To Be or Not to Be – In a Literary Network

(adapted from a speech given to the League of Minnesota Poets)

by

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I have reason to be afraid of poets.

At the last Northlight Writers' Conference, during a banquet, I introduced Tamas Aczel, a Hungarian poet, essayist and novelist who happens to have been my thesis adviser while I was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. And during the introduction, I told a story of how Tamas once introduced me. I said there used to be a reading series at U-Mass; the graduate poetry series. Only graduate students enrolled in the poetry writing program were eligible to give a reading there, which was followed by a large wine and cheese reception.

Those of us who wrote fiction and nonfiction weren't much in favor of being excluded from that podium, so several students worked long and loudly, mostly loudly, to get it changed. They succeeded, and one night Jay Neugeboren introduced a graduate student essayist named Doug Whynott and Tamas Aczel introduced a graduate student story writer named Scott Olsen.

And, in the process of telling this introduction story to the almost one hundred writers at the Northlight banquet, I confessed I had absolutely no memory of the graduate student poet–or who introduced him or her.

The group's reaction should not have surprised me. It was good natured and I can now say I've been booed by some of the best writers in the upper Midwest. What did surprise me was when two weeks later I saw another poet friend of mine, who lives in California, at the Charleston Writers Conference in South Carolina. She walked up to me and said, "So, I hear you've been forgetting poets."

What surprised me even more was when, right about the time of the Charleston Conference, I was invited by a woman who attended the Northlight Conference to address the spring meeting of the League of Minnesota Poets.

Now, I know this essay's topic is supposed to be whether or not to belong to a literary network, and I will be talking about networking, in its various

forms, with its various problems and potentials, at some length. In fact, it's what I'm talking about already. But I thought I would begin by establishing some sense of context. Some sense of the networks I am a part of. Some sense of the networks that influence me.

There are three types of networks that concern all writers. The first is what in its ugliest form is called the ol' boys network. The second is the creative network of literate friends, most happily other writers, who read our drafts, our attempts at something, who offer us the honesty about our work we don't get from most people, who tell us when we've got it right or when we've got it wrong and just can't see it for ourselves. The third is the organizational network, organizations like The Loft, The Associated Writing Programs, Poets & Writers Inc., even The Northlight Writers' Association, that keep us somehow involved in the issues and concerns and joys of the national writing community.

And I would like to argue a contradiction. All three types of networks are essential for a writer's literary well-being. All three types of networks, however, can lead to literary suicide.

Let's begin with the ol' boys network. We'll need to go back for a minute to the Charleston Writers Conference, and even further back to when I was pulling together the very first Northlight Writers' Conference, to explain what I mean. I was part of the conference faculty in Charleston, but not really. The big names were writers like Syndy Lea and Rosellen Brown and Michael Harper. My friend from California and I were there to give short lectures on contemporary literature in the classroom.

Bret Lott is the director of the Charleston conference. Bret and Dorothy and I were classmates at Massachusetts. When I needed people for the first Northlight conference who were willing to travel to Moorhead, the town Buddy Holly never made it to, in February, for no pay beyond the cost of their hotel and airfare, I called Bret. When Bret needed people to lecture for no pay beyond the airfare and the obvious benefits of walking along the shore of the Atlantic Ocean on a bright warm afternoon, he called us.

During the conference, I had the opportunity to go on a short shopping trip with Mindy Werner, Senior Editor for Adult books at Viking Penguin. Mindy is Bret's editor. During our walk, she asked polite questions about my fiction. I told her what I was up to, and I told her that an agent had my story collection and was thinking about representing them. I told her that Tamas Aczel used the same agent, and that he had recommended my work to the agent. A short while after the conference, I got a letter from the agent, who decided he would in fact take on my stories, and in the letter he said that Mindy Werner had called and asked to see my work.

Now, I am not about to deny the often very ugly nature of ol' boy networks. Their exclusions are legion. People of real merit are often not asked or not allowed to the prom because a closed group of people has already decided who will dance with whom. Yet, I cannot deny the opportunity that can come from friends calling friends. Would I have spoken in Charleston if I'd never met Bret? No. Would Bret have taught at Northlight? No.

