Keeping in Touch

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In this very practical article, dealing with a very down-to-earth and unpoetic topic, I would like to begin with a poem, perhaps after all not inappropriate for my discussion of the English teacher as writer. It was published in the Fall, 1973, issue of the Kansas Quarterly (p. 32) and written by Robert L. Tyler. Its title, "Tradition."

It gives me a silly security to be immortalized
in the Library of Congress
and possibly a few university libraries.
Even if all those words I struggled with
end up as electronic codes on tapes
or whatever
in any case I am somehow still sending.
Chances are somebody years from now
will stumble across the words.
Tonight for example I heard Whitman
on this very theme
somebody reading "crossing Brooklyn Ferry"
on a scratchy phonograph record.
Through even more dubious and difficult translations
I have run across messages from
Plato, Jesus, Augustine, many others.
Apparently it's always been a tough life
and basically a lonely mystery.
Somehow it's good to be in touch.

The poem makes a point our profession may be in danger of forgetting: that the urge to communicate is still extremely strong in all of us. No matter what the technique, we like not

only to hear from others but also to be able to say ourselves, to achieve a distinct and recognizable voice, life being basically tough and a lonely mystery. Still "Somehow it's good to be in touch."

Addie Bundren may have felt that the switch was the only way she could make her students understand "Now you are aware of me," and Lifebuoy may feel that TV ads are the best way to help people keep in touch by suggesting that you need to smell clean before you can keep in touch but most of us try words even if they are as blurred and out of focus as the pictures of an amateur photographer. We need, therefore, to remind ourselves that it is one of the most important, if not the most important function of the the English teacher to teach students that it is good to be in touch, even when we touch with very tentative tongues, and that one of the most fundamental ways of being in touch is to write. Important as more mundane professional and organizational concerns may be for the profession, we cannot forget that English teachers teach writing and that one of our major concerns must be to facilitate the teaching of writing.

But writing is agony, though it may and certainly can be an alluring agony, even an addictive one. And it is agony for me, even though it may, at least in the end, also be delightful. I had to learn the hard way that English teachers write, and I had to learn the hard way what little I know about writing.

I grew up in an immigrant home speaking a language, Low German, that was not even a language, only a dialect. It had no formal grammar, at least not codified, no dictionary. It still doesn't. Indeed, in retrospect it sometimes seems to me that in the linguistic community in which I grew up we really needed to know three basic utterances: When do we eat? How much will it cost? Do you love me? On the other hand, I may have overestimated the linguistic sophistication needed because there were more effective nonverbal than verbal ways of asking and answering at least one of these questions. My students have suggested when I have used this illustration that I have ignored one other important question, namely, where is the bathroom? And they are probably correct, except that in my community we didn't travel enough so that that became an important question. We didn't have to ask. We knew where the bathroom was. Only it wasn't a bathroom, rest room, john, comfort station, biffy, powder room, or even a privy. It was an outhouse, readily visible.

It soon became apparent that in the world in which I wanted to live I needed to know more about language than was encompassed by those simple questions and the answers they required. They were not adequate to keep me in touch. There was something

more to life than eating, buying and selling, and making love. And even if there weren't, the last of the utterances was a problem, because the language I learned did not have a statement equivalent to "I love you," or "Ich liebe dich." We could only say "Ik zie die goat," literally translated meaning I like you, and that did not satisfy me. Nor did the stronge affirmation "Ik zie die zea goat." Much later in life I tried to make that inadequacy clear in the following poem:

I LEARNED A LANGUAGE

Low German, that couldn't say
"I love you," only "I like you,"
plowed Oklahoma clay from five
in the morning until ten at night.
Watched turkey red wheat grow,
helped harvest it,
went to college to learn
a new language, studying Chaucer
and Shakespeare with the same care
my Father studied clouds,
reading Faulkner, Hemingway, Dreiser
as carefully as Father read wheat fields,
found students' minds as tough
as Oklahoma's red gumbo
and learned how hard it is
to say "I love you"
in any language.

The poem brings me to another point: writing, keeping in touch, is difficult. These three assumptions--English teachers teach writing; English teachers write, and writing is difficult--will dominate the ideas I wish to present. I do not, however, wish to take them up in a particularly systematic manner.

