants, even when such words were meant to be encouraging. In fact, excessive praise that is non-specific and obsequious can actually derail students and destroy their self-confidence (Madden, 1988). Bookworm described a time when she was given the feedback of "This is perfect." She said, "I'm glad they like it, but that didn't help me put together a better book."

According to participants in this study, writing groups are an ideal place to receive feedback. I recommend that one goal for any writing program, regardless of the age, be the development of writing groups. Doing so will provide the students with more opportunities to receive feedback, listen to responses, become exposed to more ideas, access insights to the writing process of other people, develop their own ability to read

and respond critically, and so on (Kohn, 1999).

Writing groups serve to refine and develop student writing abilities. But is not the actual act of writing an independent act? Yes it is, and students should do their actual writing independent of the group; however, as Murray (1994) has established, most of a writer's time is spent working toward the first draft. Students' individual writings are based on their own ideas, their own abilities to craft. The relationship between a developing writer and the writing group is a reciprocal one. A writing group makes the individual stronger; the stronger the individual becomes as a writer, the stronger the group becomes as a band of individuals.

Critics may argue that a writing group would have too much influence on a student's writing. With this, I must agree. Where does one student's ideas stop and another one's begins? Very little I have said in this dissertation can I claim entirely as my original thoughts. True, I have spent much time in the library, established a research agenda, transcribed interviews for countless hours, scribbled thousands of notes to myself; the fact remains that when all is said and done, I won't have done much more than clarify or elucidate on ideas about writing that have been around for a very long time. If my committee grades me on originality, I'm toast. If they, however, judge me on my growth as a developing scholar, I may be granted a degree, which probably happened if you are reading this dissertation as a public document.

Writing groups in schools would also prepare student to live and work in society. School often diminishes social instincts by overemphasizing order. Although the research is a bit dated, Fillion (1979), reports that teachers talk 80% of the time. If a teacher who talks 80% of the time has an average of 20 students, each student would get

to talk only one percent of the time. In other words, students would be listening or, more likely, tuning out 99% of the time (Smith, 1994).

With continuous feedback from teachers and peers, the writing student becomes well aware of her strengths as a writer as well as those areas she needs to strengthen. In fact, as the writing students grow as writers they become increasingly responsible to self-evaluate their writing. Self-assessment is a vital component of writing instruction for it prepares students to write independently of a classroom setting. Self-assessment is empowering as well as a useful tool in lifelong learning (Hargis, 1995).

Each student's ability to self-assess strengths and needs as a writer serves as the basis for each individual's writing goals or writing expectations. As with participants in this study, the texts a classroom of writing students produce should take the form of different genres and be about as many topics as there are students. When choice and purpose are allied with cogent feedback and encouragement, students not only develop as writers, they also acquire the skills necessary to become lifelong writers'. Bear in mind, to be a writer is does not mean, though it does not exclude, becoming a professional writer. Being a writer encompasses writing notes in birthday cards, writing directions, writing shopping lists, writing letters to the editor, writing work reports, as well as more imaginative writings such as poetry, stories, and so on.

To inform parents, other teachers, and administrators of student development in writing, Hargis (1989) suggests using substantive evaluation reports. These reports are basically written narratives of each student's journey. They document where the student began as a writer, the risks he or she has taken to grow, writing strengths, writing weaknesses, goals, and so on. Although these reports take time to assimilate and write,

on average the same amount of time would be used to give tests/quizzes/etc., grade them, average them and record them. Ironically, the reason most teachers prefer grades to these substantive reports is that they do not like having to write.

The benefit to substantive reports is that they convey exactly what the student has done to make progress in his or her development as a writer. A single letter or numerical grade is simply an abstraction of the student's achievement void of pertinent information or feedback. The information used for the substantive reports come from tools the teacher uses in facilitating a classroom full of developing writers such as teacher's status-of-the-class chart, teacher conferences, peer conferences, a student's editing check sheet, completion of goals as well as writings the student has successfully completed (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Fletcher and Portalupi, 2001; Ray, 2002). Portfolios are becoming increasingly popular to showcase a student's writing progress, which makes sense; there is no better way to demonstrate growth as a writer than to look at the student's writing (Graves and Sunstein, 1992). On a personal note, when reporting to parents and administrators about the general progress of a writing class as a whole, I have found newsletters that highlight student work are enjoyable to read as well as informative. Public performances where students read or perform their pieces are also a valuable process to demonstrate student achievement.

One way to circumvent the entire issue of assigning grades to writing is to reorient our current view of writing. Though it may seem heretical at first, think for a moment of writing as being nothing more than a linguistic process, not an academic subject. Consider writing as simply a tool we use to learn about our world and not as an end to itself. Writers never arrive at having learned how to write; they are always

arriving, always learning. In writing, as thinking, there is no end state. Robert Frost said that if you waited until you learned everything you needed to learn about the craft of writing, you would be fifty-years old before you started. Fugitive insisted that we always work with insufficient knowledge, even those who are beyond fifty-years old. Thinking of writing in these terms, an “A” could be just as detrimental to a developing writer as an “F” for it might communicate “You have arrived! You can do no better! You have reached the top and can go no further!” Perhaps even more dangerous would be the average grade of “C,” which insinuates “You have nothing original to say. Your writing voice is like all the others.”

For all my arguing against grades and the types of assessments traditionally used in tracking students’ abilities to write, I fear I may give the impression that writing development should be left alone or ignored by teachers. Quite the opposite. I believe it is our responsibility as teachers to do everything we can to assist students in their development as writers. I simply advocate that we facilitate it by creating environments conducive to student development. According to Hairston (1992), Writers develop best “when teachers are able to create low-risk environments that encourage students to take chances (p. 189).” Similarly, Becker (1986) writes, “You can only show you less-than-perfect work to people if you have learned...that you will not be harmed if people see it (Becker, p. 18).” At the end of the day the writing teacher’s hope for students should be that they are interested in writing, engage in it willingly, and read extensively (Smith, 1984). In other words, students should experience writing not as something they are forced to do but rather as people who write.

New Questions

Nelson (1999) writes, “For too long in education, we have treated reading and writing as mechanical processes, as I-It transactions, and have been increasingly dismayed at our students’ diminishing abilities (p. 327).” He suggests that those of us in education become more sensitive to language, that we restore mystery and reverence to language, which most of us left behind with our childhood. By conducting a phenomenological study, I was able to reconnect to that mystery and reverence.

With phenomenological research being largely absent from the field of writing research (Brannon, 1985), it is my hope that this study of the experience of writing contributes to a better understanding of the process of writing. Ultimately, I would like for our understanding to lead to improvements in how we teach writing or, at least, stimulate further research questions.

Having interviewed practicing writers on their experience of writing, I would next like to talk directly with students about their first-hand experiences of writing. Much of what I have said about student experiences of writing comes from my observations of working with students. I do not discount this information as being informative; however, conducting a phenomenological investigation with students who could elucidate on their experiences of writing would allow me and/or other researchers to, at a minimum, compare apples and apples.

Also, I am interested in talking to professional writers; writers who make their living solely from the words they produce. Would similar themes emerge with professional writers as with people who write but do not necessarily consider themselves professional writers?

Technical writers are yet another group with whom I would like to speak. What roles, if any, do “compulsion,” “connection,” “discovery,” and so forth play in the experience of a technical writer?

Finally, I would like to revisit participants of this study to determine the role(s) their schooling played, if any, in their writing—did their educators support them, did they write in spite of school, or both? I am especially interested in those whose onset of interest in writing occurred before or while they were in school. Also, I am interested in the cluster pattern of participants’ ages when they became interested in writing (ages 4, 8, 16, and 21). Does there exist a window, or many windows, of acquisition for writing in the same way as oral language?

The possibilities are endless for writing research. Yet, regardless of how much we understand about writing, it shall always assail us with its magic and its terrors. Ultimately, as generations preceding us, writing forces us to approach it with “straightening shyness” and prayers.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information and Consent Form

A Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Writers as They Write

As a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, I am currently collecting data for my doctoral dissertation research. The topic of my research is the experience of writing. The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of what writers experience as they write and to contribute this understanding to the existing literature on the process(es) of composing written texts. I am interested in hearing about your unique experience of writing in order to understand what the experience was like for you and what you were aware of during the experience.

Specifically, your participation in this project will include a one to two-hour audio taped interview, during which I will ask you to tell me about some times you have engaged in writing. Audiotapes are used to ensure accuracy and clarity. Because my goal is to understand as much as possible about your experience, I will ask questions about the things you say that I don't understand, until both of us feel satisfied that your experience has been communicated as much as it can be. I will also ask you for some non-identifying data: the number of years you have been writing, the type of writing you do most often, and the number of publications you have.