Would I have been invited to address the League of Minnesota Poets if Susan Stevens Chambers, an officer in the LMP, hadn't come to the Northlight conference? No.

Would I have an agent for my stories if Tamas Aczel hadn't recommended me and if Mindy Werner hadn't called and expressed an interest? Who knows.

At its best within the literary community, the ol' boy network serves the same function as the letters of recommendation professors write for graduating students. The benefits–the introductions and the evaluations of skill and merit–are the same. And the long term benefits are the same. The ol' boy network may get you in one door, but the doors after that are up to you.

I'll come back to this type of network, but let's move on to the second type–the creative network of literate friends.

It is a trite but true observation, to steal a phrase, that most of us want to be published. To get published, we need to come to some understanding of how our work is read and received by others. We need, in other words, feedback. We need feedback we can trust. We need feedback from people we can trust to understand that friendship has nothing to do with literature. We need feedback from someone who can tell us, if it's the truth, that the work we've been fighting with and making love to for the last so many years is garbage. And we need feedback from those people who will tell us our work is good only when it really is. Most basically, we need people to talk with seriously about what we write–and what it means to be a writer.

Let me give an example. A number of years ago, when I was a junior at

:he University of Missouri, I had the opportunity to spend a spring :vening in William Peden's living room. Bill was the professor for my :reative writing course. There was no special distinction that brought ne to his living room; I was one of several students in a class he invited :o a reception for Mary Lee Settle. She had come to campus for the usual 'eading/lecture, having recently won the national book award.

Geographically, I was lucky. I arrived at the home when a good chair was)pen between the two writers. The party floated throughout the house,)ut Bill and Mary Lee Settle stayed where they were. I stayed where I was.

will admit I felt out of place. The conversation about writers they liked, ıgents they knew, the politics of publishers and peers was a good bit)eyond me. The conversation convinced me my talent and experience vere wholly unsuitable for becoming a writer. And there was no way to eave that good chair without it seeming I was leaving the people it was mportant for me to hear. Yet, at some point in the evening, perhaps ıoticing my extended silence, Mary Lee Settle asked me what I was vorking on.

have no idea how I answered. I have no idea how the conversation :hanged from the circle of writers and concerns Peden and Settle shared, o the concerns of struggling, new voices. It isn't important. I do know, ınd this is important, that it was that night I felt as if a place in the :ommunity of writers opened for me. For the first time, I had a :onversation about writing, my own writing and the writing of others, hat was honest. Sure, we'd talked in class before, but back then grades vere important to me and my disagreements with professors were mostly ınspoken.

My writing was unremarkable (in fact, back then I was doing my best to)e a Donald Barthelme clone), yet there were people, I suddenly liscovered, people who knew what being a writer was all about, who were villing to take my desire to be a writer seriously. I credit that :onversation with keeping me going when I needed it.

Who are these people? How do we find them? Most often, we find our literary soulmates only through trial and error. We participate in a vorkshop and we find someone who seems to look at the world through ;omewhat the same pair of glasses. We attend a reading and hear a voice ır a reaction that we would swear was our own, despite the fact it didn't :ome from our own throat. Or we hear something so completely opposite)ur sensibility we cannot help but seek out its source. Perhaps we send vork to a journal editor and what comes back is more than the form 'ejection or the polite letter of acceptance.

For me, today, the most important members of my creative network are the other writers at Concordia college, members of Concordia's English department, and a handful of journal editors. These people are important because they can see my work in context. The Concordia writers and English faculty to who I show my work see my work in the context of my other work. They know me well enough to give honest feedback. The journal editors who are important to me are those editors who have, over the years, responded to my work in substantial ways. The editors see my work in the context of everything else they are sent. The opinions of all these people are important because they are not dedicated to maintaining my friendship. They are dedicated to informing my perception of how intimately my language has addressed them.

I would like to emphasize the importance of journal editors in a writer's creative network. Most literary journal editors are fine people. They receive more material in a year than they can use in a life-time, and they go through it seriously. They worry about the aesthetic and financial health of their journal. They do their best to treat authors well.

Some editors, of course, are rotten. They seem to be publishing to make themselves look more important, and they treat authors as some type of serf begging entrance at the castle gate.

