

## Writers as Teachers: A Balancing Act

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### CHAPTER ONE

#### Introduction

*Scholarship is deliberate inquiry. Creativity is unexpected insight.  
How do teaching writers balance writing and teaching? This is my question, too! My other  
question is, how will I?*

---Beth Mayer

*“The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlyn . . . “is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, . . . you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.” ---T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (Palmer, 1998, 141).*

On May 9, 2006, three days before the deadline for turning in spring grades, I met Beth Mayer, a teaching mentee I will work with this fall. After scheduling the meeting with her over an email exchange, I became frantic once again with time constraints. Why do I try to fit something else into my life with the grade deadline hanging over my head and having four classes of 20 students each to account for? However, ten minutes into our meeting I forgot all about anything but what I was there for. I was gifted to mentor an energetic, bright, talented young writer and my heart was filled with passion. We met at Nora’s Café, located on the second floor of Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and briefly discussed the “quaintness” of the art college. We met there partly because I teach here, and it was convenient for me; we met there partly because I am most comfortable talking with educators in an educational setting.

Beth is an MFA candidate at Hamline. She designed an independent study course, and will co-teach with me at Metropolitan State University a four-credit class titled *Humor Writing* starting the end of August of this year. This is a class I designed for a “Topics in Writing” course at Metropolitan State several years ago. It was initially taught as a summer session seven-week course. Eventually, *Humor Writing* was also taught over the course of a full semester in the fall of 2004.

After almost two hours of lively discussion, our conversation started to wind down. Then the reality of turning in grades returned, sobering my mood from our discussion on the hilarities and tragedies of teaching a course on humor writing, and teaching philosophies and strategies in general. Just before we were to leave, Beth brought up an interesting question: how do teaching writers find time to do their own writing? I told Beth that the irony was that my dissertation, or rather my current creative scholarship, was exploring the question: How do teaching writers balance scholarship and creativity? We both knew at that moment that this mentorship, with an initial deliberate inquiry, was to have some unexpected insight.

This dissertation seeks to generate a theory that can be instrumental in finding/achieving a balance for mentees and mentors of writing who also teach. It explores the ways in which professional writers have successfully accomplished the twin goals of holding true to their passion for creating art, while providing instruction to students seeking apprenticeships with “real” writers. It also sheds light on some writers’ regrets. This dissertation examines how teaching writers savoring the moments of teaching and creativity; it is about how these moments intersect and merge, and also about how they stand in isolation. Through narrative inquiry with teaching writers, patterns emerged. Balancing scholarship and creativity were viewed similarly in many cases. Overall, the eight interviewees agreed that they feel passionately about their art: writing. Simultaneously, they feel very passionate about teaching.

### **Personal and Professional History**

My first creative writing teacher exceeded these definitions during my Intro to Creative Writing class in college back in 1995. I was 38 years old at the time, not your average-aged junior in a college writing classroom. The university I attended was situated in an urban setting, designed for working adults. Many of us had fallen off the “path” of traditional learning, but here we were, several of us, back in school either part-time or full-time in

When I climbed the stairs to my Intro to Creative Writing class on a chilly autumn evening in a building located on 8<sup>th</sup> and Hennepin, downtown Minneapolis, I was petrified. Who did I think I *was* taking a class in creative writing? I had no prior experience in writing creatively, not to mention I had the self-worth of an expired coupon.

Teener’s costume shop sat directly across the street from my third floor classroom. The lingering clientele that consigned their front door after closing time at 7p.m. mesmerized me. As I stared out the window, I remembered another life, years earlier. I had spent many hours in Teener’s costume shop with friends picking out materials to construct outrageous hats that would put Carmen Miranda to shame. Little did I know that Teener’s and this scene as I watched it unfold that night before me would appear in a novel I would write years later for my graduate synthesis.

When class started that first night, I took to the free write like a fish to water. I always had a fascination for reading and writing. Somehow I felt this desire resurge immediately that first night in class. Much of this had to do with the teacher. Her voice, her mannerisms, her dedication to literature and writing were apparent in how she talked and guided our class instruction.

A few years later I was told that this teacher was up for tenure at Metro State. I had since graduated and moved on to graduate studies at a small liberal arts university, focusing on writing. I remember hearing that during her tenure interview she was asked a question regarding her views on teaching. She apparently stated that she considered herself first a writer, then a teacher. I cheered at hearing this. As a developing writer, I believed in the power of creating art as no other. When I had time to reflect on this, I felt conflicted. I wondered, “Does she not really enjoy teaching?” Do these mentors who touch our lives do so as an occupation, a vocation, the nuts and bolts of making a living? What did it mean to be *first* a writer, then a teacher? I then began to wonder, “How do these great artists find time to be great teachers in addition to creating their art, and is one sublimely connected to the other?”

