

BRINGING DOWN THE FIRE: WRITING WITH EMOTION

by *Lezlie Laws Couch*

A recent article about Phil Schultz, director of the Writers Studio program in New York City, has intrigued—and troubled—me.¹ Schultz’s workshops have helped many writers find their way to their own best writing. His emphasis is on finding the “disconnect,” the place where the writer is unaware of the mood and emotions that drive the writing. In examining a trouble spot in student writing, Schultz often asks, “What were you feeling when you wrote this?” Most students have difficulty answering. They have disconnected action and feeling in their text.

The reason, Schultz says, is they are “afraid of what’s inside of them.” His workshops give students tools for recognizing emotions they are ignoring. He says, “The right persona gives you the right distance to access emotion. It allows you to connect to emotion that would otherwise lay untouched.”² It can lead you, Schultz believes, to your best material.

To help students think about the effect of emotional honesty in writing, I share this excerpt from a writer’s journal:

My mother numbs herself with alcohol and TV, desperate to avoid feelings, afraid of the change or the pain they incur. She suffered for years the

Lezlie Laws Couch is professor of English at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, where she teaches writing and literature and directs the writing program.

assaults of an alcoholic husband whom she adored, and now, him gone three years, she stuffs petulant feelings that she was ignored, she was discounted, she was hurt in oh-so-many ways. She rebuffs any detail that does not fit her girlhood dream of perfect love and marriage, and she tries to convince others that hard truths aren't around, gnawing at her, insisting that she consider another version of her life. In the mean time, her body and her heart are collapsing under the burden of these ignored feelings. She is debilitated physically and emotionally. She has relinquished her voice. She is receding in all ways from living.

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This writer has thought much about her mother's condition. And she has articulated some of her own assumptions about that condition. But here, the mother is not revealed as an interesting and complex person with a story to be unfolded; she is simply commented upon. The writer's challenge is to turn this character summary into prose that brings this mother

and her circumstances alive on the page, alive in both the facts of her life and the effect of those facts upon her.

One might think that talking about feelings is not only acceptable, but very easy to do. In therapy, in the literature of self-help, on TV, we are exhorted to understand our feelings and given 12 steps to achieve a healthy emotional life. But much contemporary literature—written and cinematic—portrays our failure to address our emotions and the relationship collisions that occur as a result. I have just re-read Kazuo Ishiguro's wonderful novel *Remains of the Day*, and I was moved again by the tragedy of the emotionally stifled English butler, Stevens, when he gets a glimpse of his own inability to connect.

While it is all very well to talk of "turning points," one can surely only recognize such moments in retrospect. Naturally, when one looks back to such instances today, they may indeed take the appearance of being crucial, precious moments in one's life; but of course, at the time, this was not the impression one had. Rather it was as though one had available a never-ending number of days, months, years in which to sort out the vagaries of one's relationships with Miss Kenton; an infinite number of further opportunities in which to remedy the effect of this or that misunderstanding. There was surely nothing to indicate at the time that such evidently small incidents would render whole dreams forever irredeemable.³

Of the many things that mark our era, an intense interest in our own psychologies might be the predominant characteristic. We are told to own our feelings, go with the pain, ride out the emotion, admit our frustration. Ignoring these feelings keeps us from getting beyond them, to a place of greater wisdom and understanding—or even love.

The problems in our living show up as problems in our writing, too. And though Schultz says his school is not a place for therapy, he admits that he is “as concerned with the psychology of writers as he is with the finished sentence.”⁴ We try to write about an event as if the event itself is what the piece is about. When in fact, good writing almost always concerns itself with reactions to events. With feelings. As Frederick Busch says, speaking of the work of Andre Dubus, “It walks the dangerous edge of emotion—his work dares to go there, risking (as we should) sentimentality in order to explore feeling.”⁵

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A student of mine struggles with a piece about her handicapped son, a sad and difficult and dramatic piece, to be sure. But I keep suggesting the story is really about her, the mother of this child: What is happening to *her* in the process of learning how to deal with a severely handicapped child? Even more than what is happening to her, I am interested in what is happening inside her. “What are you feeling?” I asked. She resists because she doesn’t want to go to that place of feeling. She needs to keep what Schultz calls a “disconnect” in her writing because to deal with what she truly feels will take her into dangerous territory. She is angry, she is hurt, she is obsessive, she is tired, and she wants out. And none of these notions fits with her image of the kind of mother she thinks she should be, much less the kind of mother she should write about.