From the audiotape of your interview, I will prepare an interview transcript that I can study. I am the only person who will transcribe the audio-taped interviews. I will compare all completed transcripts and try to develop common themes from all the writers I interview. The information obtained will be held in the strictest confidence. All audiotapes, transcripts, and any other data will be coded by number and will be identifiable only through a master list. I am the only person who will have access to this master list, which will be kept locked in a secure place along with the tapes and transcripts. This signed consent form will be kept in a locked file separate from the location where the tapes, transcripts, and master list are stored. Access to the audiotape of your interview will be restricted to me and to the professor who is my project advisor: We both promise to maintain your confidentiality. Upon completion of the research project, the tapes and the master list will be destroyed.

Once I have completed the transcript of your interview, I will provide you with a copy of the interview transcript. I will delete all names, dates, places, and any other potentially identifying information. When you receive your transcript, I would like for you to check it carefully to make sure that it is an accurate account of your experience and of our conversation. Also, I would like for you to make certain that the interview did not leave out any important point you wished to make. Please feel free to make any changes (typographical errors, etc), mark out sections that you do not want me to include in my dissertation and publication, or add further comments. We can discuss these as well as any questions you might have.

It is possible that this study, when completed, will be published or presented in a

public forum (e.g., a professional conference). By signing this form, you are consenting not only to participate in the interview but also to all or part of your interview, as edited and transcribed, to be used in a publication or presentation.

This study is considered a human research project; however, the risk to you for being involved is minimal. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You will choose the experiences that you wish to talk about in the interview. At any time you may discontinue your participation or withdraw from the study without question or penalty. Many people find that exploring their experiences with another person is satisfying. While I cannot promise that this will be the case for you, I hope that it will be.

If you have any questions at this time or at any point later in the study, please do not hesitate to ask them. If you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of this form to keep. You may contact me at the following address, phone number, or email address any time you have questions or concerns about this project. If you call and do not contact me, I will respond to you as soon as possible.

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I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM, AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT. I ALSO AGREE TO HAVE ALL OR PART OF MY INTERVIEW, AS TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED, INCLUDED IN ANY PUBLICATION OR PRESENTATION IN THIS STUDY.

Name (printed): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix B: Participant Interview

Pseudonym: *Fugitive*

Gender: *Male*

Age: *50*

of Years Writing for Publication: *27*

Age Became Interested in Writing: *21*

Primary Genres: *Novels and Poetry*

Profession: *Professor of English*

I: Again, thank you for agreeing to do this, Fugitive.

P: You're most welcome—Happy to.

I: We are going to be talking about what stands out in your experience as you write. We can get into this a couple of different ways. Um, for some folks I've asked to think of a time or think of a project or think of a piece you were working on and talk about what stood out. Some were able to just get up and go with that, but if we need to talk about specific examples, first, of certain pieces, you know, three pieces that stand out to you that you've worked on recently—we can go that way and then jump into your experience as you write. So...

P: Well, we could go back to the beginning. We could go back to an earlier time, and, uh, talk about the genesis of my poetry because I began as a poet. And, as you know, I write poetry and fiction and nonfiction. In other words, I write. (I: Right.) But, the first serious piece I worked on, and spent a great deal of time getting to know myself as a writer in the act of writing it was the poem "Lilith's Daughter," which has been anthologized in a number of places, and, of course, was in my collection *Dusk, Child, and Morning*. That for me was the beginning of my life as a writer. Paradoxically, that poem is about the *death* of a small child. I was in Washington D.C. and picked up a newspaper in 1976 in which there was an article about a little girl from Cleveland, Tennessee. Her name was Melisha Gibson, she was four years old and she had been beaten to death, tortured by her stepfather and mother. My first reaction was one that most people would probably have, and that was to ask, "How could anyone do something like that to a child?" (I: Um-hmm.) Now, you have to understand that in—how long ago has that been? Twenty-five or twenty-seven years or so?—that a quarter of a century ago, twenty-five years ago, child abuse was relatively unheard of in the public domain. Of course, child abuse has always existed. But, what I'm talking about is that you didn't pick up the newspaper the way you do now and see, uh, five or six examples everyday in a place as small as Knoxville, Tennessee, of parents or caretakers who have been charged with child abuse. So this made *national* news. Do you see what I mean? I picked up the article in the *Washington Post*. And, I thought to myself, "How could someone do something like that?" Now, you have to understand, too, that this was on the cusp, the tail end, of the Vietnam War.

Vietnam had not been over for very long. (I: Um-hmm.) And this confluence of circumstances prompted me to ask the question, the larger question, about, umm, man's inhumanity to man, and especially our, uh, inhumane treatment of our children. The natural order is for parents to give birth to their children and then parents die. (I: Right.) We perverted the natural order by sending off a generation of young people to die in a mercenary war—a war for profit. So, given that larger set of circumstances and this small circumstance, I began to ask a question about evil, about the dark side of human nature that would permit somebody to do these things and justify them with “perfectly good reasons.” I set about, because I was a graduate student at the time, an insipient graduate student, I set about looking at literature to find examples, uh, in which children had been tormented, tortured, sacrificed, and, of course, I found plenty. You have, for example, the Babylonian, uh, deity Molech in the Old Testament to whom children were sacrificed. You have vegetation cycles, which children and young women, primarily, were sacrificed. You have the story of Media, and I happened on this myth of Lilith, the goddess in Hebrew mythology who ate her own children. Again, this was a way of explaining the shadow side of nature, you see. And, in looking at all these things, I didn't come to any satisfactory conclusions. But, what I did start to do was to evolve a voice for this child, who becomes every child that experiences something as horrific as that. So, I started with the very concrete Melisha Gibson and began to expand her experience into a larger mythological dimension. So I was doing this, I was trying to create a voice for a child who did not have one in life and would not have one in death if I didn't give her one. And, one of the things I discovered then is that poetry was a way of keeping people from dying a second, more final, time. So she, paradoxically, her death was my birth as a poet. Now, I wrote that poem—I scratched it out word by painful word (chuckles) over nine months, and I was not unaware of the irony that nine months, of course, corresponds to the period of human gestation. (I: Ahh.) I was also aware giving birth to a dead child, so to speak...or giving a voice to this dead child. And, it seemed to me that, uh, I walked around with that poem in my head, I memorized it, and I couldn't get the last stanza. I was having trouble with the last stanza...I always have trouble with conclusions, no matter what I'm working on—I'll come back to that. But, in any case, I was trying awfully hard to say something meaningful, I suspect. I think I had already written the poem and didn't know it. And, so, one day I quoted the poem to someone, and I said, “But, I can't get the last stanza.” And he said, “I don't think you need a last stanza: I think that poem is finished. I don't think you need to offer commentary. You've already completed the dramatic action necessary to render this experience poetically.” And I thought about it and said, “That's right.” The person said, “Do you have a copy of the poem?” And I said, “No, actually I don't. It's mostly in my head.” And he forced me to sit right there and write it down—he said, “In case you leave and get hit by a car.” (I: Laughs.) So, I wrote the poem down (in completion) in his office, and that was an important event for me, a benchmark event for me.

- I: Were you able, in your mind, to say something meaningful.
- P: *Oh, yes*, I think so. I think, if nothing else, what I learned about, uh, composition, about the role of poetry and fiction, by doing that has always stuck with me. I learned that...that you have to be invested emotionally and spiritually in your work. You have to have a “monkey on your back,” so to speak. And, themes, reoccurring themes, in my work, it’s not that I set out to make them recur. It’s that they won’t let me go. My wife will say—this is the same for you, I’m sure—that, um, that I would *have* to write. It’s not that I *want* to write so much as I *have* to because there is something usually gnawing at me, something for which the act of writing provides a kind of catharsis, a kind of relief. The most recent example would be the essay I wrote on the Christian’s responsibility to peace, an examination of the “Just War” doctrine. I’ve been furious for months, uh, frustrated, feeling as if I were beating my head against the wall to get people to understand what they were about to do by entering this war in Iraq. And, it was only when all the passion overflowed into the exercise of writing that essay and delivering it (I: Um-hmm.) to people in the area and here at Montgomery State—to several hundred people to whom I spoke, that I felt a sense of relief...that I felt, at least, the words are out there. And, if you put the truth out there, uh, I have faith that you are casting bread on the water, even if you don’t see the immediate results—just to have it in the collective consciousness is an important thing.
- I: You’ve talked about saying something meaningful, um, that you must be spiritually and emotionally connected—a monkey on your back...
- P: That’s right. I think, I think words are units of energy and the quality of the energy and the purity of the energy come with the craft of writing and the concentration that you give to the craft. Now, that sounds spooky and mystical, and I don’t mean for it to, but I think that the tone of a work, whether it’s a poem or a novel or a short story, the tone of the work, the way it sounds, uh, reveals its spirit. You know the word “genius” means “spirit”—the “genius” of any work of art reveals not just the spirit of the person that composed it, because I think that, uh, that a work of art sometimes takes on a life of its own, that the writer or painter are simply vehicles for some larger expression, some communal expression, that *needs* to be said or *needs* to be seen. Um, it seems to me that art certainly anticipates, but it also taps what’s already there but unspoken in the collective psyche.
- I: It sounds as if there is this absolute need to write in your experience. (P: Um-hmm.) Yet, there is a transition between needing to do it, getting it down on paper, and having it done. Can you talk about your experience of that process, of moving it from such a raw emotional state into something for the collective psyche?
- P: Um, Flannery O’Conner said that she sat down every day for two hours whether anything came or not. (I: Umm.) She was determined to be ready if it did. I

