

THE BEGINNING OF TALENT: CASE IN POINT

by Alice Glarden Brand

Writing as a way of learning has become a keystone of the profession. Georges Gusdorf, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Carl Rogers said it each in his own way. E.M. Forster said it best. It is the platform on which the interdisciplinary writing movement rests. It is a guiding principle for research in cognition, linguistics, and the humanistic psychologies. At the pedagogical level, the expression refers to the Brunerian discovery of the world through the structure of the items that constitute its business. In its existential sense, writing is one of the symbolic ways we try to render intelligible the meaning of life, the reason of death, the cycle of things, and the place of self in that cycle. This last became synonymous with the personal growth paradigm which in turn figured centrally in the Dartmouth conference and in the period of psychosocial enlightenment that followed and promoted my research.

Two years ago I wrote a book about using writing as a way of social and emotional learning. At the time my purpose was to make a case for using personal writing for personal growth. My work reported on a program that provided for such experiences. Eight secondary school students participated in a five-month, intensive personal writing program. After objective and naturalistic analyses, I concluded that three students resisted deep engagement in personal growth writing and five students experienced varying degrees of social and emotional enhancement through writing--two of whom exemplified the purposes of the

program. It helped them learn more about themselves, explore some life questions, solve some problems of daily living, and discharge some tensions. My book, Therapy in Writing, details this progress.

I never imagined that, by mere serendipity, the program would be delivered not of the therapeutically ready (in the holistic sense) or the therapeutically reluctant but of a third sort, Diane--the proverbial natural. Diane's writing was impressive in its honesty and detail, unmistakable in its elasticity and spirit. Why then did she not appear in the chapters of my book given over to individuals? The first and most obvious reason was space restrictions. The second was insufficient contrast. Diane's material did not provide as striking a transformation as the writings of the two students I did profile. Diane was not a student whose social and emotional development the program seemed to have much to do with. Diane was not a student whose fluency and felicity of language the program could take major credit for. It was as though she had been at the brink for years, already thinking about commonplace experiences in uncommon ways. The program merely gave her permission, gave her place.

Of course, maybe it was too early to tell; Diane still had a few more years in the system. Maybe her gift was more in managing to escape academic suffocation--a gift in itself, never mind the writing. It reminds me of a Picasso quotation: "Once I drew like Raphael. But it has taken me a whole life time to learn to draw like a child." We know the stage in the life cycle that Diane was then in. She was 14 years old and

writing appropriately like one. But one wonders why in the phylogeny of writing it seems that so many of us must pass through, as Shaugnessy states, a stage of formalese that echoes the bombastic styles of more experienced writers in order to acquire our own mature style. And once there, like Picasso, complex ideas may be expressed in more elemental terms. Must our expository selves first be pried away from our expressive selves in order to know the difference between the two? Must Diane's unabashed illuminations be abandoned somewhere along the academic line before they are restored later on (if at all)? Are we better writers for having gone through that stage? Or is our writing otherwise considered simplistic but not artful? One wonders if "English" is indeed is an institutional mandate, contrivance, or part of the of natural course of cognitive events.

In any case, Diane is a student who has not yet arrived at that stage. Those of us who have come full circle would do well to note her transparency, her forthright insights, the relaxed, natural style of her written voice.

Let me explain. Writers like Diane do not have to start reclaiming the parts of themselves that some of us were trained to deny. They are naive (or wise enough) to do writing as an egocentric enterprise in so far as their deep down knowing is the centrifugal center for everything else that occurs to them. They have a gift for saying, as they claim of poets, what most of us barely permit ourselves to think. Remember, it is not so much the informational content. It is not so much originality as it is bravery. Good writing is risky business.

Young writers like Diane have unusual access to themselves. Their writing actually produces ideas; and they are not afraid to declare them. They startle us with their observations. The writing simply delivers the goods.

So what, you may say, Diane is no different from my John, Debbie, or Carol. And I'm sure that is true. We have all had Dianes at one time or another in our careers. But we don't have enough of them. We don't have enough students that never stand in quite the same relationship to the world again once they have come to certain ideas, who sense the increase in themselves once they have said certain things. We don't have enough students who sense that they never knew more about what they were writing than at the moment they were writing it. We don't have enough students who sense that so much of experience is lost to them without such writing.

