

Rescued from Burnout

I nearly failed out of high school. In 11th grade I was in the midst of repeating the classes from my entire freshman year and half of my sophomore year. It was then that I met Mr. Thatcher. He was the boys' basketball coach -- a fact which made me immediately write him off as an English teacher. I laid my head on my desk when he was lecturing, I made smart-aleck comments when he invited discussion, and I wrote what *I* thought was funny when I wrote anything at all. In my estimation, I was smarter than the other students, smarter than my teachers, and consequently, too smart for wasting my energy on school. In Mr. Thatcher, I was completely outmatched.

He liked to choose some of our journal entries, (a daily 10 minute free-write assignment), and read them aloud to the class. One day, Mr. Thatcher read mine. It was some absurd, tangential riff that I had done to mock the banality of the quote he had used as the prompt. The wily so-and-so took my teenage rebellion and threw it right back at me. He had the audacity to be entertained by my writing. The outrage grew the next day when he chose another one of my entries to share with the class. This one even got laughs from that cynical bunch. All of a sudden, I had an audience for my writing. I didn't care so much whether the students liked it, but I *did* care more than I wanted to admit about what Mr. Thatcher thought. He continued to read my entries almost every day. The days that he didn't made me work harder the next day to be clever and interesting. The days that he read my work aloud became my favorite days in any class other than Theatre. I even wrote a serial adventure for him featuring an original superhero called Cricket Boy.

I was converted. The burnout became an engaged and curious writer. Little did Mr. Thatcher know that his insistence on daily writing and his acknowledgement of my work would later inspire me to teach -- first as a pastor, and later as an English teacher myself.

I realize now that that little daily exercise in writing was building two formative elements in my creative desire. First, the discipline of the act developed my writing habit like a well-conditioned muscle. Just as a sprinter gains a quicker reflex for leaping from the starting block, a writer learns to be ready with a pen whenever the moment presents itself to put ideas down on paper. This isn't just a question of being witty at the firing of the starter pistol, though that skill does get sharper with practice. The writer also learns through the demand of a daily writing routine to observe, collect, and catalog events and interactions that happen away from the desk so that they can be applied when a piece needs them.

Secondly, the joy of writing comes in producing something of oneself that resonates with another. I suppose there are writers who use their gift simply as an outlet and care nothing about whether their work sees the light of day. For me -- and probably most others, too -- writing something that speaks to another human being is invigorating. If I can create a poem, a sermon, an essay, or a short story that makes someone think or cry or laugh or even feel less alone in their struggles, then I have made the world a little better than it was before the ink touched the page.

However, there is another aspect of creative writing that does not make me want to sing Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. I refer, of course, to the critique. My first experience with academic critique of my writing came decades later in my first college-level creative writing class. Specifically, it was a poetry writing class. Every week we had to write poems and submit them for evaluation. The critiques came from every direction, arrows raining down to pierce the

structure, content, and form of what I wrote. And here I was without a shield, exposed and defenseless with my soul laid bare in free verse. I'll never forget the sound of those iron-tipped missiles, annihilating my every Latinate adjective.

I hate criticism. I know that constructive corrections and recommendations are the path to maturing as a writer, but I don't want to be mature. I want to play in my little sandbox and have everyone tell me that my sandcastles are the most stunning architectural wonders they've ever seen. Yet try as I might to resist letting go of "The Precious," (for Gollum it was a ring, for me it's my initial draft), I grew up anyway. My professor's persistent refusal to put my writing under museum glass led me, kicking and screaming, into becoming a more thoughtful writer. I begrudgingly moved from believing in love at first sight to accepting the necessity of that dirtiest of expletives: *revision*.

While I am still a fledgling writer in my own eyes, especially since I've yet to be published, I know that the awakening of the desire that came through Mr. Thatcher's journal entries and the refining fire of critique in my first actual creative writing course have been the cornerstones of what measure of good comes from people reading what I write. I have learned from these two experiences that good writing necessarily arises from passion, diligence, and malleability.

With these lessons in hand, life has come full circle. Now I find myself in Mr. Thatcher's place: evoking groans from reticent teenagers who would rather have hot needles jammed in their eyes than write a 10 minute response to "Anger is One Letter Away from Danger." They put their heads on the desks when I lecture about the beauty of Dickinson's thing with feathers, they make smart-alecks remarks when I ask their opinion on the philosophy espoused by Atticus Finch, and they write funny and engaging responses in their journal entries, often as a protest

against the banality of my chosen quotes. Just the other day, I stopped two of my 9th graders in the hall to tell them what I thought of their work. One writes poetry about her faith that is replete with rich imagery. The other prefers absurd stories about characters in nonsensical situations that only tangentially relate to the original prompt. What a delight it was to see them smile with embarrassed pride when I encouraged them to pursue their gifts in creative writing.

I finally think I understand the raw materials of creative writing, both as a writer and a teacher. I still don't like criticism, but I welcome it at least as much as I welcome a flu shot. I don't want to revise my work, but I am far less funerary about hitting the delete key than I once was. I'm still learning how to encourage budding writers, both in praise and critique, but I am grateful to do for others as Mr. Thatcher did for me. I doubt I'll ever develop his patience, good humor, and grace. But I hope I can make him proud.