think that the craft is conscious preparation for the unconscious event when it comes. There are plenty of days I sit down and I begin to, because I'm working on fiction right now primarily, I begin to write my quota—I want to get three-hundred words in a day, but they've got to be *good words*. I want them to be, uh, as precise and as powerful as possible. So, I sit down and I write by hand because there's blood in the fingertips and there is, um, I'm closer to the work that way—I'm not saying that everyone has to do it my way, I'm just saying that's the way I do it—and, I write and look at what I've written, and then I rewrite, again, by hand. And I make subtle changes, and I may look at it tomorrow and rewrite the three-hundred or four-hundred words that I wrote the previous day until I get them to my satisfaction. I won't revise much at the end of a project because I will have revised throughout the project. I want it where each word is foundational, it's part of the architecture, so it *has* to be the *right word*. And, you work for years to learn to trust your instincts. I know, now, the karma comes back to me almost immediately. I know whether I'm going in the right direction or not, pretty quickly. Now, it wasn't like that when I was younger. I had a lot of false starts. I threw away a lot of manuscripts. I don't do that now—I don't have time to do that now. I'm fifty-years old. If I've learned anything, uh, I shouldn't have as many of those false starts as I once had. But, you also lose something in the “fire and inspiration” that comes with being a younger writer. (I: Um-hmm.) Robert Frost said that if you waited until you learned everything you needed to learn about the craft of writing, you would be fifty-years old before you started. (I: Hmm.) We always work with insufficient knowledge. I work with insufficient knowledge, but not as much as I used to work with. And I hope, if I live, that by the time I'm seventy, and if I'm still writing and can write, that I will know more than I do now. It's, it's, uh, it's an interesting activity. It's one of the few activities, uh, in which aging results, or should result, in more concentrated work, but you lose something, too. There's always a tradeoff, the more craft you know, um, the less inspiration, to a certain extent, you have. But, it's less haphazard, too. And getting the work done, then, becomes more important the older you get.

I: What exactly is the inspiration?

P: Well, I think it gets back to that business we were talking about, about “the monkey on your back.” Uh, you know, do you have to be a disappointed child to be...I asked my class, uh, my creative writing class every semester, do you have to have a bad childhood to be a good writer? Well, nooooo, I don't think so, *BUT* it may help. Uh, in other words, are there things you want to...are there wrongs you want to right? (I: Um-hmm.) Why would anybody write if not to create a better world, or at least a world in which the truth seems more apparent than falsehood? What I'm suggesting, I think, is that, um, something Faulkner said one time...uh, Delmor Shwartz or someone was pontificating to him in Hollywood about, um, the writer's role to society and wasn't he concerned with that and wasn't that why he wrote fiction and really adopting a kind of Marxist view and Faulkner said, “No, I just like to make things up.” Well, there's a lot of

disingenuousness in a statement like that, you know, because obviously Faulkner was doing more than just making things up. But, I think he makes an important point: You want to improve upon life; you want to right certain wrongs; you want to be able, um, to raise humanity above the water level of mediocrity; you serve *life* rather than *system* when you write; you sever human beings. And, I think that, I think that's what Faulkner was getting at: That life on an ordinary—what is today? Tuesday? (I: Tuesday.)—life on an ordinary Tuesday can be dreary business, and, uh, by going into the world you create, you can improve upon it. That or at least give a name to that dreariness so that it's bearable. The worst thing in the world is to not have a name for something, isn't it? That's all I try to do is to give a name to things that would otherwise be unbearable.

- I: It sounds as if that, although it's that gnawing inside of you that makes you want to write, that the writing is just not for you, though.
- P: No! No! I, I, uh, that's a good point. I think I probably started writing out of a therapeutic impulse, but found out very quickly that you have to... (long pause while P. looks upward and taps his pressed hands to his chin) I'm sorry, um, you have to be able to take that impulse and create something larger for other people. I know writers for whom writing is nothing more than therapy, but that's not the case for me. Uh, it seems to me that there are too many writers for whom their work is simply that. I think you must speak to "*other*." I think you have to connect through the miracle of dialogue with other people for your work to be significant. Who wants to write solipsism? Who wants to write something that has no meaning for anybody but the writer locked in his or her own head? For me, it's connection. For me, that's the blessed miracle of the event of writing—that I connect with you. When you, when you say something to me about my work that let's me know it spoke that it spoke to you, uh, in some significant way—that it gave you an insight or a name for something that maybe troubles all of us, then I've done something important. I got a letter today from a former student and writer and one of the things that, uh, she talked about was entering this world of writing, this world she is creating, and how unsatisfying, at times, that world is, but how even more unsatisfying the so-called "real world" is. I don't see writing as an escape, though. I see it as an engagement, an engagement with "*other*." So, I want my reader to be engaged. I'm not writing simply for myself.
- I: You mentioned the word "significant." (I: Um-hmm.) Who decides whether or not the work is significant?
- P: That's a good question, too. Um, actually the word "significant," for me, can be summed up in a question: Does the work signify? We get into a whole theory of semiotics here and Charles Sanders Peirce and, uh, a theory of, again, connection and connectedness. I was thinking about that just a moment ago when you asked me the question. Uh, we have a sender and a receiver if you want to adopt a

simple model. But, we also have this strange and miraculous occurrence, the third part of this art, in which this signification takes place. And, it can only take place in human beings, in people's minds, because it's not sign behavior it's symbolic behavior. Now, nobody really understands that, you know what I mean. Nobody really understands what happens either in the brain or in the soul, whatever terminology you want to use. But something miraculous happens. You remember—I know you know this story well—Helen Keller, down there in Alabama and the day that she understood...the day the spark crossed the commensure and she understood that those three fingers meant “water” as a symbol, not simply as a sign. She said that at that moment she became a human being because she was able to interpret a symbol and not simply respond to a sign. And her whole world blossomed for her in that instant. Do you remember what she did? Uh, she went around, uh, touching everything and asking Anne Sullivan what it was. She hadn't been able to do that before. Well, that's a miraculous thing...some sort of God-given thing, you know. And, of course, even our own religious traditions sanctify the process of naming (I: Absolutely.) And, you know, John 1:1: “In the beginning was the *word* and the *word* was made flesh.” Well, you know, God calls things into existence. With what? *Words*. And, that's what writers try to do is to call things into existence, uh, with words. Now, back to your original question: How do we know when those things signify? Well, the response comes back to us in words. When you tell me that a poem that I have written means something important to you, connects at some essential level with your own experience and seems to illuminate that experience, then *I know* that connection has been made. I have signified. Now, language is subject to all the laws of thermodynamics, unfortunately. The Second Law of Thermodynamics is “everything wears out, runs down.” Language does, too. Language can become clichéd. It can be so used, misused, and overused that it becomes meaningless: It no longer signifies. So, the writer must constantly be aware that language is subject to “a fall” as well. That language is subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, so what does that mean? Well, you try to avoid clichés. You try to find ways to, uh, vivify, to give life to the language so that it can give life to the experience it symbolizes-it represents.

- I: Because without that “life” in the language, when it becomes clichéd, there's no more meaning?
- P: That's right, there is no meaning...in that language. So, that's the task, uh, for the writer, particularly in a time in which so many people live on cultural islands. I mean the postmodern dilemma. Once upon a time, of course, the modernists understood that consciousness had fragmented, but they didn't mistake the island, or the part, for the whole. (I: Okay.) Now we mistake the island for the whole. I'm floating along on my little cultural island, my little archipelago, and you're on yours, and we seem to have trouble connecting. We don't seem to have a common language. And, so much of the language becomes clichéd very quickly because we live in an information society that overexposes the language through

advertising. I heard, uh, um, Fred Chappell say once that there was a lot of poetry around, it was just low voltage poetry in the form of advertising and marketing. (I: Mmm.) Well, no, that's not true. It's so low voltage it's inconsequential, insignificant. And, even if it has some voltage, by virtue of over exposure—again, using semiotic theory—it will become extinct very quickly. It will lose any meaning it had. Now, that brings us to an interesting point because language comes out of silence, out of the void of silence. In other words, silence is just as important as language in being able to produce significant and meaningful words. It's just not what I say, but what I leave unsaid that resonates with a reader.

I: Could you give me an example?