Yet good teachers are not interested in producing great writers. They are not expected to turn students into embryonic professional writers with unfailing fluency, disciplined thought, and a discriminating sense of style. But good teachers have an intuitive sense of what is quality writing. And the job of a teacher is to recognize promising work and keep it going.

So what I would like you to do first with Diane's work is enjoy it as you might a Peanuts' cartoon or a Zindel dialogue, an apprentice Woody Allen or Judith Viorst. Then I would like you to take Diane's work to your students and help them get acquainted with her. Say to them: "This is one way Diane knows herself and one way we can get to know her. Look at what we can learn about ourselves if we can say these things.

Imagine how we can think about other things if we can write these things about ourselves."

Let me tell you about Diane. She was a small, vivacious girl, a conscientious student, and an active member of the community. At the time I taught Diane, she was involved in her church and did volunteer work at a local nursing home through the Girl Scouts. It has been several years since I last saw Diane. I do not know what she is doing now, whether or not she is still writing, still fighting with her sister, or has grown any taller. I do, however, know some things we can learn from Diane that we should never allow the school system to deprive our writing of: its (1) emotionality, (2) honesty, (3) particularity, and (4) personal quality.

Emotionality

Promising writing is fueled by feeling. Diane was first among the program participants to verbalize the disparity between the happiness she thought she was supposed to feel and the anger that she actually felt. During opening sessions she seemed to have no trouble making midcourse corrections; happiness was in fact finding out how important it was to say what you meant to say and then saying it.

Happiness is all sorts of things to me. I'm just going to tell you about things I like. Well, you already know I love backpacking and camping. I like outdoor things like sports. Soccer and swimming I like best. Happiness is also when you do something better than another person. I feel good all over and then do a bit better. To tell you the truth I'm sick of writing about things I like.

I wrote about these things in 5th, 6th, 7th grades and now I'm doing it in 8th. I'm not mad about you I could've picked something else. I'm going to write about that thing I feel anger but/and often express. . . (whatever). When I'm mad and I yell a little bit, I take it out on my mom. She's a nice "kid". I guess she understands my problem and accepts it. When I'm mad I sometimes go to my room and listen to the radio and clean and when I'm mad and start cleaning theres no stopping me. I think I do this to get my mind off my anger. I really don't like being angry but sometimes its good to let your emotions out. If everybody in the world were never angry this world would be boring and less challenging in making your own life.

Unlike the above piece in which Diane addressed her anger almost proudly, she treated remorse with deference and confusion. In the passage that follows, Diane tracks the responses which trigger her distress and her writing. Her associations bring her to several frontiers. She talks about the indiscriminate suffering of cancer victims as well as of those close to them. She wonders about the constancy of friendship. She takes on the role of her friend, acknowledging what calls friendship into question, and then she reaffirms her loyalty. (She also mentions in passing the therapeutic benefits of her writing.) She is more subdued and clinical here. The emotional level is subtle but the tenor of her concern is unequivocal.

I got a stomach ache ever since this morning on the bus stop. Maybe because I'm upset. Today well, really this morning, my mom called up grandma. She found out that

Aunt Anne has cancer. It's all on her neck and shoulder. My mom was very upset I hope my Aunt doesn't have to suffer. Every one else has to suffer also but I don't want her to go through it all again. Her best friend died I think in 75 -no 76. Well, any way Mrs. Musto had cancer and suffered for three years. My mom didn't have the cancer but I know she suffered. It took her a long time to recuperate, I don't think she's ever going to get over it because I still can't. She was Barbara's mother. Barbara never talks about it. I wonder how she feels. She is still my best friend and not because I feel sorry for her. I've never written about this before. I don't know if it's good or bad for me. I could keep on writing about this forever. Maybe this could become a log. I'm going to write about it on white paper and see how it comes out.*

Honesty

As would be expected, the disquiet of adolescence often crystallizes around siblings. Over a three week period, Diane pursued a younger sister by correspondence--probably no better form to inspire authenticity. We see in Diane's word choices very specific adjustments for her reader. Diane spins a couple of metaphors, reminds herself that her sister may not understand, then follows with a brief explanation. She also refers to their mother in the familiar form as "mommie" not as "my mother" like my other students who were

*Writing on "white paper" meant putting it in final form.