This was an issue I didn’t have to worry about, because I had no intention of becoming great at either; as a matter of fact, teaching hadn’t even entered my thoughts as a possible vocation at this point. I was still thinking primarily of the immediate future. It was deeply reflective of my newly found lifestyle of recovery from alcohol and drug addiction: one day at a time. If I could make it through this semester in school, that was great. I had a full time job catering, money I could count on to support my two kids and my meager lifestyle. Teaching was not a goal of mine. It was not even a periphery illusion.

As I stated earlier, reading and writing have been life-long passions of mine. I would read anything I could get my hands on, starting with comic books. I loved my intimate relationships with each story I read and I always dreaded the simple words, “The End.” To avoid stories ending, I lived in their worlds beyond our actual reading time together. Those worlds were the only worlds of which I wanted to be a part. As a result, I settled in as a quiet student, often overlooked or ignored by teachers. I learned early on--don’t ask questions, don’t rock the boat, barely be seen and never heard and you can function in your own world without a fuss. Teachers didn’t naturally gravitate to me, so my fictional world became my reality. I think this is partly why I took such a long hiatus returning to school after high school graduation.

Before I took my creative writing course at the university, my first course upon returning was in English Composition. This is where I met my first mentor, Brian Nerney. He was a stickler. I remember thinking the only thing that would be harder than being Brian's student would be Brian himself. He had to have spent endless hours carefully commenting on each student's assignment. I was in awe of his dedication and determination to teach others how to precisely get to the point. His teaching style included positive feedback, suggestions for improvement through questions regarding text assignments, and patience—lots and lots of patience. I started getting papers back with lists of questions all leading to the underlying question: "What is it you are trying to say and why should this matter to me?" No longer was Brian just combing through student text in search of mixed metaphors, dangling modifiers or tense shifts; he was in search of developing craft through clarity. He subscribed to the belief once expressed by Raymond Carver; "get in, get out" of the text. Don't hum and haw; don't "hang on the reader's arm like a needy drunk," as Annie Dillard reminds us. Just say what you have to say and damn well figure out why you said it. What a gift Brian gave me. I still ask myself with every piece of writing I draft: What am I saying and why should it matter? This has developed my academic writing as well as my fiction and poetry.

Fast-forward eleven years. I've been teaching for the last seven of those eleven years, variations of writing courses, a few of which I've had the opportunity to design. How I came about teaching was a fluke. I filled in for someone who, upon short notice, wasn't able to complete a contract. My first evening of teaching I was a wreck. I talked to Brian about it. He said, "What are you nervous about?" I wanted to slap him. Twenty minutes into my first night of teaching, I would have to say I forgot about being nervous. What was I nervous about? Therein lays my history.

#### Development and Significance of Research Question

*Who is the self that teaches?* ---Parker Palmer, 1998, p. 7

Moving forward, I ended up in a doctoral program for education at the same institution where I did my graduate work in creative writing. Why? Because I realized I am, much to my surprise, a teacher and then a writer.

Don't get me wrong; I am passionate about creating art. I need to create art in order to be a good teacher and a conscientious person in society. But my primary passion is teaching. However, I must balance my life. Hence my dissertation question returns, only this time for motivational purposes as well as for a dissertation proposal: How do teaching writers balance scholarship (teaching) and creativity?

My mentors worked overtime. My mentors never lost a beat. It was through their dedication that I am once again reminded of that silhouetted speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. To keep the bank of justice from becoming bankrupt, I must carry on the teachings from my mentors. I must stay aware of the importance of instilling a passion in each student for writing and revision. In doing so I must hold them accountable to take on that challenge. I must represent a balance for my mentee this fall not just through idle words, but through action. Patrick Bizzaro (1994), who teaches at East Carolina University states, "As teachers, we must spend less time telling our students what they should do when they write and more time showing them who they can be" (p. 234).

How do I hold myself accountable to my art? In another life I would have spent the afternoon in Teener's instead of drafting this chapter. I would have created a scrumptious hat, but it is not the hat I would wear now. Now my hat would be littered with the question: How do I balance scholarship and creativity? Does one motivate the other; in other words, is it a necessary component for one to be in place for the other to stay vibrant? "Actions speak louder than words," is a thread-worn cliché my mother would say to me as she'd pass my room and catch me reading fiction when I'd told her I was doing my homework. Funny, in this case she didn't see the action in the art of reading.

The following chapters will lead up to what some writers have disclosed through interviews regarding apprenticeship and mentoring, reading and writing, fulfillments and regrets and the art of self-discovery.