P: Let me go back to what I was saying just a moment ago about contemporary culture, about public language—language that is prepared to sell you line of goods. You walk into a school in Denver, Colorado, and you look at a, at a, at a sign on the wall because corporations are trying to buy the schools, you know. And it says, “M&M’s are better than straight “A’s.” Well, they aren’t, of course, but that’s beside the point. There is intent, a propaganda behind a statement like that. But, what happens to the language on that poster if I see it day after day after day? Well, whatever uniqueness, cleverness, or novelty it once had, it evaporates quickly. It’s meant to be digested and forgotten. Language that is remembered, language that as Ezra Pound says, “The news that stays news,” does not come out of a constant frenzied effort to produce something transitory and to replace it. It comes out of an effort to produce something significant and lasting. And, for me, it seems that that sort of language comes out of meditative silence. (I: Hmm.) It must come out of...the words are born out of silence. We have a generation of folks who believe words are born out of more words. I don’t think that is true. I think if the mystics understood something it was that, uh, significant words—words that are lasting—must come out of the void of quiet. How do you compose? Writers compose in solitude. They compose in silence. They avoid, uh, noise of a certain kind. If all I read is a steady diet of John Grisham or Danielle Steel, I’m not going to be able to produce a better book than John Grisham or Danielle Steel. To me, those are awfully noisy books, if that makes any sense. Would you return to one of them to learn something? I can’t imagine. But, if I teach Shakespeare’s *King Lear* thirty times, as I have probably done, the thirty-first time I will gain insights, knowledge of the human condition, some sense of what it means to be a human being “in extremis.” I will learn all of those things and relearn them.

I: Can you think of times when words were born out of a meditative silence for you—a specific example?

P: I think the fact that I sit in one place and write in one place a good deal of the time, that place for me is a place of quiet. It’s a place where I can center myself (pause) and let the words come to me instead of trying to wrench them out of the

air. Sometimes you have to sit and be very still and quiet. I know I can work too hard to get the words I need, in which case I have to get up and, paradoxically, forget what it is I'm doing so that those insights will come to me—the muse will speak to me again. You can work too hard. You can try to wrestle the muse. And, of course, you know, the conscious process is very important. Again, the craft is very important, but you also have to be open to those unconscious impulses...to the voice that will speak to you when you are not *trying* to talk to it. I'll give you an example. (I: Sure.) I didn't know three or four days ago where I was going in this chapter of a novel I'm working on. I just came up against a wall. And I thought to myself, "Why did you get started on this chapter without having a more careful plan?" I usually plan more carefully. I just did not know where these two characters were going to go with this conversation, and so I fretted and fumed and tried to, uh, wrench words out of these characters, and I realized that the writing wasn't any good. So, I left it. I got up and left it and went and did something totally unrelated to writing...usually I can get in the shower—sometimes that works for me. Maybe it's the water. Uh, but in this particular case I went out walking. And, I had a stick, I was playing with a stick and walking, and suddenly the two insights I needed *came* to me. They *came* to me; I didn't go after them.

I: What was *that* like? You say they "came" to you.

P: I let my conscious mind rest enough that my unconscious could talk to me and answer the question for me, could solve the problem for me. And, I've noticed that a lot of my writing is solving problems...a lot of writing is solving problems. Nobody wants to think that, but it is. It's just how you get from A to B. How can I get the character to walk across the room? It is very practical. How do I solve the problem of getting to *this* place? Now, the novel I'm working on right now, I know the last sentence of that novel, but I'm probably only a third of the way through. I have some sense that I'm about a third of the way home, and that is what you're doing: You're trying to get home. But, I know how it is going to end. I know the last sentence of this novel so I write everything so that I'll arrive at that place, at that sentence. (Pause) So you have a plan...Eudora Welty once said—was asked, uh, a student asked her at a conference, "Ms. Welty, do you always know how your stories are going to end?" She said, "Of course I do. I wouldn't write them if I didn't." But, now, you as a reader still have a sense of discovery when you read Eudora Welty's stories as if you and the writer are discovering the same thing at the same time. She creates that illusion for you. Doesn't she? If I read "A Worn Path," which is a marvelous story, I don't get any sense that she's giving away anything. I get the sense the writer and I are discovering along with Phoenix (the protagonist in "A Worn Path") what will happen next.

I: At what point does discovery become discovery? She could have discovered the ending first (P: She probably did.) and is that still discovery in your experience?

- P: Sure, she probably did, but she's going to create—and again, this is where her craft comes in—she's going to create the *illusion* of anticipation, of hesitancy and expectation of the new, and, um, again she knows her craft well enough that she can do that. I tell my students that feeling and believing aren't enough. You can feel something intensely; you can believe in something intensely, but you have to *know* how to create the illusion of those things for your reader.
- I: There seems to be much attention paid to “others” in your experience. How do you balance writing for others and balance being spiritually and emotionally invested in your writing?
- P: Well, I think, uh, um, I probably create an imaginary audience. Uh, it's always apparent to me, at least in the back of my mind, that I'm writing for people...that I'm not trying to create clever exercises. Um, it's a problem with some poets. You get the sense that they are hermetically sealed in their own experience, and they demand that as a reader that I break in to that experience in some way. They're not going to be very generous or charitable in letting me come into that place. The worst form of that is cleverness, that “wink in the mirror” cleverness: “I'm in on the joke, but you aren't.” Someone like John Ashberry and his early work. He always gave me that impression of not being a very generous poet, of being locked within himself. Wallace Stevens—I know that this is heresy, but I think Wallace Stevens, um, spawned a generation of people (telephone rings and P. notices that it is a call for which he has been waiting.) We were talking about Wallace Stevens. Uh, I have great admiration for his ability to create music in poetry, but so much of his poetry is obscure. (I: Mm-hmm.) Almost deliberately so, uh, intensely personal and subjective and as a result, I'm not sure what his relationship is to me as a reader, or if there even is one or whether he's carefully concerned about whether I'm a reader or not. So, I suppose that there are poets who are...who keep their distance, and there are poets who are more connected, and I suppose I am in the second group. That doesn't mean, by the way, that I'm...that I cater to this imaginary audience that I've created. On the contrary, I don't at all. It just means that I'm aware that I'm writing for other human beings, and that, uh, it seems to me that, again, if all you need is therapy, well, writing can certainly do that for you. (I: Um-hmm.) But, why would you stay at that very long?
- I: What's the “catering” mean?
- P: I don't, uh, think...it never occurs to me to say, “Will this book be a best seller? What do I need to do to pander to the tastes of the American reading public?” It wouldn't occur to me. Someone once asked me, “Couldn't you write a blockbuster?” It's such an absurd question. I *couldn't* because I *won't*. Everything in me would scream out against, uh, doing that.
- I: Even though that would mean a bigger audience?

- P: Absolutely. Absolutely. (I: And more connections?) Well, the quality of the connection, I think, would probably suffer a great deal. Do I want to add to the noise out there? Or, is it more important to say something meaningful, significant, arresting to, um, a potentially smaller group of folks. It depends on what you want to do, and what I want to do is to shake people down to their foundations, to give them something powerful and beautiful and arresting—something they won't forget...not just something that will add to the great junk pile despair that's already out there. I heard Robert Penn Warren one time, someone asked him, "Have you read such-and-such a book?" And he said, "Nooo, life's too short and that book's too long." Well, there are a lot of them out there like that, aren't there. (I: Um-hmm.) I gave my son ten books for high school graduation, invoking the island scenario: If you were on an island, what ten books would be indispensable for you as a human being? And, we are all on psychic islands at one time or another. And, uh, I spent weeks thinking about those books—which ones I thought he would need to have. And, we were talking yesterday at the movies, and I said to him, "Those ten, I think, you could take to the island and spend your life reading and would still be repaid by the end of your life.
- I: I can't help but to be curious...
- P: Which ten?! (Both laugh)
- I: Probably not the greatest question for this protocol; however, maybe it will be because it's part of your experience as a person who writes.
- P: Exactly! Exactly! Uh, I said, first of all, the *King James Bible*. I said that it was poetry and spoke the heart of God. It's human poetry that speaks the heart of God. I also have on the list *The Odyssey*, and I pointed out that *The Odyssey* is more than just a story about some old people taking a trip across the Aegean. That it was a blueprint for certain kind of psychological and spiritual states...that you can read it as an allegory—a kind of psychological or spiritual allegory. It's also just a damn good story, too. All the unguarded human passions are there in that story. Then I said, umm, I gave him a modern day odyssey in the form of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. And, I told him, I said, "Now, if you actually read this, you won't have a chance, ever, of being shallow." Nobody who's ever read James Joyce's *Ulysses* could be said to be shallow. There's just too much there that will have an impact on you and will transform your humanity. (I: Mmm.) Then, with that in mind, someone once said of William Faulkner that if you're satisfied with your humanity, don't bother reading Faulkner. But if you still think there is something to learn, *Absalom, Absalom* is a good place to start...that the epistemology of the world may be in that book. Certainly all the questions about human nature that anybody would want to raise, Faulkner probably answers quite a few of them dramatically, at least. *War and Peace*...I gave him *War and Peace*, not because it's supposed to be on anybody's list of books, but because, um, great

stories are usually about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. That's certainly what that book is about. Tolstoy understood that. I also gave him the complete works of Shakespeare. If you fall under the Bard's spell, you will never be the same again. (I: Absolutely.) Uh, all of these things, by the way, do something to the circuitry of your brain. (chuckles) Uh, they imprint experience in an indelible way on your brain, but they're more than intellectual exercises. I had, um, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I told him that the absolutists and the relativists had both misread it, but that Huck and Jim would steer them past their prejudices. I also had (pause) Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* because men's and women's ways are different. And a book I especially love is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because we don't all see with the same eyes, and it's important, sometimes, to borrow someone else's vision for a while. That's communal, that's community. She speaks across the barrier for me: the barriers of race, class, gender... That's true genius. And, she doesn't forsake her experience, simultaneously. That's what I mean about audience. Umm, I love Langston Hughes's poetry. Now, you may say, "Well, how can a white, southern male even understand all the codes in Langston Hughes's poetry?" A case could be made that I don't, I suppose; but, I think I do: Not because of me but because of *him* and his ability to reach across the gulf without, in any way, denigrating the integrity of his experience or the experience of his people. That's genius, isn't it? Somebody who gives us something that did not exist before that reaches across chasms that were thought to be so wide and deep that we couldn't possibly make connections with people unlike us. That's what I would ideally like to do in my work is reach across the chasm (I: And make those connections.) Exactly.

