

Winds of Change

American Indian Education & Opportunity

Winter 1997



To Ask Forgiveness of a Creature Spirit

Writing Power

Opening Doors to Self-Expression

BY ANN KOCH

High-school English teacher Ann Koch experienced the healing power of writing in her own life. When she released her American Indian students from the pre-programmed curriculum and encouraged them to write, they discovered the poets inside themselves.

Teaching at the Hannahville Indian School in Wilson, Michigan has given me the freedom to teach English the way I instinctively know it should be taught. Just as light can change our mood, so also can use of creative writing release a healing process within each of us.

What I had only suspected when I started teaching at Hannahville three years ago was that teaching writing in a *less structured, less traditional, less curriculum-oriented* manner could be used as a way of “healing” for my students.

The heartaches needing to be healed among Indian students are varied and common throughout all of society. They could range from abuse and/or neglect at home, sexual promiscuity and irresponsibility, to alcohol and drug abuse by the student.

“The condition of Native American students, however, appears to be especially alarming... Native American children have been found to be more

rejected, depressed, and withdrawn than white children. Studies also show that Native American teenagers have a lower self-image than any other minority group, the highest rate of suicide, and the highest dropout rate."

— Preventing School Failure: The Native American Child, by Johanna Nel (The Clearing House, Jan-Feb 1994: 169-174).

Many times students have asked me, "How do you work through your problems?" My answer is always the same, "Writing and exercise; both are hard work."

The first time this question was asked in class made me think, "If writing a book (for my personal satisfaction only, not for publication) had helped me work through a difficult divorce, why couldn't the same answer—writing—be applied in the classroom?" There is something wonderfully concrete about setting a problem down on paper, or creating a new world on paper, into which to escape and draw hope. Most importantly, there is the wonderful feeling of accomplishment when this has been completed.

But let me back up a bit. I have the proper credentials including licenses from Wisconsin and Michigan to teach english and journalism (grades 7-12). I am currently in a Master's program pursuing certification as a reading specialist. As an undergraduate, my lesson plans were published by the University of Wisconsin and distributed to journalism teachers throughout the state. As a former working journalist of more than 15 years, I've earned a bit of knowledge about writing the best way possible—by doing it. Why then are so many schools stuck in a regimented routine, set in concrete and enforced by department heads, that writing can and should be taught in one way only — their way.

- Research papers are the only way to go, or
- Write an expository theme of 2,000 words, or
- Follow the format I've given you and respond to the stated topic in 400 words.

All may be and can be good goals for the classroom writer, but they are not the only highway we can travel in helping children learn to write. Students also need to be given a chance to unleash their creativity. Yes, some students first need to be taught the basics of grammar. And for these students I later reinforce my lessons with some practical and fun applications of writing (such as writing to pen pals in a foreign country).

In the higher grades I also allot a portion of the week to a review of the grammatical basics and then I turn these wonderful kids loose to unleash their creativity as they see fit within the boundaries of the classroom. Often, they come up with better topic or format ideas than what I've suggested.

"Go for it," is my usual response. Ownership in writing leads to commitment and success. When

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students share their writing—a poem, a short story, an essay—with their classmates it often leads to smiles and pride and, sometimes, to the assumption of a newer, more positive identity. Hopefully, students learn that what originated as a classroom teaching process can evolve into a spiritual process, in which the results are shared in the classroom and with the community.

Of Pride and Poetry

Ching Bezine, a leading Chinese author of Southeast Asia who has had 15 books published in China and five published in the United States, visited our classroom to explain the writing process. One of the students approached her and said, "Hi, I'm Tonto, I'm a poet." And so he is, and a pretty good one at that.

The Ways of Man

Into the midnight darkness,
Stormed the warriors.
Like a mighty herd of buffalo,
They rode away sounding like thunder.
They ride with anticipation,
courage, and experience.

Into battle they charge.
Not for food,
Not for gold,
Not for glory.
They fight hard for the land that
Once was theirs.
If not to succeed,
Then to die.

Fires are burning fiercely.
Guns shoot all around,
People falling like drops
From a faucet.
Screaming and yelling echoes
through the night.

For these men, and all men,
Their worst enemy is not each other,
But only themselves...
Why must man destroy itself?

Tonto Wandahsega
Hannahville

The imagery is strong, the ideas expressed show a reverence and pride in his people's past glory. This poem was published in the 1994 edition of *Pegasus, An Anthology of Student Writing and Art* (Delta-Schoolcraft, Michigan Intermediate School District, Gifted and Talented Program assisted by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation).