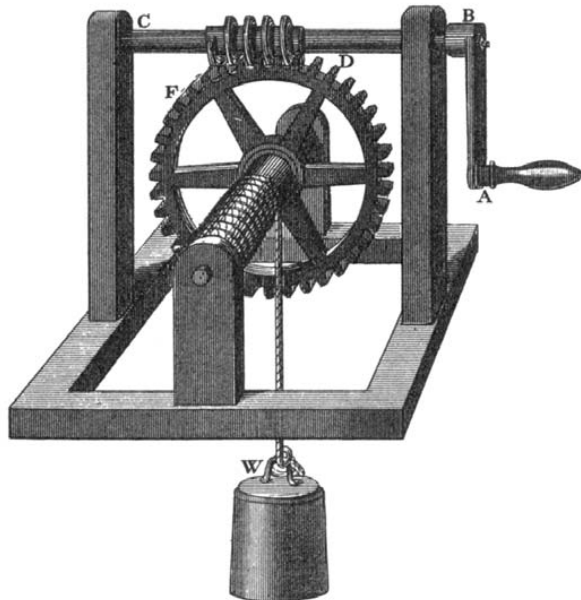
A fellow writer called recently to worry over another common dilemma for writers. “If I write the story I want to tell about Scott (a former lover), what will my husband think? Will I hurt him? Would I want him doing something like this?” She was ready to abandon her project of reestablishing a correspondence with this man who had opened her to new ways of thinking and being some 20 years ago. As I heard her creating a legitimate excuse for not continuing with her writing project, I thought of Schultz’s aim in critiquing: “helping writers free themselves from the inner demons that may compel somebody to agonize over a single line and rewrite it 20 times rather than give his or her imagination

room to explore, to try out new ideas, to fail, to try again, and eventually hit on something fresh.”⁶ He says, “it is impossible to underestimate the obstacles that writers create for themselves.”⁷

It occurs to me that my friend, though certainly concerned about her husband’s feelings, was really more afraid of her own feelings. “What if I still love Scott? What if I am deeply saddened by the loss of his friendship? What if I realize I abandoned a part of my own creative life 20 years ago when I abandoned Scott?” These thoughts must have been in her mind and heart. They are difficult questions, for sure, but is it possible they are also a pathway back to this writer’s full participation in her creative work? So I wondered, is it constructive to talk about structure or story line or how to punctuate dialogue when the real problem is the writer’s unwillingness to face the emotional content of the writing? What David Bradley calls “the cost” the writer pays for the writing, the emotional resonance. It’s what we read for. It’s what we crave.

In speaking of watching his father give a powerful sermon, Bradley says:

Until that night I had not understood what it meant to write. I had known that the writer’s goal was to reveal truths in words manipulated so effectively as to cause a movement in the minds and hearts of those who read them. But I had not understood that it would cost anything. I had believed that I could do those things while remaining secure and safe in myself—I had even believed that writing fiction was a way to conceal my



true feelings and weaknesses. That night, I found out better. That night, I realized that no matter how good I became in the manipulation of symbols, I could never hope to move anyone without allowing myself to be moved, that I could reveal only slight truths unless I was willing to reveal the truths about myself.⁸

Bradley desires to get better and better at facing those truths that reveal who we are and what we feel. He doesn't always do it, he confesses, but his best work achieves such honesty of feeling. And yet, ironically, Schultz says, "many writers avoid their best work because it causes high anxiety."⁹ We spend our lives developing defenses against the very feelings that will lead us to new places. Bradley has more to say about the "cost" of getting to this new place:

It may sound silly, but I believe that to become a better writer I have to try to become a better person, just as I believe that the best preacher is

not the saint but the person who allows himself or herself to be touched by the word, even as he or she transmits or interprets it. Of course a writer isn't really a preacher, and a novel isn't divine word. Every reading is not religious conversion. Every sermon is not a masterpiece, and every sermon doesn't bring them screaming up to the altar. But the truth, I hope, is that we come to both a book and a service of worship with the same hopes—that we'll learn something, yes, but more important, that we'll be touched by something, that we will feel a connection with some source of power and energy and understanding.