## Assumptions and Limitations

*Since 1947, the idea of college and professorship has become quite familiar to American writers. I am one of a multitude of poets, novelists, playwrights, and essayists who have crowded into universities from the Atlantic to the Pacific. No one has taken an exact census, but our numbers, I would guess, amount to a couple of thousand. We have entered the academy for reasons as diverse as our talents. Some of us relish teaching and the conversation about literature, while others merely grab our paychecks and rush back to our keyboards. Some are drawn to the university as the last sanctuary for books in a marginally literate culture. Some of us come to escape loneliness. Others linger in the academy simply because, after eighteen or twenty years of schooling, we cannot imagine living anywhere else. (Sanders, 1991, p. 2)*

One assumption I bring to this dissertation is that these writing teachers must have the answers. Many of the teaching writers I am interviewing have been teachers of mine. Alison McGhee from Metro State was my first creative writing teacher; she must have an answer. Deborah Keenan, John Fenn and David Haynes were all important mentors whose creative work I admired as deeply as their teaching abilities. They must have solid answers. Do I assume all of these eight individuals I am interviewing enjoy teaching? The ones I know personally do. About the other four I make no assumptions. Do I assume that most of these teaching writers do both simultaneously full-time? More or less I do. However, the common assumption in the writing community is what Sanders (1991) quotes a well-known teaching writer as saying: “Denise Levertov has cautioned that ‘teaching, even at its most rewarding, uses up some of the same kind of energies that go into [one’s] own work; therefore I think it is extremely risky for any artist to teach full-time—perhaps especially if he enjoys teaching’” (p. 5).

The limitations to this project are that it is confined to just one area of the arts. If I had more time I would interview across art genres to see if there are similarities and differences within the way teaching artists (painters, sculptors...) balance their roles as creators and educators. I say this because of the labor-intensive work that goes into responding to written text for a writing teacher. My assumption is the time spent on critiquing for teaching writers is far greater than the other arts. If my assumption is accurate, would this have any bearing on the question of balance in one’s life?

## Definitions of Terms

*As teachers, we must describe analytically what, as artists, we do instinctively. Surrounded by colleagues who are scholars and critics, we may be tempted to write for that specialized audience; our experience of the world may be cramped; our ears may lose the sound of unfettered speech. The ethos of the academy is aloof, rational, dispassionate. Insofar as writers take on these attitudes, their art is likely to suffer. On the other hand, if they violate the decorum of the academy they may be dismissed as hotheads or curmudgeons. And yet, without passion, without an openness to the unconscious, without a willingness to appear ignorant or foolish or rude, without omnivorous curiosity, without a sympathy for the full human range, the writer is doomed to superficiality. (Sanders, 1991, p. 5)*

When I refer to MFA programs throughout this dissertation, I am speaking specifically of Master’s of Fine Arts degrees in writing. When I speak of the “workshop” classroom environment, I am referring to a class setting founded over 50 years ago through the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. “Iowa’s methods have been models for virtually all writing programs” (Shumway, 1997, p. 1). The following is a brief description of the class function:

The class itself consists of a round-table discussion during which the class and the instructor offer impressions, observations, and analysis about each piece. The specifics of how the class is conducted vary somewhat from teacher to teacher, and between Poetry and Fiction workshops. The ideal result of the process is not only that the author come away with insights into the strength and weaknesses of their own work, but that the class as a whole derives some insight, whether general or specific, about the process of writing. (wikipedia.org)

Creative Writing includes the genres of fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, essay and memoir. The term “necessary evil” is used in a question I pose to the interviewees in reference to a “day job” (teaching). It is not meant to mislead the participants or appear any more subjective than any of the other questions I ask throughout, hence the quotation marks. For the interviews, a coding chart is attached in Appendix M. Terms are defined on the chart.

#### Outline of Remaining Chapters

*The poet Rumi says, ‘If you are here unfaithfully with us, you’re causing terrible damage.’ But Rumi would surely agree that the converse is equally true. If you are here faithfully with us, you are bringing abundant blessing. It is a blessing known to generations of students whose lives have been transformed by people who had the courage to teach—the courage to teach from the most truthful places in the landscape of self and world, the courage to invite students to discover, explore, and inhabit those places in the living of their own lives. (Palmer, 1998, p. 183)*

We seek meaning through critical thinking. Critical thinking is what writers bring to their texts every day, whether through essays, social commentary, academic criticism, poetry, or fiction. A writer develops a persona to convey a meaningful message for their readers through the art of storytelling. A story resonates with its readers, leading them to think critically about themes from A to Z, connecting those themes to their own lives and articulating questions that may lead to change for the betterment of self and humanity. James Moffett (Charters, 1999) states, “What a story is about is partly a question of how it is told. You cannot separate the tale from the telling.”

This is one reason why we all read and want to tell stories. Stories are usually about evolution and/or redemption. Stories told indirectly, stories in which we search for the meaning rather than those in which we are preached the meaning, lead to change.

Annie Dillard (1989) states:

The writer studies literature, not the world. He lives in the world; he cannot miss it. If he has ever bought a hamburger, or taken a commercial airplane flight, he spares his readers a report of his experience. He is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know. (p. 68)

A review of the literature regarding how teaching writers feel about the balancing act of creating artistic work while teaching is provided in the following chapter. Chapter three explains the methodology used to present the experiences of the participants and the researcher. Chapter four consists of case narratives of the participants and the researcher and a coding analysis of each case as well as a comparative analysis of all the cases together. The final chapter reviews the observations, findings, recommendations and directions for further research.