The boys will often use strong verbs and rely on very physical activities, such as war or sports, to express their battles with life. In another poem, Tonto, a '96 graduate of Hannahville, uses a sports analogy.

Picking Up a Football

I see it lying there
waiting for me.
Calling out cheers of joy
and cracking at impact.
Like lost loves being reunited,
The first contact is unreal.
I check, making sure I'm awake.
It fits so naturally in my arms
I know it was meant to be.

Tonto Wandahsega
Hannahville

These two poems helped launch Tonto's writing efforts. This past year he has taken to writing his own legends during the winter months, and more recently he has set his poems to music, singing them to a taped accompaniment. We played them in the classroom. His fellow students liked some of them and voted thumbs down on the others. We had a lot of fun, Tonto was assured and

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Poetry from Hannahville Students

Elders

by Larry Seymour

The only one left
To learn on her own
To survive in a world
That's run by white men.

The old are not weak
But very strong.
They can build their own houses
Kill their own food
And make their own medicine.

The old are not weak
But very strong.
We shall learn from them.

My Brother

by Tonto Wandahsega

Come now, my brother
For it is not too late.
Our mother is sick but she is not gone,
The rivers still flow,
The grass is still green,
The animals still live,
We are still a people.

Come now, my brother
Our souls are not taken.
Our people are not beaten,
For our culture has not been broken.
Let us live as we once did,
Let us live in harmony as one with one another.

So come now, my brother
Stand tall. Stand proud. Stand for who you are,
For now we have come a long way, my brother.

Shadows

by Kristy Thunder

Image of a young man
in the shadow of the night
was all I saw.
It was you.

Nothing was there.
but it was you.
You were all I saw
for a minute, only for a minute.

But as I walked
I knew you were with me.
I could feel the warmth
of your heart in mine.

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honest and sympathetic audience, and the very creative writing and sharing process continued.

Joe Sagataw, another Hannahville student, also likes to refer to sports in his poetry.

Underdog

Don't blink,
You might miss out.
The pressure is on you.

As your toes lift off the court,
Your arm pushes the ball outward.
Smash!!

As your small frame hits the hardwood,
The ball leaves its mark on your face.
Failure!! Again.

Short, succinct, but could anyone have written a better analogy for the daily battles faced by Native American adolescents?

*"To me, being creative means
to be spontaneous, to come
up with something out of the
ordinary, to be above average
in areas of thought and
problem solving, (to have)
artistic values."*

— Nick Sagataw, '96 graduate.

Kristy Thunder, a sophomore, showed a different way of looking at these daily battles, one written from the female perspective.

Love

Love is the air we breathe,
the blood we bleed.

Love is the gun we shoot,
the war we fight.

Love is the arms in which you hold me,
the fist (with which) you hit me.

Love is the tear that drops from my eye,
The scream I yell, the fears I hold.

Love is the beginning
and the start of the end.

Love is our life and our death,
That is yet to begin.
Three years ago, when only in seventh grade,

Kristy responded to the book, *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. Her book report was written as a poem.

Terabithia

Tall pines at the grove,
Excitement.
Relaxment.
Aaron
Burke's
Imagination.
The bridge.
HELP!
Icy river.
All together, forever.

I entered the above poem in the *Parents Resource* writing contest and Ken Seidman, editor, replied, "Terabithia has the power of a Japanese Haiku. Its juxtaposition of concise images and words has a strong effect." Very high praise for a student in junior high school!

What Creativity Means

The students themselves have described the creativity inherent in the writing process as they see it.

"To me, being creative means to be spontaneous, to come up with something out of the ordinary, to be above average in areas of thought and problem solving, (to have) artistic values." — Nick Sagataw, '96 graduate.

"I think creative means that you can create something. I think Mike Tyson is creative. He created such a macho image of himself, then ruined it by talking." — Joe Sagataw, senior. (Joe wrote the poem "Underdog" above, and here also shows us his ironic sense of humor.)

"Creative means doing something differently and doing something your own way." — Amy Dowd, junior.

Notice how Amy chose to emphasize "doing something your own way." She shows us once again how important ownership is in the writing process. Amy says of her writing, "I just sit down and write it on my computer. All the words just come out, they come from my heart. They have to come out. It means a lot to me and is really how I feel."

Essay writing also is an important part of both the students' creative, and hopefully healing, process. The topics are as varied as the writing styles. Here are some examples.