- I: You say this ability to make those connections (P: Um-hmm.) is something that has taken you some time to become better (P: Absolutely.) and is a process that you see continuing on (P: Absolutely.) until you...
- P: Give it up! Give up the ghost! (laughs) Until I have "shuffled this mortal coil," I suppose I will do it. Again, I can't imagine not doing it. I suppose that I could have some sort of, uh, something could occur that would limit me physically that would keep me from writing. But, uh, I can't imagine just giving it up.
- I: It would have to be something external to prevent you (P: That's right.) from writing. (P: Right.) You don't think it will be ever be a choice...(P: No! No.) because it can't be a choice?
- P: Not any more! At one time it could have been. I remember a time when I was young, uh... oh, I had plenty of days where I wondered, "Is this what I should be doing?" I think every—*every*—young writer has days where he or she wonders, "Have I strayed down the wrong path?" And some have sense enough to turn around and get out of the woods. (Laughs.) Some just go on. I remember one day thinking, "I've invested so much in this, I can quit now or I can continue

without any certainties, without any assurances, now, what am I going to do?" And I made a conscious choice in a moment to keep doing this no matter what. (I: "This" being the writing?) That's right. No matter what. And you do make sacrifices. Uh, I could have been some tyrannical lawyer somewhere and made three million dollars a day: I'm bright, argumentative, and thorough. Uh, I think writing is far less harmful. (Laughs.) That doesn't mean it isn't dangerous; it is. But, uh, it is ostensibly less harmful to people than a whole tribe of lawyers assaulting them and their sensibilities. So I think I made the right choice, BUT your family, if you have a family and they're around you and you're a writer, they're aware of the sacrifices that they make on your behalf. I've never been on a vacation when I didn't write. Now, I try to be considerate and I get up early and write so that I can be a human being the rest of the day. (I: Okay.) But, it's a very, very hard balancing act at times—You know this: You're a father, you're a husband, you're a teacher...all of the things that I am. You know how hard it is. You know that as Walker Percy says, "You go into that place where you orbit"—that transcendent place of intense concentration where time loses all meaning. You have this hyperawareness, and then you're supposed to come back and be an ordinary human being—you're supposed to come down because you have to pick up the kids at three o'clock. Right? Now, how do you manage that? Well, some people don't manage it very well. Some people are irritable, some drink, some do drugs, some beat their wives...Um, I try not to do any of those things, certainly not to excess, but, uh (P. and I. laugh.) But, it seems to me that, uh, once again, that orbiting is a precarious situation for a writer and the people close to him or her. It must be terrible being married to a writer, even a good one. I tell my wife, I say, "You know, I orbit very well." I come down pretty well. I've trained myself to be able to "shut it off" and to go do ordinary things. But, we both know that you're always a writer. You're never not a writer.

- I: Could you explain to me a little more about that, about your not "shutting it off"?
- P: I don't think you can after a certain point. I think your whole orientation, your whole awareness and consciousness, is geared to seeing the way a writer sees and hearing the way a writer hears. I don't just engage people without the prospect of thinking about how a writer sees an encounter. Will I use that encounter? When I look out on the landscape, I'm not just enjoying its beauty, I'm thinking about how I'm going to recreate that beauty with language. I'm already trying to put that scene into words. When I hear people talk, or overhear people talk, I hear it as dialogue between characters in a book. In this interview, I'm trying to be as precise and deliberate as I can be because the medium here is language, and I want to say something important—something that you can use that gives some insight into the process. So there's a quality of deliberation that a writer takes to every experience, realizing that there are two experiences going on simultaneously: the one he is having and the one he may create from the one he's having. (I: Mmm.) So, I'm never not a writer. I write in my sleep. By the way, I don't keep a dream journal or any of that sort of thing. If the dream is important

enough for me to remember, I'll remember it—I'll work it in, and I usually interpret my own dreams and why they're significant. My unconscious is pretty primitive and tells me when I'm doing something stupid or not. And, uh, I think, um, that you're always writing if you're a serious writer. You get to the point where you can't not do that. It is a habit of being.

- I: Even though you can engage (P: Oh, yeah.) and have to (P: That's right.) because going back to "Lilith's Daughter" you were looking at a newspaper (P: That's right.) and engaging—using your words here—when you engage, your engaging, actually, on two different levels: On the level of person-to-person...
- P: Right. One hopes a kind of empathy. Right? And at the same time, how do I translate that empathy into an expression that will, again, touch a number of people...that will be "communal," ultimately. (I: Right.) I could have left Melisha Gibson in my mind. I could have forgotten that incident. Goodness knows that there are thousands of others I have probably forgotten that I should have paid more attention to but I didn't in that particular case. So, one of the things you do as a writer is learn to trust your instincts. If something is tugging at you, there is a reason why. There's a reason why an image, uh, an idea keeps recurring. You probably remember places in your childhood, scenes that come back with almost photographic clarity. There's an image to me—sometimes I try to fantasize about some sort of Utopian place where I can go and calm myself, you know, the way the "how-to" books tell you you should. (Both laugh.) And, uh, it never works for me because I always end up in my grandfather's yard in the country and, uh, surrounded by rattlesnakes and copperheads because he caught these snakes and kept them in cages and would take them to the fair each year. So, the snake is always in my garden, I guess, isn't it? Both literally and symbolically. I can't manage to create, um, a paradise of sorts in which the snake isn't there. He was crazy, of course. (I: Your grandfather?) Yes. And mean. I ask him when I was a child, "Why do you keep those snakes?" He said, "Well, only my friends come to see me." He said, "If you keep snakes, only your friends will show up." He didn't have many friends.
- I: It comes to mind that in your collection of poems snakes come up often.
- P: They are there, aren't they. Uh, I have a poem called "Snake." George Scarborough said that's the finest poem about a snake since D. H. Lawrence. I appreciate that praise—I don't know if it is or not, but, um, snakes do come up. Worms come up, I have worms, I have my grandmother milling around with worms, and at one point, of course, I have a poem called "Shark," which is again about a threat, something threatening coming up out of the abyss. Uh, those poems are really poems about anxiety, I think.
- I: Then there's the poem that begins something like, "The poet sits in the mouth of the serpent."

- P: Oh, yeah, I forgot about that one. “Down in the mouth of the serpent.” The serpent, of course, is an object of fascination. The serpent is a symbol of wisdom. So there’s always something threatening about wisdom, isn’t there?
- I: Sure. Connecting all of this back to your experiences, would you say all of this is part of that baggage of the monkey that rides you?
- P: Yes! That’s right. See, I don’t see why anybody would want to do this if he or she didn’t have that monkey—didn’t *have* to. It’s too hard. It’s *hard*. It requires too much of you in terms of energy and intellect and emotion. Shelby Foote—I keep quoting writers because, not because I’m dropping names but because, uh, they mean so much to me (I: Okay.) Uh, writers depend on other writers. What, I’ve probably referred to half-a-dozen or more writers in the short time we’ve been talking, and again, it’s not because I’m dropping names. It’s because they have said things that mean something to me and help move me along. I am indebted to them. Umm (long pause) (I: Shelby Foote.) He said, “No one wants to hear this, but the one characteristic a writer needs most, that is often overlooked, is intelligence.” You have to keep so many things in mind at one time. (I: Yeah.) People like to think that writing is some unreflected activity, and, uh, it’s not. That somehow you’re just this, uh, container. I don’t think that’s true, I think it’s an enormous activity of engagement, and it does require great intelligence to do it well. You have to keep so many things in mind simultaneously, things that are often contradictory, opposing tendencies: Keats’s negative capabilities, Shakespeare’s ability to keep opposites in a state of tension, of suspension. And, that takes a mind that is alert and active and aware, and again, writers being human, sometimes you’re more tired than at other times, sometimes you’re sick, sometimes you’re just “off” for whatever reason, you’re not centered. And you just work very *hard*. This is too hard to undertake it without the utmost seriousness. I was at a party one time and a neurosurgeon told me that he had a lot of interesting experiences as a neurosurgeon and that he was thinking about becoming a writer so he could write them down. And in smart-ass fashion I said, “Well, you know I’ve always thought I’d like to be a neurosurgeon. I may take that up in a couple of weeks.” (I. chuckles.) And he looked stunned and then immediately, uh, became angry that I had exposed him as a fraud. I mean, how *dare* he depreciate what it’s taken me thirty years to learn to do. So I put it on a level, uh, at which we could both have mutual understanding. It’s a lot harder than, um, almost any activity I can imagine, and I’ve done other things. Goodness knows, teaching is hard. You’re always a failure. You’re always rising out of the ashes, aren’t you—Phoenix like. Writing is even...even, uh—it takes its toll. Sometimes people can’t do those two things together: teach and write. They draw from the same well, and the well runs dry sometimes. So, you have to those periods of...gestation, you have to let the well fill up again, you have to do things that will—for me, usually, that’s reading—reading other people.
- I: That brings to mind a question. You talked about being indebted to writers (P:

Um-hmm.) and how they helped “move you along,” (P: That’s right.) and you have just talked about learning, that it has taken you thirty years to learn. Would you talk some about your experience of learning to write? What that means to you.