writing letters to family members. She owns up to her share of the provoking behavior but uses the letter as a way of unloading a stockpile of resentments. She is conniving if not patently diabolical. At the same time however Diane does seek some rapprochement. She invites Karen to enter into a written exchange to settle differences. The co-existence of Diane's drive for control as well as her desire to come to terms with her sister has an impassioned ring of truth. Here is the last and strongest of those communications:

Dear Karen,

I'm going to come straight out with it. We don't understand each other. It seems like my brain is on pluto and yours is on earth. To communicate we use a C.B. and the wires are short circuited. The wires need repairing and we have to fix them up. This is like a comparison of our relationship. We could give each other lists. On the lists we could write what bugs each other. After they are done we could switch them and read it over. We could stop bugging each other if we know what bugs us. Well, do not tell any body! This is top secret!! (corny!) Do not tell Mommie - repeat do not tell Mommie or Janice for that matter. Everything I do you have to hit me or complain. I hit you because I have to defend myself. You also tell Mommie everything. That's why the kids up the block don't like you. When you get mad you yell out secrets I told you. That's why I don't tell you anything. You have to get control. You can't tell anybody because you have to decide on your own. Don't consult mommie. Well, here is something

you shouldn't do. Never tell anybody any secrets. Anyway give me a note if you want to do it or not.

Diane is loud and brassy. Her writing is rough and ready. She means business. Although her letters were in fact sent, they apparently made little impact. Several weeks later Diane recounted another run-in with Karen. I note it because it documents casually but candidly the self-management and self-repair experienced on at least two levels. Diane substitutes a nonviolent, symbolic behavior for a violent act which she then describes through the linguistic symbol.

I forgot Saturday Karen and I had a fight again.

I stormed out of the house and started to whittle. I kept thinking Karen was the branch. I think I'm going to ignore her so I won't get bugged so much.

Adolescence is the first period in life that individuals hold up for examination their doings and beliefings. They also learn about the more creative uses of defense and equivocation. At another time Diane talked about honesty itself. Her reflections on lying are not exotic and spiritual exercises. They are moral, realistic, and playful. Diane knew her rights and wrongs (I suspect that a dutiful upbringing saw to that). Fluent youngsters draw on their experiences however homely and familiar. Here they enable Diane to amplify her perspectives-to justify positions in between categorical rights and wrongs. For all intents and purposes, we have caught Diane in the process of constructing her personal world view. Isn't that precisely the way exposition should begin?

I lie very seldom. When I do lie it's usually during a

fight with my sister. Well, it's not really lying -- it's exaggerating quite a bit. If she punched me I'll make it sound terrible. But - sometimes it hurts real bad and she goes "I just tapped you!" That gets me sick. I wonder how many people lie. I guess everybody but, I mean how much do they lie. If it's once in a while or every minute of their life. Anyway lying is bad but sometimes it comes in handy. For instance, you got a rip in the seam of your gym shorts because you are "plump" or "full". So you say to your gym teacher "I can't play gym because my things are in the wash." But you shouldn't because then you will get use to it and use it more and more.

Did you ever stop and think about lying? A lot of people don't give it much thought. Maybe they lie so much it's a part of your daily life. Others don't lie a lot but when they do it's probably a "biggie."

There are advantages and disadvantages of lying. Sometimes it comes in handy. For instance: You got a rip in the seam of your gym shorts because you are a little "full". So you say to your gym teacher "I can't play today because my clothes are in the wash". Lying can become a problem because it will become habit forming. Nobody will believe you -- like the boy who cried wolf.

Particularity

Diane had a knack for paying clearheaded attention to detail. Ideas and things probably never brought into relation before tumbled out of her effortlessly: a pen was a poem on a stick; strolling on the beach was like walking on Corn Chex. Though

a high degree of specificity permeated all Diane's material, I want to share with you the way she treated it in verse form. At one point in the program she wrote a poem about her beliefs in general and about friendship and materialism in particular. The poem showcases her ability to alternate judiciously between the general and the specific through a blend of imagistic opposites.

This Poem

This Poem is about FRIendship
It talks about Diane FRANCavilla
And BARBARA MUSTO
Some parts are FAN TAS tic
Some parts are decomposed like a
dead squirrel lying on the road.
Some parts are in between.