On prejudice: "Prejudice is a very sad thing because people are people and if we can't accept anyone for who they are or what they believe in, then society is going to crumble even more... Getting along in society is the most important thing we have left, so I'll make the best of it." — Ralph Little, '96 Hannahville graduate.

On the importance of women: "As long as I can remember I've been told that the Mother is a very important part of the cycle of life. We honor Mother Earth because of the life-giving our Mother Earth gives to us. No matter how strong or brave our men are, they need the woman to carry on the blood lines of the tribe."—Amy Dowd.

On responsibility: "When I moved out of my dad's house I was expecting to have a lot of fun, not to have to worry about anything. I was wrong. I had bills to pay and a lot of responsibility I was not expecting. The first couple of weeks were fun. Parties, freedom, and no one to tell me what to do. I thought I knew it all. I thought it would be easy, but it was hard. Bills kept coming in. There was not enough money to pay for anything... What I learned from this experience is not to expect the most of anything, but do not expect the worst."—Becky Hardwick, senior.

Other essays may range from a light-hearted poetic response to the importance of school:

School

is hard but easy,
Sometimes fun but boring.
But stick with it,
And (you'll) probably come out scoring.

Dustin Larson, junior

Or, it may be a more serious reflection on one's name.

"Yes, I do like my name because my grandmother on my mom's side used to call me by it. I believe it does fit my personality now and even more so when I was younger, Wenaboozh Indizhinakaaz. (Trickster is my name.) Now my grandmother has passed on I want to keep my name to show respect for her."—Nick Sagataw.

Nick has also submitted essays showing serious thought about his future.

"I don't fear getting old, but I want to do something with my life before it's too late to do anything. I plan to go to college and get a good job. ...I want to show people that not all Native Americans are drunks or poor with no family values. I want to show people who put me down because of

my skin color that I can do better in life than they have and still have fun doing it. So, if I accomplish this task in life then I won't have anything to fear in old age. *I think it's not the paths a man chooses in life, it's how other people respect him and welcome his presence.*" (The italics are mine.) Nick has also written a six and one-half page, single-spaced, typewritten short story in the western style of Louis L'Amour.

Ralph Little described his grandmother using five short sentences, yet each chosen with loving insight.

"My grandmother is a person who likes to sew and make crafts. All she needs is her sewing machine and some material and she is busy for the day. In the evening she plays bingo. All she needs is a dabber and \$25 and some luck and then she's off. Medically, all she needs is a shot of insulin and some love from the family."

I believe that creative writing has helped my students reach the four basic components of self esteem as described by Stanley Coopersmith: significance, competence, power and virtue (*Reclaiming Our Youth At Risk* by Larry K. Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Bockern). The authors made a telling point, "...without a sense of self worth, a young person from any culture or family background is vulnerable to a host of social, psychological and learning problems." Hopefully, their creative writing has helped my students to sometimes be able to put these problems in perspective.

My rewards are many; they come when I enter school in the morning and a sophomore hands me a slip of paper saying shyly, "Mrs. K., can you read this poem? I wrote it last night," or when an eighth-grader tells the class, "I was thinking about the poem I'm writing on the way home from school yesterday," or when one of my older students asks for computer time to work on a short story.

Hannahville students don't just write to use words. They write to embrace healing in its four sides — the physical, the emotional, the spiritual and the psychological. ✦

*"Creative means doing
something differently and
doing something your
own way."*

— Amy Dowd, junior

Right then I knew,
it was you.
It was only me and you,
walking in the shadows of the night.

Fear

by Kristy Thunder

The eyes as they stare,
The mouths as they laugh.
Why, I ask him why.
But some know they're only lies,
But still they laugh as I cry.
He doesn't know what it is
to be denied.
Or maybe in those serious eyes,
He feels my pain, my fear.
No, he doesn't care, he does not think.
Like an animal that feeds on its prey,
He doesn't care for the pain you feel.
Like the hunt, he thinks
What will happen next?
He hopes it won't be a sudden death
Because he loves the small of your FEAR.

Confusion

by a Hannahville student

Confusion is all round me.
I can't really see what is going on.
I don't really know what to do.
Can't someone tell me what to do
Or tell me what not to do?

I am so confused.
I don't know what to say
Or who to turn to.

I am all alone in this world
In this small world we live in.
What is here for me?
What am I here for?
What am I supposed to do now?

All I know is what I have done
and what is expected of me.
But I don't really know me.
What do I do?
I am so confused.

Haiku

by Ralph Little

I know a woman
with hair as dark as midnight
and a loving soul.