P: I was heartened one time to hear that William Faulkner, sitting down there in that little study in Oxford, Mississippi, would read for thirty minutes and put the book down and write for an hour. And then pick up the book for another thirty minutes...and you certainly see examples of appropriate literary theft in his work. We do not develop as writers in a vacuum. Uh, now, that doesn’t mean you have to imitate everyone who has ever written, but what it does mean is that, uh, the more choices you have available to you as a writer, the better writer, presumably, you can be. And, those choices are the works of other people who influence you at various times. Your history as a writer is your history of what you’ve read. And, how did I learn? Well, I learned by reading people who spoke to my condition at various times in my life. And, I can see their influence on me, but I was also aware that I had a story to tell. And, I would borrow techniques. I sometimes pick up a book just to see how an author manages a flashback technique. Nobody writes flashbacks better than Flannery O’Conner. Or maybe first-person point-of-view. I need to see how a writer can sustain first-person point-of-view so I might look at Walker Percy, you see. And, if I know these things, I can simply pull the book off the shelf and remind myself how this writer did it so that I can, uh, not steal lines and phrases and passages, but techniques—a way of doing, a way of seeing. So I borrow those.

I: So, to learn the mechanical aspects of writing, you read?

P: Absolutely. And study, again, with that dual vision we were talking about earlier. I don’t read a book the way a reader, an ordinary reader, does. I read a book as a writer does. How did this writer accomplish this page? How did this writer create an illusion so credible that I forgot that I was looking at the craft? That’s real craft to be able to do that. So I go back and study that page. I never read a book—not in years have I read a book, uh, in which I did not have pen in hand. I don’t know how to read without a pen in hand.

I: What do you do with the pen?

P: I remark in the margins what the writer is doing and how the writer is doing it, how well or how poorly is accomplishing a particular effect.

I: Essentially creating a dialogue?

P: Exactly. I’m responding to the...that’s my response. It certainly is. So, uh, I have learned a great deal from the people I’ve read over the years, and, uh, I’m amazed, I’m surprised at times, I go back and read something I’ve written and I’ll hear a writer’s voice in that. For example, my poem “Mowing” is a self-

conscious response to Robert Frost's poem by the same title, only where he uses the iambic line to create the sway of the scythe as it's cutting in the higher grass, my poem, necessarily, must account for different technology. I'm using the lawnmower. So, um, the motion of the lawnmower is going to be very different from the sickle or the scythe. So my line breaks are different, the sounds are different. But I couldn't have written that poem as effectively, I hope it's effective, as I did without Robert Frost's earlier effort. That's the best homage I can pay a writer.

- I: If we could, I would like to go back to when you said remember making a conscious decision and continuing on. You also said that "writing is something that I have to do." Um, could you talk about how hold those things together in your experience?
- P: (Wrinkles his brow and begins to nod.) Um...that's, uh. Thank you. That's, uh...you've given me an insight now. Um, "holding those things together"...I think I probably made that decision based on whether it would have caused me more despair to quit or more despair to continue. And I guess I thought it would have caused me more despair to quit at that time. And, if you forsake the process, can you ever get it back? I'm sure that thought occurred to me. Writers are a spooky people. They are superstitious. Uh, I have to write with a certain pen, and, uh, I have to have a certain place, and, uh, there are all kinds of habits. They are as bad as third base coaches in baseball. You know, you have all these ticks and rituals that you have perform just to be able to sit down and do it. And, you know when your rituals are being violated. But, I think I must have decided that it would have been more disappointing not to continue than to continue. And, of course, it sounds as if I'm putting the whole thing in a negative context. I'm not, because I can't think of any greater joy—uh, well, there are some. I suppose rearing one's children, okay, loving one's wife. These are joyful things. They're just as hard as writing if not harder. But we're talking about work now, and I can't think of anything harder than writing and more potentially disappointing than writing. But I also can't think of anything for which there is a greater underlying joy. (I: Hmm.) You may not always be satisfied with the results, and God knows that you may not be satisfied that you have the audience you have or *don't* have the audience you *wish* you had, but it's a joyful activity. And it is life serving. You are serving life rather than systems. And, by the way, a lot of writing programs are just systems. (I: Hmm.) Codified techniques for which you get a certificate, a diploma, or a pat on the back or some nominal attention if you complete the rigors. I never took a creative writing course in my life. How many have I taught? Hundreds? I never took one. I tried it one time. I walked into a class, sat for half the class and eased out because I knew I needed to learn what I needed to learn on my own. So, there is a certain stubbornness that a writer has to have, so you don't get caught up in somebody else's game, and goodness knows there is a lot of gamesmanship out there, particularly in writing conferences and in the academy where, uh, writing programs promise all sorts of things. What they

actually deliver, I'm not sure.

I: Getting caught up in the game and being stubborn. Are we talking about not letting the "other" impose too far in one's writing life?

P: Uh-huh, uh-huh. I've seen students of mine go away to writing programs that damaged them irreparably. They would come back to me and say, "I spent five years trying to write like so-and-so wanted me to. I found out that I couldn't do it. I was disappointed, frustrated; I feel that I lost, not only time, but direction." A good writing teacher has to be someone who isn't attracting disciples, somebody who is trying to bring out the best in that *student's* work so that student is no longer indebted to him or her. And, again, uh, it's the rare person who can do that, I think, because too many people want followers. They want to see themselves reflected in the work of their students. My approach is that I want to see my students, uh, give, uh, create something that, um, makes us all better...that makes us grateful. I want to read something that, uh, speaks to me, uh, and, uh, I don't care who does it. And, if I can help somebody do it, what an honor that is.

I: Is there anyone for you between the isolation you experience when you write and this larger "other"?

P: Well, Linda, my wife, is a reader in good faith, and her instincts are unassailable. Uh, there are two or three other folks with whom I share work, not consistently, but, uh, maybe because I think they will be interested in something I'm writing. I probably, when I was less sure of myself, or maybe less delusional than I am now (laughs), uh, I used to let more people in on my process. But one thing I found is that you can dissipate your energy that way. Um, you can't write by committee; you are the ultimate arbiter—you're the ultimate judge of your work. Now, you can't be so arrogant and stubborn that you don't take advice. You need to take advice. At the same time, you have to decide, um, what you've written is what you want it to be. And sometimes, you know, you get into the psychology of readership here, um, you have to trust this person, to whom you're giving the work, to put his or her ego aside and neurosis and all sorts of things, in order to be able determine what you've actually done. Now my wife, of course, is an American literature scholar. She's well read. When she sits down and reads my work, she rarely imposes her relationship with me on the work. She looks at it as a work of literature or a work of art and asks, "Does it work?" Where does it work; where doesn't it work; what would make it better? She is an invaluable ally, but I certainly have some other folks, too. And if I'm working on a particular assignment—I say assignment whether I assign myself or someone else did—if I don't know something, I don't hesitate to ask people. You know, I started out as a young writer interviewing people and writing freelance, and I learned that it's important if you're going to produce a credible piece to know the details. The devil is in the details. So you need to be able to ask people questions. You need to be able to research.

I: You mentioned research very early in our conversation. You mentioned it while talking about “Lilith’s Daughter.” You had the idea and wanted to know what literature had to say about it. So you began by doing research on it. Could you tell me a bit more about the devil being in the details?

P: For me, credibility depends on research. Let me give you an example. In my novel *The Deal*, I’m writing about the late...

