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## Notes Towards An Affirmation of Poetry, Writing, & Teaching

### **Caveat**

I don't believe teachers or writers should make statements. They should ask questions. Even when they are making statements. Is that a contradiction? Very well then.

### **Hello**

I believe in the power of language. I believe in the strength of narrative. I believe in entrusting the self. I believe in the lyricism of the lived experience. I believe in the spaces between words left unsaid.

### **What I Want**

We shape clay into a pot,  
but it is the emptiness inside  
that holds what we want.

—Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

### **Reading**

I have a picture of myself when I was about three or four. In it, I am wearing a pair of pale green polyester footsie pajamas, and I am stretched out on my stomach on the floor, my two hands propping up my chin and my legs curled up in the air behind me. I am staring at the comic strip section of a newspaper, engrossed in whatever I see there. I have not yet learned to interpret the glyphs on the page into sounds with my voice, so it must be the pictures I am enthralled with, the stories laid out in large squares with speech balloons bubbling forth from so many silent mouths. I like to believe it is the spaces between the words I have yet to learn which draw me.

This is why I read.

### **Writing**

At night, when my wife has fallen asleep after getting our children to bed, I sit in front of the computer and write, sometimes on the computer, sometimes in a journal. I've been doing this for as long as we've been married, which is over ten years now, staying up until midnight, writing until my eyes strain and the room starts to feel hot despite the ceiling fan rotating lazily above my head.

I gave up smoking when I got married, and every night when I'm writing I crave a Marlboro Light and a bottle of Budweiser.

This is why I write.

## Making the Connection

In the mid-1980s, during middle school, I was enthralled with heavy metal music. I don't know what drew me in, but it did, and I found some weird level of comfort with the lyrics and music of bands such as Metallica and Iron Maiden, bands whose songs were often based on literature. I can still vividly remember hearing Metallica's "For Whom The Bell Tolls" for the first time in 1984, how that song resonated in my headphones as I listened to the throbbing bass and cascading guitar rhythms as the cassette tape unspooled in my cheap Walkman knock-off as I turned the lyric sheet over and over in my hands, scrutinizing the words for any indication that this wasn't just another angry song glorifying death, but was something more, because Metallica was just too cool to be another hair band. And I found what I was searching for when I mentioned the song's title to a teacher I thought of highly, Jane Carter, my eighth grade English teacher, and she thought I was referring to Hemingway's novel of the same name. And by God if I didn't go and find that book at the public library and devour it in one sitting and come back to school the next day full of questions, wanting to ask Mrs. Carter about why the Spanish Civil War was fought in the first place and why in God's name would any sane person volunteer to fight in a war that didn't involve their own country only to hear the news that one of my classmates, Mark Johnson, had committed suicide the night before with his father's service revolver.

That week I was in charge of the computers—top of the line Commodore64s—and when Chad Venable and I were left alone in the room, we popped in Mark's disk, fired up Bank Street Writer and read what he had been working on for our storytelling assignment: a Tolkeinesque tale of an elven party dodging falling stalactites in a spelunking expedition only to be obliterated by a large unknown explosion. Even at fourteen, it was easy for me to see this awkward piece of juvenile fiction as a thinly veiled parallel to whatever unknown events in Mark's own life drove him to pick up his father's gun.

When Mrs. Crater came back in the room, Chad quickly flipped off the screen and I slid Mark's disk back in the stack. We didn't tell Mrs. Crater what we had read. It wouldn't have made a difference if we had.

## Learning

I consider myself a writer who teaches. I love the written word and what it can do to and for us, how words on a page can evoke responses in a reader miles or years away. And as a writer, I realize all written works are works in progress: they need a reader to make the text complete.

Students often don't think about this. They think something is done when the teacher says it's due. But what if it isn't due? Is it still done? Who said it has to be done? When is it done? How do you know?

The student's duty is to learn collectively over time. Here's why: I can't teach anyone to write. I can only tell someone what's working for me and what isn't working for me—I can only tell you how I complete the text you started after I read it. And if I can't complete the text when I read it, then you haven't done your job as a writer.