This poem talks about MONEY
the bills are in Fives AND tens
Some parts are valuable like life
Some parts are worthless like an old doll
Some parts are in between

This poem talks about lonliness
lonliness like an ant without a colony
some parts are tiptop like a neatly cleaned bedroom
some parts are cold like wet mittens in winter
some parts are in between
This poem goes just like this

The Personal

Diane had an untutored sense of the comic, the ironic, the rhetorical. Everything she experienced was a potential topic. The world was her realm and everything in it worthy of comment. Just as we all are graduate students of ourselves, Diane waxed most prophetic when she wrote about her personal self. However, while so many of our students move from childhood to their adult years with feelings of pessimism, cynicism, and despair, Diane confronted those troublesome parts in herself with good-humored perceptivity. The pieces that follow are

unpolished but to my mind remarkable, because their originality, intimacy, and vitality counterbalance the national obsession for correctness and reverence for propriety that virtually paralyzes writing.

The part in my hair is like a road on a highway meandering someplace or trying to get to the back of my head. Sometimes it gets lost on the way there and I have to straighten it out. Other times the road is quite curvey and hard to control. But there are times when the road is straight and there are no buckles in it. Buckles are very rare. They occur when I'm playing baseball and the ball hits my head on my part.

My highway is now in the middle of my head because a person gets sick of it on the same side for 5 years. Sometimes during the summer I would switch back and forth. Now I'm going to keep my part in the middle until I get sick of it. Mabe I can have it halfway in the middle and halfway on the side. That's a thought.

In the beginning this is going to be boring but, at the end there will be a spark in this writing. This is about Short People, First off I grew 2 inches over the summer--which I am very delighted. Second, I don't know why people keep asking why a person is so short. There are two very simple, logical reasons. The first reason is: if your mother, father, grandmother and grandfather are short, then your answer is heredity! The second reason is simply: because God made you that way. Well, here comes the spark in the writing (ready for this?) Short people

are: Extraordinary, outstanding, eye catching, marvelous, phenomenal, well known (Sammy Davis Jr., Paul Williams and me!) incredible, inconcievable, rare, wonderful, fabulous, remarkable, spectacular, legendary, striking, superb, and finally, as Mrs. Brand puts it, sublime. (howd ya like that!)

Clothes are a problem to me. I don't have much of a selection because I'm in between sizes and I don't know what size I wear. It's either a size 12 or 14. Some 12's are gigantic and then some 14's are too tight. If you can figure out why tell me.

If I go in the girls department all the clothes fit good but are babyish. My mom won't buy them because they are going to shrink and money is going to waste. In the junior high department everything is much too big or a little old for me. I guess I just have to wait, and grow more in every direction, up,, down, and sideways.

Oh--this really takes the cake. I wanted to buy a pair of navy blue polyester pants. I took a size 12 and 14 into the dressing room. You know what happened--I end up with a size 10! I couldn't believe it. We didn't buy the pants because the seam by the hip puffed out and I looked like a jockey.

I have no solutions but wait to grow. My mom would put darts in and hems. I don't think that's a good solution because I'd look like Frankenstein--all sewed up! Diane's mother once told me that Diane could write about a string.

Here's one of her best strings: 86

As you can see I took the typewriter out. Thank God It is not dusty. My mom cleaned it out last year before we put it back. It seems different from last year. It seems smaller, mabey because I grew. As you can see the ribbon is not too great. By the way the name of this typewriter is REMINGTON. I have to rewrite this over. This is really wiered writing because half of these sentences are not on the line. Well, getting back to the ink ribbon story. I said that the ribbon was a story within itself. The ribbon has the imprints of letters, numbers, and punctuation marks. With all these things to communicate with a person can go writing on forever like a babbling brook, (this seems to waste paper). A brook is always changeing. You can form something different every time whether it is a story, poem, or just plan writing. It is funn thing though, when something you type does not come out right or the way you do not want it the ribbon seems to know what you do not want it there because the ink comes on very light. I just took a look at the ribbon and it is on the last oomph of energy. The material is dried out, there is hardly any ink left. It seems like it is doing it for me. You know something - a ribbon seems to reveal a face. It has wrinkles, it is dried, and every crosssection of a weave are like the eyes THIS is amaxing. If a person really stares at it you can see something like the eyes. They are looking intently at you. Well if you get a chance look at the ribbon on your typewriter. (I think that blotch was the last spurt of energy left).