And some editors seem protected. They mean well, but they are surrounded by an army of first readers or graduate students who sometimes miss the harbor, much less the boat. These journals publish good stuff, but the process of submitting a manuscript to them is about as human as sending in payment for an outstanding bill.

However, there are also a few great editors. Their journals are superb, and sending them a manuscript is similar to sending a story or poem to a literate friend. You know your work will be read by someone who knows something about contemporary literature, and you know that person also understands what it is to be a writer. Daniel Curley, editor of *Ascent* (published at the University of Illinois), was a great editor. Just over a year ago he was struck by a car and killed.

I never met Dan Curley, but I knew him for years. When I was an M.A. student at the University of Missouri, I noticed *Ascent* seemed to always turn up in Best American Short Stories and the O. Henry Awards. I hadn't seen the magazine, but, of course, I started sending him my work. My stories were nowhere near the quality of the work he published, but I was too young to believe that. And Dan wrote back to me.

His letter were never more than a page, and he never used stationery. More often than not, he didn't correct the typos he made. But the letters had a quality to them that let me know he took my work seriously. More than that, he took me seriously. I continued to send him material (I also became a subscriber) and he continued to send it back, and we also came to know each other. Even when months passed between submissions, he remembered me and his letters would ask questions about my life and progress. I answered him, and asked questions about his life and progress. He answered me. He usually wrote a sentence or two about my submission (sentences, I came to see, that hit right at the heart of a problem), and then a long paragraph about what was going on. Dan knew my work, its merits and its problems, and his encouragement, like the conversation with Bill Peden and Marley Lee Settle, kept me going.

In many ways, I felt I had a friend at *Ascent*. I know I am not alone in this feeling. Other writers I know have had their work accepted and rejected by *Ascent*, and all of them have said Dan Curley was special. Dan was more alive and involved with the authors who sent him work than any other editor I've dealt with. When he did take a story of mine, he apologized for not being able to construct my contributor's note from memory.

Dan was also a writer. His stories won the Flannery O'Conner prize. He'd been in the anthologies. He knew what it meant to work hard on a piece of writing, and he knew what it meant to get a cold rejection, or a stupid one.

We need great editors in this world, and Dan Curley was one of the very best. For me there are other editors now, but it is important to note that a creative network is developed–not found. A creative network is not an accident of time or place, as the ol' boys network often is. A creative network is a conversation–one of those conversations at 2 a.m. when everything matters.

The third type of network is the organizational network. The League of Minnesota Poets is an organizational network. The Loft, The Associated Writing Programs, Poets & Writers Inc., and the Northlight Writers' Association at Concordia are all organizational networks. Their purposes are straightforward. Organizational networks want to bring news and opportunity to the writers they serve; they want to foster the development of creative networks; they publish newsletters filled with opinion and news of places to publish; they sponsor classes and readings and workshops and services writers often need at various times in their careers; they want to be available for the exercise of power that comes from the gathering of any group.

Isolated as we all are in our individual writing rooms, isolated as we all are as individual readers, organizational networks provide the sense of connection, the sense of community, we all desire. Musicians and dancers and theatre people have performances for sharing their art with an audience and among themselves. Sculptors and painters have museums and galleries for shared participation. Literature is the only art that requires a solitary psychology for its comprehension and appreciation, which gives rise to the tremendous loneliness organizational networks fight against.

Until recently, in Fargo/Moorhead, a small city with two universities and a college, the only show in town for writers was the Tom McGrath reading series at Moorhead State University (that reading series, but the way, is really very good). The best bookstore in town was B. Dalton. We've got a better bookstore now, and we've got the Northlight Writers' Association. Northlight, now in its fourth year at Concordia, sponsors an annual writers' conference, a database of area writers, an occasional drama contest (winning manuscripts are produced by the college's theater department), a regional small press that publishes the annual conference anthology, a journal and in the near future titles by single authors, and occasional one or two day workshops. All these activities are designed to fight the artistic loneliness of writers in our area.

However, these organizational networks also have power. Political power. It is this power that's important for all of us right now, because the organizational networks are at war. They are not at war with each other. They are at war for the noble cause.