Scary, but true.

But that shouldn't stop you from trying. Read what others have written. Then try again. Learn the rules. Learn there are no rules, only conventions. Break the conventions. But only after you can explain why you needed to break them. And then read some more. Keep at it. We're all in this together.

## Hannah

Back in 1986, I saw Woody Allen's movie *Hannah & Her Sisters* for the first time. In the movie, Eliot, played by Michael Caine, lusts after his wife's sister, Lee, played by a drop-dead gorgeous Barbara Hershey in mid-career. I had a thing for Barbara Hershey for a long time. In an attempt to woo Lee away from her live-in painter boyfriend Fredrick, (a crusty misanthrope played by Max Von Sydow), Eliot gives her a book of e.e cummings' poetry with instructions to read a certain poem, "LVII." Late at night he sits up in bed, and in a voice over we hear him recite the poem as she reads it while lying in her bed.

For the sake of brevity, I'm not including the poem here. You can find it on page 366 of the 1980 edition of cummings's complete poems published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. You should read it. It's a good poem. Of course, Lee melts after reading the poem, and it isn't long before she and Eliot are having an affair.

I felt an immediate connection to this poem, felt the urgency of the speaker's words as he tried to explain in precise detail how his love for whomever he is speaking to overwhelms him in the subtlest ways, how even the smallest gesture intensifies these feelings. My date started crying when the poem was read on-screen, and in my hormone-addled adolescent brain it suddenly clicked that poetry could help me get laid.

The next day, I walked to the Webster Groves Bookshop and bought cummings's *Complete Poems*. I read it straight through, all 845 pages of it, and while I understood the words, I didn't understand most of the poems and completely misread the techniques.

In other words, I wasn't ready to listen yet.

But eventually, I was.

## Revision

I started writing verse in fifth grade. It was bad, pale imitations of Shel Silverstein. Ask me to show you sometime. I still have it. What, you mean you don't keep anything you've written? Why not? How else can you tell if you've gotten better?

## Wilco

I miss the innocence I've known.

—Wilco, "Heavy Metal Drummer"

## Honoring the Holy

I do not throw the word "holy" around lightly. I do joke that because poetry is the holy art of language that I'm an unrepentant sinner. It's a weak joke. You have to read my poems to get it. At any rate, I do not consider myself pious by any means, and although I converted to Catholicism in 1995, two years after marrying a cradle Catholic, I find myself wrestling with the intricate precepts and dogma of faith on a daily basis. I find it hard to pray, to meditate, to sit still and empty my mind to the wholeness which is the elimination of the self in submission to the unity of silence.

I think I have problems with this because when it comes to religion, I'm a mutt: I was born with a Jewish last name to a lapsed Catholic father and a mother who was indifferent to religion after being raised by a Southern Baptist mother and a lapsed Roman Catholic father. It was this grandmother who brought me to Candlestick Baptist Church in Humble, Texas, every Sunday for three years straight after my parents divorced and my mother, sister, and I moved in with my mother's parents. I was seven, and it seems Candlestick Baptist Church was my clichéd home away from home until I moved to Missouri to be with my father in 1981. This second home thing isn't true, because my mother moved us to an apartment once she completed her LVN degree at the local community college and got a job administering shots at a pediatrician's office while my sister and I ran wild in the apartment complex's playground after school (I think I was in fourth grade) when we could escape the babysitter's stifling living room. We lived like that for about a year, and I know I didn't go to church too many Sundays that year. But I went enough in the previous three years to make up for my absence. But I digress.

What I remember most about the church is the baptism pool set above the choir behind the pulpit, built into the wall with a Plexiglas façade so that all might see the saved cleansed in the waters from the comfort of their hard backed, cushionless pews. When it was my turn to stand in the lukewarm water, I stared out the window at the congregation, trapped. It was the only time I ever saw my mother in a church, sitting next to my grandmother, who was prouder than spit that her eldest grandson was embracing the Risen Lord despite having raised six kids who had lapsed into secular indifference. I was seven when I was saved the first time. Nine when I was saved the second time. Twenty-five when I finally got it right in another faith and place.

