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### Writing to Free Ourselves

The trapped air was decomposing around us. Each molecule hung onto the other, pleading for help. They were dying by the second, and we were oblivious to their desperate cries to open a window. It was only when we put down our pens that our eyes readjusted and we noticed our environment. For the several minutes before that, my classmates and I were immune to the stale air around us. Our antidote: writing. Our papers, the lines that flowed to it, and most importantly, our thoughts, immortalized us on that hot June day. But it was our teacher who gave us the medicine. Mr. Harrington, my eleventh grade English teacher, taught us the skills to block out the world and just write. The way he did that was by creating a classroom environment of trust and respect that fostered our writing expeditions.

Without fail, Mr. Harrington brightened my day every time I walked into his classroom. He started every class by standing outside in the hallway and greeting each student with a handshake. At that time, the school had adopted an initiative to have teachers teach their students his practical skill. Some teachers only did it on the first day of class; some maintained it for a few weeks, but Mr. Harrington did it genuinely and voluntarily for the entire year. Upon the start of class, he always welcomed us and asked for a bit of good news. A few students would share their recent excitements, and then he would somehow flawlessly tie that good news into the beginning of whatever lesson he had planned.

Throughout his Literature and Politics course, his enthusiasm and love for literature inspired me to appreciate works that I would have never given a second glance on my own. We read Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, which is, to this day, still my

favorite book. I experienced a deep appreciation, bordering on amazement, of Hurston's tackling of complex issues. Her masterfully employed descriptive language made prose intoxicating to read. When we started our next book, The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles, I knew it would not compare to our last book. Yet Mr. Harrington posed questions to the class that intrigued his students and prompted us to delve deeper into the characters and their motives.

That year, New York State had imposed a new type of testing that required teachers to give a pre-test in the beginning of the year and a post-test at the close of the semester in order to track our progress in the course. Our post-test was an in-class essay on The French Lieutenant's Woman, our choice being between three different essay prompts. I wish I could still remember what they were, but what I do know is that I ended up picking what I thought was the more challenging of the two prompts I was torn between. During the allotted forty minutes, I feverishly wrote the most poorly organized essay of my entire school career. And yet, I had bells, whistles, sirens, fireworks, even atomic bombs going off in my head as I discovered something new about the woman's character. My thesis was a blind guess at where I wanted my essay to go, but by the end, I had stumbled through a forest of ideas and had arrived at the most exciting lightning strike of an idea that had ever shocked my brain. That day it helped to have a solid skillset for writing and a command of the language. But the writing skills and confidence that carried me to such an exciting and insightful experience would have been severely anemic if it had not been for my fifth grade teacher, Mr. Somoza.

Mr. Somoza's approach to in-class writing involved two of my favorite hobbies: writing and music. Once again, the lesson's success hinged on the classroom environment that the teacher created. When it came time in our schedule to write, he would put on a CD of usually foreign music so that we could not understand the lyrics (if there were any). Mr. Somoza then

turned off the lights, and in our groups of four desks, he told us to write in our journals about how the music made me feel or what we envisioned the singer was saying. The first time he played the given song, we only listened to the music. The second time, we wrote for the duration of the song and were given a few minutes afterwards to continue our narratives. During those few minutes of the song, I wrote like a criminal being chased by the police. My hand took on a different life; its minutest muscles transcribed the constant creative flow of images that swarmed through my brain matter while listening to the exotic and enigmatic music. To my surprise, my teacher and a few special education teachers helping out in my classroom floated around the room and peered over shoulders to read what my classmates and I were writing.

As we began doing this exercise more and more often, I became slightly more conscious of their eyes and slightly less easy about the thoughts that came trickling down from my head to my hand. Mr. Somoza liked to have a few students read their writings to the class immediately afterwards. More often than not, my teachers were impressed with my writing and called on me to get things started. Being severely shy and insecure as I was, I feared their pleas to have me read my work aloud. I now understand that it is beneficial to have classmates hear what their peers have written and respond to it. At the time though, this reporting out only brought me intense dread. Nonetheless, I acquiesced. The reaction I received surprised me; my peers seemed to like my narratives, as did my teachers, and my parents were soon notified of my excelling in the subject.

Mr. Somoza caught on to this well before I could find the words to explain this feeling. It was his gentle, approachable, and encouraging demeanor that brought me out of my cave and into the light of confidence. He told me one day after class that I had gift for writing. He cared about what I wrote because he cared about what I had to say. Someone would always listen, and

he made sure that that's how it was in his classroom. I was a little taken back by such a blunt statement, and it made me feel slightly insecure; but I knew he was sincere. I trusted him. In a group of 25 fifth graders, he approached every lesson, whether writing or another, in the same fashion. Each one of us felt valued, respected, and free to explore ideas (especially within our writing) in a way that none of my previous teachers, and very few teachers since then, have been able to mimic.

Looking forward to my teaching future, my goal is to emulate the type of classroom and conduct that both Mr. Harrington and Mr. Somoza embodied. I also want to use my love for writing the way they both did: to inspire their students to self-discovery and to welcome curiosity and risk-taking in their writing. The power of a teacher's enthusiasm towards his subject should never be underestimated either. Students oftentimes look to each other to see if it's "cool enough" to participate in an activity. But the teacher is responsible for turning those previously skeptical adolescents into ones sparked by curiosity and enriched with confidence. My two teachers believed in their tactics. They also coaxed students to participate by stirring up inquisitiveness and enticing them with the joy that comes from learning through the writing process. In the case of both teachers, there was nothing to spot, and adolescents have the best fake-detecting instincts out there. We should not feel the need to convince our students of our methods, but rather we should use our understanding to kick-start their interest and perfection of their writing skills. We should present them with possibilities that will help them grasp concepts and come to love writing because, after all, we never know what sort of liberating idea is going to come out of our pen next.