Everyone in the arts knows what's been going on with Jesse Helms and the National Endowment for the Arts. Helms has been upset by the NEA's funding of what he considers obscene material–the most common reference we hear is to the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe. He's proposed a morality check on art to be produced with grant money.

Clearly, this is absurd. NEA money is not awarded for a proposed project. NEA applications ask for a demonstration of past talent and success–the NEA simply wants to support artists, writers among them, who have done well in the past so they can continue to do well in the future. Never has there been any type of rider attached, asking the artists to produce only a certain type of art while working under the grant. The NEA, under pressure from the political right, has now included a drug-free pledge form which must be signed by artists who

receive money and, if things go the way Helms wants, a form asking artists to promise to produce only art with white middle-class values will soon find its way into NEA envelopes. In addition, the NEA will soon have a good deal less money to give to those artists the government decides are clean enough.

Organizational networks are fighting this. In fact, organizations have formed a network of their own. Called the Coalition of Writers' Organizations, it's made up of more than forty writers groups; among them the PEN Center USA west, The Loft, Poets & Writers, the PEN American Center, the Associated Writing Programs, the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, the Authors Guild, the North Carolina Network, the Before Columbus Foundation, and Northlight.

Writers need this type of power. The political right has a great deal of money and access to things like mailing lists. Letters to Congress about the NEA issue, during the early and mid stages of the debate, were somewhere in the range of 20 or 40 to 1 against the NEA. We have been asked, by those who lead the organizational networks we belong to, to write letters to congress and we're not doing a very good job. It would seem the country's writers aren't writing. Organizational networks are often proactive, and this is an issue we cannot ignore.

So. We have three basic types of networks. The ol' boy network, the creative network, and the organizational network. All three, individually or in concert, can keep a writer alive. People in every profession give a shot at writing nonfiction, poetry, fiction, etc. Some find a lot of success or personal fulfillment. Some, without sympathetic readers or peers, without a door opened by a friend, without a network, find despair or give up. Networks are particularly useful to foster, encourage, and support writers. Networks can offer new and diverse perspectives.

And, now the contradiction. If you don't have any real reason for becoming involved with a network, you should run like hell.

Let me admit here to a few very strong though not very original biases. Literature, by which I mean fiction, poetry, theater and the essay, is important. Literature is sacred. Literature, including the process of writing it and the process of reading it, makes us a part of a much larger community, a community that began with the very first story-teller, a community that enables us to share the loves and despairs of the human condition more fully and deeply and in ways beyond the physical experience capability of any individual human life. Literature is a

sharing between races, continents, centuries, people who live a long way away and much differently than we do, and us. Literature, along with the other arts, is the benchmark of civilization.

On the other hand, networks are a convenience. They are nice and helpful, but in the long run not very important. Networks may help us understand the workings of Literature, but they are not Literature itself. While I may find a new argument against Jesse Helms insightful and personally educational, it certainly does not touch the soul in the way the novel does. Networks may make me a more efficient manuscript submitter, they may make me a more informed reader, and they may show me pathways that lead to a richer understanding of my place in a literary community, but they are not the destination of that path.

For the sake of argument here, imagine a neighborhood. Imagine Literature as a house on one side of the street. Imagine small presses and journals as a house on the other side of the street. Imagine commercial publishing as the resort hotel down the block. Somewhere in the neighborhood, though no one is really sure where, is the home for literary critics and theorists. In the middle of the street, under tremendous assemblages of scaffolding, are the networks.

The bus pulls up to the corner and drops off the new people in town. Let's call them new writers. They look at the Literature house. The Literature house is old and worn looking. The residents are talking about what they've always talked about: Love, Passion, Despair, Loneliness, Angst, the subtleties of personal and social interaction. It's got an easy door on the first floor; just about anyone can get in. But the Literature house is taller than the new writers were told, and they hear that getting off the first floor is hard.

The new writers then look at the Small Press and Journal House. This house looks warm and cozy and small and inviting; but this house doesn't have any doors, so the new writers run down the block to the Commercial publishing hotel, where they find lots of doors, but they're all marked "Cookbooks," or "Political memoir" or "Agents only."

