Room at the Table

BY WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

The best way to teach creativity is to encourage creativity.

I was a brand-new college freshman, homesick and a bit awestruck, but nevertheless excited to set off on my long-imagined goal: majoring in English and being a writer. Pleased at having placed out of the required freshman comp, I enrolled in a creative-writing class along with a roomful of upperclassmen and a few other newcomers like me. Each week we'd hand in our work to our curmudgeon of a professor—some mechanistic assignment such as to write a one-act play that made use of a symbol, or a story that hinged on "antecedent action." A week later, he'd read aloud from a couple that he didn't like and a few that he did, pillorying or praising them as he deemed appropriate. He'd then hand back our homework with an onionskin page of comments stapled to the top, and move on to the next lecture topic.

At 18, I wrote stories about embittered 45-year-old married couples who sounded as real as characters on *One Life to Live;* haiku describing posters on my dorm-room wall; plays that were little more than transcripts of dining-hall conversations from the night before. I chose either the most remote or the most accessible subjects, consistently steering clear of anything that mattered to me.

"Is this really your material?" is the most my professor ever said in his written comments to lead me in a helpful direction. I silently answered no, having no idea how to find what was. I still have his final assessment of my work, scrawled on his crackly, see-through paper: "You've made some progress, but perhaps along tracks that *you* prefer." By that time, he'd already convinced me between the lines that a writing career was not my calling, so I switched my planned major and lost the nerve to write again until well after college.

Sixteen years after that class, not only am I a writer, but I teach writing, too. The intervening years have proved to me that as amateurish as my work was back then, my professor failed at the most fundamental responsibility that any teacher of a creative art has: He didn't encourage me.

Illustration by Ron Flemmings

To teach creativity is to encourage creativity.

"Encourage" can be a misunderstood word. A friend of mine recently entered a graduate program in creative writing. His first workshop instructor was a young fiction writer who had already been published a few times in a highly regarded national magazine. "She was smart," my friend told me, "but she was just too *encouraging."* She praised stories too much, he felt, and downplayed their flaws. He had to have a conference with her to tell her not to soft-pedal her critique of his own work; he could take it.

What my friend was describing, however, was not encouragement. The only thing his teacher's feedback could have encouraged in her students was repeating the same mistakes over and over. What I mean by encourage is to foster the *pursuit* of the art—to make the student want to grow into the skin of an artist, to find his or her fit the only way possible: by keeping at it.

If an instructor has a classroom full of people who have signed up to study creative writing, they're there because they want to write. Anyone who discourages them from doing so—whether based on a perceived lack of innate talent or simply on an imperfect mastery of English syntax—is not doing his or her job. A writing teacher's duty is to assist students in rising to the highest level of art that they're capable of. Those writers who possess the appropriate combination of gift, inspiration, motivation, and diligence will succeed; those who don't most likely won't.

I can already hear others arguing that a teacher shouldn't encourage the "wrong" people to write, that it's misleading to hold out the possibility of success to those who'll never achieve it. But encouragement doesn't mislead anyone; dishonesty does. And it's never dishonest to point out, along with the weaknesses, the best parts of someone's creative work—even if they amount to only two vivid images in an otherwise lackluster piece of writing. In part, encouragement is as simple as calling attention to what someone does well so that she'll keep on doing it.

Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter that certain people won't "succeed" at being writers, because critical or financial success is hardly the most beneficial outcome of a workshop. For me, writing workshops provided a safe space in

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which to find my voice. I'm not talking about my writing voice. (I found that, too.) I'm talking about my voice as a person in a public context—that is to say, in the world.

When I was a kid, the world felt anything *but* safe. Not exactly dangerous (although a certain St. Bernard, who paced unleashed in a yard down the street, does come to mind) but threatening in its own way: Around every corner lurked potential embarrassment, humiliation, exposure. I was required to speak to near and total strangers, which I considered tantamount to performing without having seen a script. I was required to demonstrate physical grace when I had little. (In elementary school I usually bonded with one or two bookish types who preferred the exchange of verbal trivia to dodge ball or any other activity involving an inflated projectile.) In short, the world forced visibility on me when I would have chosen the protective mantle of home.

Home was the only place that felt safe to me. Although the adult now knows the questions and passions the child kept hidden even there, home was nonetheless the site of acceptance, of sustenance. The six of us sat around the kitchen table every night and ate, talked, bickered, joked, bored one another, listened—took part in a daily ritual that I keep hearing has all but died out.

Home. Workshop. The connection seems almost too obvious to miss, but it took a friend to point out to me the main thing the two have in common: the table.

A writing workshop—prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction—is a place where a group of people sit face to face around a table and open themselves up to one another, where they (ideally) offer and accept help and support. The ingredients essential for a productive workshop, then, aren't very different from those that make a family function: trust, respect, honesty, the ability to listen, and the imperative that each member be guided by the only voice that ultimately matters—his or her own.

There's one other ingredient: permission. Without it—whatever table you're seated at—there can be no safe space in which to be yourself, to tell your stories without shame or fear of judgment, to create your art. To create yourself.

As a college freshman, I lacked permission to uncover and claim those experiences and ways of seeing that were distinctly mine. One of many ways this permission might have been conveyed is through writing exercises such as those I give my students: Write for 10 minutes without stopping about a departure, an arrival, an illness. Write down the phrase "When I was 12"—or "On Sunday" or (courtesy of Natalie Goldberg, a deservedly popular teacher in her own right) simply "I remember"—and keep writing until you fill two sides of a page. See what happens. What happens could become fiction, an essay, a poem. Whatever happens, it's yours and no one else's.

I returned to creative writing in my 20s. And I discovered by taking more and more well-run workshops that as my creative voice developed, my outer voice made itself heard as well. I found I could think on my feet, not just on paper. I could express my opinion and have it acknowledged and—to my surprise—even affirmed. I gained confidence. People started telling me they could see me teaching.

In the first workshop I taught—to undergraduates only a few years younger than I—I was wedded to my notes and had to wear a jacket in 80-degree weather to conceal the nervous sweat under my arms. (A representative sample from my students' evaluations: "Bill's a good teacher, but he needs to *relax!*") By the second workshop—this time for adults—I was halfway through my introductory remarks before I realized I was blithely twirling a bottle cap on my head as I chattered on. I was in the moment; I was being myself.

Like storyteller Garrison Keillor a self-acknowledged "shy person," I continue to teach because it's the only way I know of to repay the best teachers I've had for the gift of my voice. And for an equally important lesson as well: If a student is willing to take on the delicate dare of creativity, there's so much to be lost through discouraging him, and little to be gained. I might not be sitting at the computer keyboard today—let alone heading out of the office and into the classroom at night to teach others—if I'd taken my first creative-writing professor's approach as the last word.

In the end, though, it turns out he was right about one thing: I made progress along tracks that *I* prefer.

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