(END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B)

...this book is set in a time before I was born. And, as such, I rely on early childhood memories that are within reach of that time, but I had to do a lot of legwork research. I visited magazines, and a lot of them, just to get a feel for the late forties and early fifties: what people were driving, what refrigerators looked like, um, what people in the magazines wore, what the advertisements looked like, what articles were being read. I, of course, teach literary history and as a historian I know about the major historical events of the period-political events-but I had to look at little stories in the magazines. Um, I also in two instances had to do some extensive reading in order to be able to duplicate the process of lobotomy in the book. There is an excellent book called *Great and Desperate Cures* that I consulted, and it had a very fine bibliography, which gave me additional sources to consult because I wanted to make sure that, um, I understood the operation and all the horrors associated with it. I also spoke to people who had worked inside mental health facilities at that time. I talked to patients so that people who had been patients then, who obviously are very elderly now, so that I could get a sense of what it was like. I couldn’t of had a better moment then one I had at Borders reading back in the fall when Dr. Robert Zander, who had formerly been head of the clinical department at U.X., got up and said to me, “You got it! How did you get this so carefully?” He said, “I was in state mental hospitals at this time, and I want you to know that you have everything—there’s not a detail out of place here.” Well, I couldn’t have received a better compliment than having someone who had worked in those facilities at that time tell me that. I felt like I did my homework well. If Dr. Zander can say, “You got it,” then I must have had it. (I: So he confirmed...) He confirmed that. Uh, likewise, I have a character who is, who was in real life, Tennessee Williams’s aunt. She’s an inmate at the asylum. I had to do a great deal of research to find out whether she could have been there or not. Chances are she wasn’t there during the exact period of time I was writing about, but I do know that she was an inmate at Eastern State—that a good many of the Williams family ended up there at one time or another. And I do know that Tennessee Williams thought, I believe, to his dying day that his sister had been lobotomized at Eastern State. I heard him talk about this years ago before his death. He said that he loved East Tennessee, but that—for its beauty, its scenic beauty—but that he always felt appalled whenever he was here because his sister had been lobotomized at Eastern State. Now, when I started doing my research I found out that she was at Eastern State, but they moved her to Missouri to

perform the lobotomy. They later performed lobotomies over here, but, uh, I think to his dying day he thought that they had performed the operation over here. He was in New York at the time. So, I had to do my homework. Little things. Um, I had in my first draft an old fashioned tape recorder and the reels were going the wrong way. Well, an editor caught that. That's a little detail that you want to create a seamless illusion for your audience...a flawless illusion. So, all of those things are important. The research is incredibly important, and by the way, the research gives you ideas that you didn't have when you started the project. (I: Through "dual vision"?) Exactly. Exactly.

- I: The research begets more ideas. I'm also struck by how so much is involved in an act of writing. You begin with a story, but the story requires research. Then when you write there are certain times and certain places, but you walk around constantly living while observing to get more ideas. And most everyday there is a minimum of words you produce. There seems to be so much more in your experience of writing than just sitting down and the physical act of writing. For you, it seems to me, writing...it's a life.
- P: It's an act of being. That's right. It is an act of being. Um, it is a way of life... *A* life, you're right. It's inseparable now from who I am. I don't wake up and think, "Well, I'm a writer." I don't have to do that. It's as close to me as my skin.
- I: Another part of your life you mentioned "meditative silence," and you mentioned phrases such as "gnawing at me" and "a tugging." Would you talk a little more about the writing, such as "Lilith's Daughter," the writing that is done in your head and the meditative silence?
- P: Everything in our culture militates against what I'm talking about, that meditative silence: the routinization of life, the emphasis on McDonaldization, efficiency. I mean, how often do you find somebody who says, "Oh, I have time for that" and means it? And yet, one of the conditions of writing is this leisure, this looking like you're not doing anything, but you are. You are engaged in that meditative silence. You're observing. Uh, you're, uh, in a kind of place of hyperawareness. It seems to me that writers have to work very hard not to get caught up in all the regimens of life that other people accept normally. Let me give you an example. Years ago in an interview in *Esquire*, Walker Percy talked about how he wrote during the mornings and then he would go and get a haircut, let's say. Try to be an ordinary human being, right? Come down from orbiting. And the barber would say, "Dr. Percy, what do you do?" And he would say, "I'm a writer." And the barber would respond, "No really, what do you do?" And Percy would say, "Nothing." And the guy was satisfied (Laughs) with that answer. Nobody knows what you do if you're a writer, but if you're a good-for-nothing, everybody can sort-of understand that at least. But part of being a writer is being "good-for-nothing," not being so caught up in "things" that people think are important—"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," as Wordsworth said—making a

living in the most ferocious way possible. And, so, you've got to be able...one of the criteria for being a writer is having some leisure, and by leisure I don't mean the way most people spend their time in leisure, which is just more frenzied activity—let's go have a vacation...by god, we *will* have fun—but rather sometimes doing nothing, being in that state of awareness, that state in which you are not trying to make anything for profit, you're not trying to meet a deadline, you're not trying to convey a certain amount of information the way we teachers are expected to do so that we have outcomes. In fact, you can't have an outcome at all. You can't predict where it's going to go, where the mind, the unreflected mind will take you, at what point it meets the reflected mind. I mentioned Percy. I had the good fortune to talk with him on a couple of occasions, and one time we were talking about a writer we knew in common. And, uh, this was somebody who was always going to write something first thing tomorrow, always going to write a best seller tomorrow, just as soon as he got around to it. And Percy said, "You know what he needs?...a good case of Alabama lazy ass." In other words, he was so caught up in the writing life that he never got any writing done because he couldn't disengage himself from activities and the frenzy associated with the arts. I mean writers can be just as bad about that as anybody else. I tell my students, "Don't talk something to death. Don't go tell everybody what you're working on because you lose the energy. You won't want to write it then. You've got to have that sense of being full, and it's got to spill out there, and you're ready to get it written down. There's a certain quality of secretiveness about it." A lot of writers don't like to talk about what they're working on because they think it hexes them to do that. And, um, I understand that. It's that you don't want to spoke the muse. You don't want denude the muse. You don't take her clothes off. You leave her alone, and let her display herself in her resplendent glory and, uh, you don't analyze the process so much that you destroy it. (I: Yeah.) Now, for me, um, that meditative silence then is also a metaphor for a certain kind of doing nothing while doing everything. And I'll tell you, one of the reasons that I write fiction is that you can put it on a schedule, you can get three-hundred words a day, which is a page. Then, you know, in a year you have three hundred pages and you have a novel, right? Poetry is different. You can't put it on a schedule, and it's far more harrowing, then, to write a poem then it is to write a piece of fiction. I think that's why it takes its toll on people who are just poets, who write only poetry. Lyric poets kill themselves with some significant regularity. I determined that years ago when I was young and thought, "Well, hell, you know, I'll be a novelist too." (Both laugh.) Artists, visual artists don't do that; they live to be old people. Novelists tend to live on up into the years, but if you remain a poet, you're always mining the depths and that's tough on body and soul. I have a poem in *Night, Child, and Morning* about my son asking me why I haven't written any poetry lately. You cannot write poetry and live a regimented life. You've got to be able to be "good-for-nothing." And, one of the things I'm doing right now is getting back into the habit of being good-for-nothing. I think I lost that for a while. I was writing so much on demand. The good thing about that is that you produce. In five years I've written, um, lengthy

introductions to an anthology of Southern literature, I've put out a book of poems, a novel, um, and numerous articles, so I can't say there isn't something important about, about habits of workmanship. But there's also the other side to that and it's that there are some things you can't write without that leisure of the mind. And, as I say, it's hard to teach five classes and find that. I try to make sure that those activities feed one another as much as I can. You know, I give assignments to my students that I do myself so that I can have the excuse to do them.

- I: Right. Something you mentioned you wanted talk about more, early on, and I wanted to make sure you had the opportunity to go back to that statement. You said that conclusions had always been hard for you, and we were specifically talking about "Lilith's Daughter." I don't know if you want to go back to that or not.
- P: I'll be happy to say something that I think is helpful or might be helpful to young writers is to know yourself as a writer. Do not have illusions about yourself. I know that I tend to rush conclusions. Again, I'm fifty years old and you would think I would learn not to that. Well, paradoxically I have learned not to do that by being aware that I do that. So, one of the things that I'm careful about is not to get in a hurry when I feel the end of a project coming on. I rewrote—out of this knowledge of myself and my process—the last chapter of "The Deal" three times before I was satisfied with it. And I'm much more satisfied now than I was with the first conclusion I wrote. Uh, I knew...there was this vague and gnawing sense that I had not written the best conclusion that I could right just yet, and I was tired. Part of it is that you want to finish the thing, (I: Sure.) especially if it's a poem because it's one of the odd paradoxes of being a poet is that you're not a poet unless you're writing a poem buy while you're writing a poem you want to get the thing done so that you can no longer be "poet," you don't have to be a poet anymore. But, writing fiction, again, is different. I'm a novelist all the time... a novelist all the time. Um, I know where I'm going to go tomorrow because I made marginal notes this morning about where to go tomorrow. I never stop that I don't know where I will pick up tomorrow. I make notes to myself; I don't trust my memory. (I: Yeah.) So, um, that gives me a sense of anticipation, a willingness to sit down tomorrow and do it again another day because I at least have an idea of where I'm going. Umm, in poetry that isn't always the case. You finish the poem, now are you a poet? Well, I don't know. You know, you may never write another poem. Right? (Both laugh.) And that causes some anxiety, too. I think...(long pause) that they're same process but one is more intense than the other—more intensified than the other. And, uh,...if I know that I'm rushing something, I consciously slow up. I know that that's a weakness I have. By the way, it's like playing basketball. You remember when your coach told you, "Well, don't just do lay ups from the right side; learn to do them from the left side, from the weak side." So you *hone* your strengths, but you also bolster your weaknesses as a writer—exercises, practicing things. Um, creating little exercises for yourself that will put you in your weakness so that you have to, uh, learn those

skills. Too many writers learn how to do one thing well and just keep doing it. Umm, I don't want to do that. I want to examine the shadow side, too, and know what my weaknesses are so that I can make strengths of those.