In the middle of the street, the networks are welcoming. The assemblage of scaffolding is beginning to look like a house itself. It's large and new and smells nice. They've put on new siding, and they've added extra rooms. They've got their own print shop now, and it's turning out thousands of newsletters. People are being published in these newsletters. The smell of fresh paint is everywhere. The people there speak a seductive new language. It's exciting, rather like breaking a code. And it's a lot of fun to listen to them. When the new writers get the hang of

he new language, they discover the scaffolding that looks like a house s really a siege tower. An assault on the seventh floor of one of the other ıouses is being planned.

Vhat's wrong with this? For a lot of people, nothing at all. And before ou start to think I'm attacking networks unfairly, keep in mind that I ot only use networks myself, I started and run one. It is particularly om my position as the Northlight director that I see the danger.

et's leave the image. When I was a graduate student, I took a course ı Reader Response and Psychological Criticism. Other than my work-hops, it was perhaps the most important course I took because it gave ıe a way to understand what was going on when I was reading or writing, nd it gave me a way to talk about it. It made me both a better reader nd a better writer. The next semester I took a course on Jacques Lacan. lore specifically, I took a seminar devoted entirely to Lacan's seminar ı Poe's "Purloined Letter." In this course I was taught how to read anslations of Lacan and Derrida. I was engaged in trying to understand ow these men used language to illustrate what they were saying. It was prestigious course and in many ways a fine part of my education. But, the course of the semester, we also read a number of critics who had opped crossing the street. We read critics who were running up and own the stairs, carrying information from the senior theorists on the top or to the unenlightened theorists on the first floor. It seemed as if the uses on the other side of the street had ceased to be important. In ıort, I came to realize that the least important thing in Lacan's seminar ı Poe's "Purloined Letter," in Derrida's response to Lacan, in Barbara hnson's and Shoshanna Feldman's explication of Lacan and Derrida's bate, was Poe's "Purloined Letter." At the end of the semester I knew good bit about Lacan, but I do not know if I learned anything about my perience reading Poe. The same type of what I believe is misdirected erest, I believe is coming out of some networks.

itself, this would not bother me. But I get the mail most other English ofessor's get. I see the announcements of new fiction, nonfiction, and etry from the commercial and small presses get mostly tossed into the sh. I see the catalogues from university presses containing the work solid poets and writers get lost.

ear writers overjoyed when they place a 300 word article in the AWP ronicle or the Poets and Writers newsletter. I read impassioned point d counter-point about the merits of writing groups in A View From The t. I hear, as I did last March in Denver, writers argue over whether Associated Writing Programs should change their name. I hear tters talk about organizational membership as if it held some type of

social distinction. And I see networks casting language to fit their own institutional goal. The Helms debate, for example, is repeatedly fought in terms of censorship, an emotional term in the history of letters, when as I see it the real questions concern patronage. In what terms will we accept government support?

In other words, I see the fine distinctions of the human condition, the focus of all good writers, becoming lost. I see the organizational network becoming the subject itself. This is fine for those people who must run an organizational network. It can be a trap for those the organizational network serves.

The ol' boy network and the creative network have their own problems. I know writers who are putting more effort into developing their personal connections than developing their writing, and I know writers who have stopped trying to bring their words to any audience larger than a group of friends who gather to talk about writing. I see the ol' boy network and the creative network becoming destinations instead of sometimes useful, often questionable paths. And to me, this is a trend growing toward narcissism, growing toward incest. To me, this is a sin.

Literature, and the process of its creation, has value. It enables us to look at the world and the history of human passions with a larger and more sympathetic heart. A poor story or poem or essay is one that stops within its own topography. A good story or poem or essay is one that invites us to make connections between the story and our own history and understanding. It should challenge and enlarge our perception of being human and all the problems, joys, and responsibilities that involves.

Do networks have value? Yes. They show ways of looking at the process and politics of literature, and the community of writers, more clearly–or through paths that are not yet a part of our experience. Networks enable a community discourse. Networks, at their best, offer professional opportunity, aesthetic insight, artistic community and a vehicle for political change.

But we must remember that our real purpose is not to be a member of any network. Our purpose is to find language for the ineffable.