I also remember that the pastor, Brother Bob, a kind-faced man with a million dollar smile and a two-fifty haircut who had a fondness for string ties and slapping his Bible on his left knee when he wanted to make an especially important point about a particular verse, fondled me before I was baptized the first time and threatened to cut off my privates with a pair of kitchen shears if I told anyone. The blades were sharp and cold.

This, too, is why I write.

### **Risks and Rewards**

That was a difficult passage to write. I haven't told anyone other than my wife about this incident. The textbook response is to tell me I should not blame myself and that I should not be ashamed. And I don't blame myself and I am not ashamed. But it happened. I own it. And for some reason I wanted you to know about it. And I'm not sure why.

What I am asking you to do is to accept that it happened, to validate my voice as authoritative in regards to what I have experienced, whether by choice or circumstance. Maybe something similar happened to you. Maybe something different happened to you. Maybe you've written about it. Maybe you should. And you don't have to share, because no one's forcing you. But it might be helpful if you did. Because it's important. Because *you* are important.

This is why I teach.

## Marriage

She clutches what sleep leaves to her chest  
and when I turn my back against the wall  
she moves away, the bed creaking beneath  
the weight of dead air that lies between us.

## Vanity

Try this. Turn on your computer, fire up your internet browser, go to <http://www.google.com> and type your name in the search box, enclosing your name in quotes, like this: "Matthew W. Schmeer". Then hit the search button.

How many results do you get? Are you impressed? Or indifferent?

Don't worry. That number doesn't matter, even if it's zero. What matters is that you write. It doesn't matter that no one knows your name. Yet.

By the way, I got around 554 hits, the last time I checked. But then, maybe I've been at this writing thing a bit longer than you. Still, I'm nobody compared to Paris Hilton. But then, she's not writing now, is she? What? She's got a book deal?

Damn.

## Modes of Writing

No one believes me when I say it, but I got into teaching because of the dress code. Silly, but true. In what other job can you wear shorts and a pair of Birkenstocks on a daily basis and still be considered a professional? Although my preferred attire is a pair of jeans and a pair of Chucks, I like to know my options are open. In this respect, the clothes are a lot like writing. You gotta know your audience and what they need from you. Need to look professional? Wear the tie. Need to impress the Dean? Tie plus jacket. Meeting the College Vice President or President for lunch? Freshly pressed shirt plus tie plus jacket plus shiny dress shoes. It's all about the presentation. Same shit wrapped in prettier paper, sometimes with a bow on top.

Any questions? No? Class dismissed.

## Poetry

I was sixteen when I fell in love with it. I've been a writing fool ever since.

## Making the Connection

I don't think of Mark Johnson too often. Mostly, I remember him as a smartly dressed kid with a wispy blond mullet who had the annoying habit of wearing a polo shirt under an untucked oxford dress shirt, the collar of the polo sticking up in that quasi-preppy fashion that was all the rage that year in our safe, suburban enclave of Webster Groves, Missouri. But when I do think of Mark, I can't help but connect him to what I know about writing, as Mark's story was the first time I realized that words carry far more weight than I thought they did, that what he was writing about could have stemmed from his own life and was not just pulled whole cloth out of thin air. Writing, I realized, was real. Even if it was made up.

It was at that point that I realized that writing and reading—no, the *writer* and the *reader*— were so tightly interwoven that it was impossible to separate one from the other, that they were tools from the same forge that worked to make connections with the world, be that through imagined worlds dreamed by those creative souls who live among us or the world that our experiences tell us we exist in. No matter how individualistic we think we are, we share common experiences, feelings, emotions, needs, wants, and dreams; even if we do not recognize that the sum of who we are as a people is present in our private experiences of the world, what we can add to the shared knowledge of human experience is invaluable, precious, and holy. Writing, and the sharing of that writing, is a gift to ourselves and each other.