. . . I do believe that . . . if I search my soul and my heart, I will find a way to capture some kind of energy, to somehow bring down a little fire to change my reader and change myself.¹⁰

But a teacher can't just command emotional resonance from a writer, especially beginner writers. Can she? She can't insist writers drop their defenses. Can she? She might hope they "bring down the fire" Bradley seeks, but she can't tell students they've been emotionally dishonest with themselves for years. Can she? How, then, are we to bridge the disconnect between the events reported on the page and the emotions harbored in the heart of the writer?

Phil Schultz says we must give students the framework that will build confidence to go to the places they need to go. And that framework is

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craft. "Craft," he says, "is liberating. . . . Craft will enable every writer to find his or her own voice."¹¹

Most creative writing teachers are well aware of the necessity of helping students understand the techniques of good practitioners of their genre. To support our workshops, we create courses that allow students to examine closely the craft of the writer. Currently, in a course called *Prose Style*, I use Ursula LeGuin's *Steering the Craft*. In short, highly focused exercises, students isolate a specific element of craft (third person limited

point of view, repetition, dialogue) and practice it under very restrictive conditions. "The exercises are consciousness raisers," LeGuin says. "Their aim is to clarify and intensify your awareness of certain elements of prose writing and certain techniques and modes of storytelling."¹²

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My students find these exercises

most instructive; they gain keener understanding of why some writing flies, and other writing skids along the ground. They see how a writer's technical mastery enables his art and, as Schultz maintains, leads the writer to "negotiate more profound feeling."¹³

Still, I'm left wondering about the "feeling" side of this equation. I understand that craft gives writers the tools they need to express their ideas and emotions clearly and effectively; how to encourage students to plunge into feelings that appear threatening is the tricky part. I know teachers who staunchly avoid such territory. Teaching technique is most comfortable. We can maintain our focus on the concrete aspects of texts—the shape of the sentences, the consistency of the point of view, the play of rhythms, etc. There's security in focusing on these elements of prose; they may be readily identified, and with practice, most writers can gain control of them. But, recently, I've noticed how less agile I am in leading students to "negotiate more profound feeling." Even our language for describing such an activity is paltry; it can easily slip into a vague and embarrassing psycho-babble.

One thing helps, though: examining carefully the emotional power in literature. I can show students what happens when someone is willing to pay Bradley's "cost" and establish a sense of what Schultz calls "something at stake" in the writing. Here's where good models speak messages a teacher may be unable—or ill-equipped—to articulate to students. If you're fortunate to work with talented writers, you have models emerging right out of your student writing. Like this last section from a poem by Rachel Gramer here at Rollins, about visiting the grave of her stillborn sister with her mother:

My mother now leans down in faded blue jeans to begin pruning.
With paraffin hands, she wipes dirt off the stone,
rips out paling blades of green, clears weeds from the corners,
arranges the flowers we brought, and tidies the surrounding grass.
I want to look away but don't because the earth's beneath my feet,
my toes touch my sister's grave—
her lungs choked to the world—
and my mother's tears drop just above Charity's empty eye sockets.
All of us tied by genetic cord to the man who was useless in '77,
divorced in '84,
over a thousand miles and a dozen years away,
forgotten.
But across the Sabula Bridge where nothing ever changes,
Charity Ann remembers him as husband and father,
and though she doesn't mean to hurt us,
her tiny rib under the dry earth pokes up through the years.
Because it is the curse of the dead never to forget,
her red hand reaches through the grave to seize my mother,
and when I say I am afraid of marriage, it is only this:
these stillborn bones clutching her white throat,
because once she was married, once she had a child,
once she was home, once she was trapped,
and the bloody fingerprints on her neck don't know she's moved on.