- I: That includes branching out to other genres?
- P: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. That's why I made the qualification early as we began talking that I'm a writer. I'm not "a" poet, "a" novelist, "an" essayist, "a" playwright, I'm a writer, and that covers the gamut. Uh, I know people, I know poets who don't write prose, who can't write prose or say they can't. Uh, I think if you can write, you can write. You may not write as well in one of those genres as others, but, uh, I've certainly tried to write in them all—have written a great deal in all of them.
- I: What you're talking about reminds me of what Robert Penn Warren said, "Poetry is the great schoolhouse of fiction." (P: Yeah. It is, indeed.) Now you are saying that one form of writing informs the others.
- P: Yeah, isn't that the case. You know, it's interesting, Warren is the only American who won Pulitzer prizes in two literary genres: poetry and fiction. He certainly knows what he's talking about. Read the first page of *All the King's Men*. If you don't think that isn't the sure hand of a poet writing. And you don't sit back and say, "Oh, this person is being self-consciously poetic."
- I: Okay, well Fugitive, let me go back through and touch on some of the things we talked about today. If there is anything missing or anything more you want to add, please jump in. (P: Okay, go right ahead.) We began with talking about "Lilith's Daughter" and how the poem was basically a response to an article you had read while in Washington. It was a case that was somewhat local to us as it happened in Cleveland. This occasion was more or less your birth (P: That's right.) as a writer. Um, the gestation period for that poem, interestingly enough, was nine months, and you were aware of the irony of giving birth to yourself as a writer with a poem about a dead child. (P: That's right.) That experience put you on a path of how you identify yourself. Then we got into the phrases of saying "something meaningful," (P: Um-hmm) having a monkey on your back," being certain that with any writing you do you are "emotionally and spiritually invested." (P: Right.) Um, that another aspect of your experience is this constant "gnawing," and that there is this "tugging." Within the context of this going on inside there is also this notion, in your experience, that the writing is "not just for me." (P: That's right.) It's for others.
- P: That's right. You transform that impulse: the personal impulse or the therapeutic impulse into something larger that connects with other people's experience.
- I: And the idea of connection, connection, connection came up repeatedly. And it seems to be between the experience "impulse" and the "other" you give over to

craft—that that’s where the writing is shaped and honed in order to go out. So, craft seems to bridge the impulse of self to the “other.”

- P: That’s right. That’s very good. Well put.
- I: It’s all your ideas, your words. (Both laugh.) I’m just trying to give it back. And what goes along that bridge, to you it is important that the writing is significant, that it “signifies” something. That it is “meaningful,” “powerful,” that it is “beautiful.” (P: Right.) You don’t give full responsibility over to the “other” to decide if it is significant or not. (P: That’s right. That’s right.) Yet, you don’t encapsulate yourself and determine by yourself that the writing is significant or powerful.
- P: Exactly. And let me just add then that is the existential quality of the work. The existential dilemma inherent in the work is that on the one hand, you’re right, you don’t...I do mediate the experience, um, and at the same time I don’t encapsulate myself. So, there is that sense of anxiety, if you will, about where that point ends, how’s it occurring, what’s going on at that point, and you have to be able to risk that, I think.
- P: This seems to be just another one of those tensions, these paradoxes we have talked about. (P: Right.) Several paradoxes have come up. Even the paradox of “I chose” to be a writer yet “I couldn’t choose” anything else. (P. laughs) The paradox of time. (P: Right.) The paradox of living in the world, yet always experiencing the world as one you will create. (P: That’s right.) At some point after talking about significance, you brought up the idea of silence being just as important as the words themselves. That words are born out of a meditative silence, and this silence is not necessarily what you experience only when you go to your special place, but you mentioned walking and playing with a stick...
- P: And driving. The thing about driving once you learn how to do it, you don’t have to concentrate on it every second with the same intensity with which you were learning, right, which lets you drift some. I don’t mean that...Uh, I mean, I’ve never had a ticket, and I’ve been driving a long time and fortunately never had an accident, but I could today, but the point is that, again, there’s a kind balance between the intuitive and the deliberate. So, driving is not a bad place to do some of this, you know.
- I: And you talked about “place,” though, as being an important part of that meditative silence (P: Right.) that you tend to write in a very predictable place...
- P: I *like* to. I can’t always, but I certainly like to.
- I: and with a predictable instrument, the pen. At some point...
- P: You know, the reason I do that, I feel like I’m making something with the pen. If

I used a word processor, I would feel like I'm transcribing something. That's a big difference for me.

- I: Making versus transcribing? (P: That's right.) Um, and for you, the making is part of solving the problem. (P: *Yeah. Yeah. That's good.*) It's getting from point A to point B. (P: Absolutely.) And what you don't like in your experience is that disingenuous "winking in the mirror."
- P: Absolutely. I don't like hermetically sealed writing. I don't like to read it, and I wouldn't waste my time doing it.
- I: Because you would have to do that in the absence of others, and that is an important part of writing for you. Um, you mentioned "dual vision" and the research also played an important role in your experience of writing. (P: That's right.) That's where you're found to be credible or not.
- P: Right. If I can create a credible illusion, I want to be able to do that.
- I: Right. And I have just one more thing that I want to ask a little bit about: when you go to these places of creative silence, you talked about inviting the muse and of the muse being an important part of the writing, and "the muse comes to you." But it strikes me that you do a hell of a lot of work (P. laughs loudly.) So, do you experience that the writing is given to you or do you find it?
- P: Yeah. We're striking a bargain here, you know, how much do I have (P. laughing raucously) I'm like the little tribesman down there sitting at the sticks and the totems, lighting the fire going, "Come on."...Yeah, that's a good point. That's funny. I haven't thought about that in that way. That's probably true. I do a lot of hard work to get the muse to come and stay for a while, you know, to make myself hospitable. So, I, I, I think you're absolutely right about that. I do a great deal of work to get the muse to stay and not to leave. And, uh, to me, that's part of our bargain together. You know, I'm personifying this, but that's an easy way for me to think of it, you know.
- I: Well, that's your experience. I mean you talked also of being afraid of talking too much about...(P: Something you're working on. Right.) It's that same type of, uh...(P: Superstition.) Superstition. So, there is this superstition present in your experience of the writing. (P: That's right.) Even though you are highly aware of what you have to do to write.
- P: That's right. It is an exquisite tension between both those things. It really is. Between knowing what I have to do, as you put it, and knowing, uh, what it takes to have that juncture occur, that meeting occur. Sometimes it happens that you do your part but the muse doesn't show up. That's when you go hunting. Uh, you can get in an awful lot of despair, you know, and you make demands: "Come on! Come on! It's not coming. Come on! What are you doing?" You can beat

yourself up and curse the gods and do all that sort of thing. Uh, but I'll tell you something I've found that's more effective than that: You come by route of indirection. You just start another project on something else unrelated. It brings you back around somehow. (I: Hmm.) You know, and you find out, "Well, maybe I wasn't as ready as I thought I was, you know." There are some things you honestly can't hurry, even when you want to.

I: That brings us to the end unless there's something that we've left out.

P: Nah, I'm, I'm—Aw, you've done an excellent job, just an excellent job. It's been really good for me to talk about these things and, and to hear your voice mirroring back what I've said because I'm really fascinated by, I mean not only your ability to listen so carefully but to mirror what I've said yet it gives me something to think about as well. It's been wonderful.

I: Wow. Thanks.

Vita

Shannon D. Collins was born July 29, 1968 in Hamblen County, Tennessee and graduated from East High School in 1986. He attended the University of Tennessee where he graduated with honors in English education. To make ends meet while an undergraduate, Shannon worked in the student living department of the Tennessee School for the Deaf; there he was allowed access into the Deaf community and became intrigued by cultural and linguistic differences of the Deaf. Subsequently, Shannon received a Master's degree in Deaf education and became a fully certified interpreter through the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. All together he spent thirteen years at the Tennessee School for the Deaf, ten of those years teaching reading and writing to middle school students. In 2000 he was recognized by the Humanities Council of Tennessee as one of the state's outstanding teachers of the humanities. As Shannon helped students develop their own passion and aptitude as readers and writers, he continued cultivating his literary interests and abilities. He has published poetry in several journals and has received an award for his fiction. He received his Doctor of Philosophy degree in education from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in December 2003. Professionally, Shannon continues to teach, present at conferences, and conduct workshops for teachers. He currently is an assistant professor teaching literacy related courses for Tennessee Technological University and serves as an ad-hoc reviewer of articles pertaining to writing for the International Reading Association's *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.