Of course, I lacked the vocabulary to express these concepts at the time. But then two years later I was sixteen and discovered poetry.

### Wilco, again

Sometimes  
I can't find the time  
to write my mind  
the way I want it to read.

—Wilco, "Box Full of Letters"

### Technology

I've been using computers to write since 1987, when my high school newspaper received two Macintosh SE30s for layout purposes. I quickly learned how to word process in MacWrite and do simple paste-up in Aldus PageMaker and became one of the chief layout artists for the Webster *Echo*. This started my long love affair with Macs. I've owned several stock machines and built several FrankenMacs from scavenged parts. But I didn't always use computers to write, and sometimes I still don't.

Before using a Mac, I wrote longhand and typed everything on a beat up Olivetti electric typewriter that my step-mother used to get through college in the early 1970s. The keys would stick, especially the *e*, which would make typing anything in English nearly impossible. But I suffered through.

When I started college in 1989, my step-grandfather —the same man who taught me how to play chess and never let me win—bought me a SmithCorona WordProcessor 2000, a hybrid typewriter that had a small 300 character screen and could save documents to a fragile 2x3 inch disk that was completely incompatible with any other computer or word processor available then or since. I typed a lot of term papers on that thing, lots of bad poems, lots of shit I'm glad could never be retrieved because it deserved to die a disgraceful death.

Even though for the past fifteen years I've used computers or a PDA for nearly all my writing, which these days tends to be oriented toward online forums—such as my personal blog, blogging communities to which I contribute, listservs I subscribe to and web sites I maintain— I sometimes find myself longing for the feel of pen against paper. I find myself writing longhand in journals again, using a fountain pen or roller ball (Parkers only, please) to scratch my jangled alphabets across the page.

In other words, writers gotta use the tools that work for them.

### My Struggle

I have a difficult time finding worthy writing subjects. I invent voices and situations because the everyday seems so mundane, but when I read Pablo Neruda or James Galvin writing about watermelons and lemons, I wonder what the hell my problem is with writing about common objects. Why shouldn't I write about a piece of fruit or a doorknob or the birth of my daughters? Should these things be difficult to write about? Probably. Has someone written better poems on these subjects? Most likely. So why do I have trouble writing about them? Is it laziness? Low self-esteem?

I've come to recognize that my writing revolves around at-risk relationships: mismatched lovers, cops and murderers, students and teachers, gods and mortals, mothers and sons, husbands and wives, disembodied hands floating in water. My wife asks me why I don't write "happy" poems; it seems I'm locked into writing poems that have a mean underbelly, a threatening edge that can't be sanded and softened.

The other problem I have is recognizing when to stop revising and let a poem go; witness, for example, the three years I spent revising a small poem entitled "Digits" that eventually found its way into the *Salt Fork Review*. This zeal to revise amazes me. When I started writing, I didn't understand revision, didn't know I needed/had to/should revise. Like most young writers, I thought it was enough to put words on paper—they would stick to the page on their own. I thought that just because I had something to say that it was worth writing and therefore worth reading. And for the most part what I was writing wasn't worth saying or reading. Now that I am writing better poems (having practiced for these many years), I find peace in revising.

Either that, or I have the revision monkey on my back.

### An Aside

Verse = poetry, but Poetry ≠ verse. It's the square/rectangle thing. If you don't get it, then you are going to have a hard time navigating the geography of the poem. Or the essay. Or life. Yes, it's that important. Ask William Carlos Williams.

### Grades

I don't teach English. I don't teach writing. I teach students. And that's why I don't like grades. Grades don't tell students anything about what they've written; they only tell students what they've done right or wrong, not the effect that writing has had on someone. That's why I only use grades when the registrar demands them at the end of the semester. Everything else is open to discussion. Let's talk about this, maybe over lunch. Or coffee or tea? Do you take one lump or two? Or do you prefer beer? Domestic or imported? Boxers or briefs? Commas or semicolons? Here, read this. And this. And this. Now, write. Good. What about doing it this way? Or this way? Here, now write this. Yes, now. Yes.