How does a 21-year-old girl write such things? How does anyone write such words? That's what a lot of people wondered a few weeks ago when Rachel read this poem at an annual student reading at our college. All of us in attendance were rapt by the poem's images, mesmerized by its rhythms, stunned by the emotional power of Rachel's story.

What "manipulation of words" caused us to catch our breath upon the single, horrifying image of an infant's bones poking through the dirt of her own grave? Was it magic? luck? accident? I wondered if the writer herself could provide any clues as to how she manages to take herself to such raw places, to show us such revealing details, to lay bare for us both her own and her mother's yearnings about the world. She told me later:

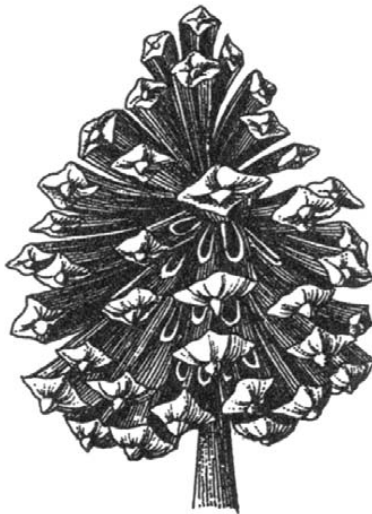
I try to write about what I don't want to write about. When I get an idea and start writing, lots of times I am pulled into memories or associations that worry me, or maybe scare me, or offend me. I used to rush away from those thoughts, but now I work real hard to notice them, sit with them, try to follow them wherever they lead me. That's what happened to me in this poem. The idea of Charity's birth came to me and immediately repelled me. I didn't want to think about it, either the actual event, or its ramifications. My first impulse was to walk away from it. Just get up and leave the computer. But I knew I couldn't do that because I would be

walking away from feelings, which is like walking away from the truth. But that's where I knew I had to go if I was going to make this poem do something. Why am I walking away from this? I asked myself. Then I just sat at the computer and stared and demanded that I deal with it.

And what does dealing with it actually entail?

Well, for one thing I try to feel what it must feel like to be that character. In a Master Class here at Rollins, Ann Beattie said she 'introspects perpetually.' I really liked that. That's what I do. I'm obsessive about thinking about things. So when Charity came to me, I just tried to think about her and what she felt and who she was or might have been. Then I tried to feel what my mother must have felt to lose her, to be alone in losing her. It made me very sad. And when I get sad I can be pretty sure something good is coming. That sounds sick, doesn't it?"

...In "Across the Sabula Bridge" I really like the section where I describe my mother leaning down to take care of Charity's grave. All that careful tending she did was so touching to me. It was beautiful and it made me love her so much. So that part I think really works because it portrays a feeling about her and not what it meant to see her do that. I'm not sure what it means. I'll just leave that up to the reader. Maybe it doesn't mean anything. The poet Carol Frost has a line: 'Whatever it means, why not say it hurts?' Isn't that great? I wish I had written that line because that's what I believe. It doesn't matter what a poem means but it matters that you feel it."



In her wonderful book *Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris discusses the dynamic nature of the writing life. She says writing is not so much a “subject to be mastered as a way of life that requires continual conversion.”¹⁴ That is, we have to keep committing ourselves to the belief that we can give utterance to our impressions. She says we have to “revise, to weed out the lies you’ve told yourself and get real.”¹⁵

And that’s it, isn’t it? Getting real, I mean. That catch in our throat—when Stevens sees his own tacit dream rendered irredeemable, when a baby’s bloody hand clutches its mother’s white throat—is a demonstration of the writer “getting real.” Excruciatingly, concretely, minutely, painfully, beautifully real. So real that we too are infused with feeling. We are alive to the human condition laid bare before us. And we are grateful for having been led out of our own resistance into deep emotion. For that moment, at least, we do not run from feeling. For that moment at least, we too are “getting real.” William Carlos Williams said “No idea but in things.” We might adapt this now famous dictum and say “No emotion but in things.”

This process of observing good models closely may be the closest we can come to instructing students about emotional honesty.

Teachers, of course, love to analyze rich models like the ones I’ve mentioned here. I’ve had many wonderful hours with students probing texts line by line, image by image, seeing what features connected reader to text in “some source of power and energy and understanding.” It’s exhilarating. And it’s almost always highly motivating to us as writers. My students and I have left each other many times eager to get home to our computers and, rubbing word against word, “bring down a little fire.” This process of observing good models closely may be the closest we can come to instructing students about emotional honesty. After they see it emerge from images on the page, listen to its rhythms and patterns, feel it moving deep in their bones, maybe that’s when they begin wondering about their own work and the extent to which their readers are moved by what they write. Maybe that’s when they begin to believe their feelings are to be embraced, not evaded.

At the beginning of this article, I quoted from the journal of a writer who was trying to depict what it was like to help her aging mother leave her home of 50 years. After considering the lessons of Schultz and Bradley and Gramer, this writer saw how her first attempt merely recounted the meaning of the mother’s condition. In her revision, she strove to portray

the *feelings* of the mother and wrote this:

I took hundreds of her books to the public library, and I handled every one of them before I boxed them up—literature, a huge number on world religions, philosophy, art history, geography, and from her later years, hundreds of mysteries and romances. Not a single book of poetry. I found boxes containing grocery lists and menus and recipes and seating charts and floral designs for dinner parties she and Dad had given as far back as 1952. In an unmarked envelope I found the packing slip for a pair of black


slacks and a black bow tie she had purchased to send my brother on his European band tour in 1963. All this carelessly preserved paraphernalia of her days and months and years as a mother and a wife was both precious and overwhelming. Still, we went through it all; every single picture and scrap of paper was considered. We reluctantly discarded most of it. Over and over I watched her pick up a picture or a frayed ribbon or a boy scout badge, her frail, veined hands

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quivering with wonder and distress. At one point she placed both hands against the wall of the family room and leaned into it, as if trying to support the structure that had protected her for so many years, and was crumbling around her; she lowered her head as if in shame, and made a sad, low moan. "Oh Daddy," she said, "our life is gone." As I carried box after box out to the street for trash pick-up, she cried and cried. I cried too, but not when she could see me.

And so, as she enters her workshop, the writer carries a double-edged sword. One side representing the emotional content of her work, the writer's willingness to pierce her own heart along with the hearts of her readers. The other side representing craft, and the daily devotion to technique. The writer's job is to make sure both sides of her instrument are kept clean and sharp.

I guess I've talked myself out of my disturbance, and reassured myself that I really can do something beyond teaching craft to push students to their own best writer selves. Yes, craft is liberating, a vital component in the writer's curriculum. But we know, too, that when we respond to powerful writing, it's the other side of the sword that makes the first slash on our consciousness. We feel first a writer's passion, his integrity, his honesty, his knowledge of the human heart. We talk about how the work makes us feel before we talk about the method by which the work causes

us to feel. In the hands of a master, the two processes are inextricably linked, for sure. And in his devotion to both the discipline of craft and the mysteries of the heart, it becomes almost impossible to see just which side of the sword a writer employs at any given moment. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Duncan Bock, "Trying Voices on for Size," *Poet's and Writers Magazine*, March/April 1998.
- ² *Ibid.*, 55.
- ³ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 179.
- ⁴ Bock, 55.
- ⁵ Frederick Busch, "Andre and the Daughters." *The Writer's Chronicle*, May/Summer 2001, 52.
- ⁶ Bock, 56-57.
- ⁷ Bock, 59.
- ⁸ David Bradley, "The Faith," in *The Dolphin Reader*, 1st Edition, ed. Douglas Hunt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 91-92.
- ⁹ Bock, 60.
- ¹⁰ David Bradley, "Bringing Down the Fire," in *Spiritual Quests: The Art and Craft of Religious Writing*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 57-58.
- ¹¹ Bock, 55.
- ¹² Ursula K. Le Guin, *Steering the Craft* (Portland, Oregon: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1998), xi.
- ¹³ Bock, 60.
- ¹⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 142.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

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