I can illustrate the difficulty of writing and the frustrations of writing and teaching writing by another poem, again autobiographical, indicating how I decided to become an English teacher, to teach writing, to write, and how painful and frustrating that task often is:

A DIRTY PROSE POEM

I was fifteen and the chicken house needed
to be cleaned and you can guess, without
me telling you, who was elected: me, of
course, and unwillingly I went to work
thinking in the middle of all that chicken
shit that there must be better ways of
earning a living and decided, then and

there, to get out of all that shit and
be a college English teacher and maybe
even write a poem now and then and I went
to graduate school where I ate, much to my
surprise, more shit than I had ever cleaned
out of any chicken house or cow barn either,
for that matter, and now that I'm a teacher
I guess I shovel out the same shit I learned
in grad school, adding some of my own, and
when I think about it, which I don't very
often, which is a good thing, I sometimes
wish that I were back on the farm
cleaning chicken houses.

No I don't want to go back to cleaning chicken houses, not really. I'd rather teach and write, shoveling and eating our kind of crap, than cleaning chicken houses and reading or writing for the Poultry Breeder's Gazette. We are all aware of the difficulty of writing and the sometimes frustrating elusiveness of words. We all remember T. S. Eliot's comment that words "slip, slide, perish," that they "decay with imprecision" and often break under the burden.

But I was saying, before poetry broke in with all her vulgar insistence that words strain, crack and sometimes break, that English teachers must write as well as teach writing. And that's hard to do. There is too little time. We have preparations. It is more exciting to talk than to write. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the teacher of writing, if he wishes to keep in touch with himself, his students, must practice, what he teaches.

As I write this paper my students are taking a test in a course in the American Novel. The test covers Frank Norris' The Octopus, Willa Cather's My Antonia, Ernest Hemingway's Farewell to Arms, and William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. The students are writing during the course of one hour, an essay on the following question:

Vanamee, Frederick Henry and Anse Bundren (sometime after the events narrated in the novels in which they appear) meet with Jim Burden at Antonia Cuzak's farm when he returns to see her after twenty years. What would these five characters talk about after every one else has gone to bed and they are alone? What would they have in common? How would they differ? Choose carefully some one topic they would be likely to discuss. How would they react to Antonia's situation in the light of their own and how would Antonia react to the situation of the others?

I should either be writing the paper with them at this time or, better yet, I should have tried writing the paper before I made the assignment. Allowing myself only one hour. A fifty minute hour. In either case I would have learned that imagination and the ability to write on a somewhat difficult question does not come easily, and I would have been more able adequately to prepare my students for this test. I might also be more lenient and a little more practical in marking their papers if I had written such a paper with them. An English teacher writes so he can understand the difficulties his students face.

I once made a plea in an article entitled "A Brief for the Incomplete Theme" published in volume five of the Winter, 1972-73, issue of the Journal of English Teaching Techniques for the incomplete theme, arguing that while the old traditional assumptions that a theme should be complete, have a beginning, a middle and an end, should have a thesis clearly stated and substantiated with instances, examples and arguments and should be wrapped up in a conclusion growing naturally out of the arguments set forth, all loose ends neatly tied together, while important and valuable, such assumptions often lead to over-simplification and a sense of accomplishment which is not justified. Though such concerns need to be kept in mind, I think there is a place for the theme in which all the ideas cannot be neatly wrapped up. An idea worth dealing with can never be completely examined. There is always a mysterious reminder. Too great emphasis upon coherence leads us to conclude too quickly that we have finished with an idea, that its ramifications have all been explored and that we need not bother with it any longer.

I once had one of my students tell me that he had heard me teach John Updike's Rabbit Run before and after I had written an article on it. Before I had written the article I was groping, searching, open to new ideas, sometimes indecisive, often hesitant, even halting and not quite sure that I knew what the book was all about. But after I had finished the article and used it as a class lecture, my conclusions tended to be final, and my tendency, even though it was not my intention, was to ask my students to walk an intellectual road the direction of which I had already determined. The steps were carefully measured, the arguments were cogently mustered, and the conclusion was certain. It was better, he said, when I was still open to other interpretations, to new ways of looking at "Rabbit."

Now I can't believe that my mind was that closed; at least I am certain that it is necessary, even possible, to leave the door open for another word that needs to be said. Just as it is possible and desirable in fiction to create the sense of an expected future, so it is possible in exposition to open up new

ways of interpretation. But unfortunately that is too often not the case. Once we have shaped and organized an idea, it tends to become cemented in and hardened. The door should remain open for a continued excitement in the chase for ideas rather than for organizing ideas and setting them down in a dogmatic, correct and effective manner. Teachers write but not to close doors to ideas but to open doors to further reflection.

Another of my students once taught me to keep doors open. It was apparent that he was intelligent. It was also apparent that there were so many ideas in his head that didn't fit in any kind of pattern that he found it almost impossible to write any kind of paper. At least he could not organize his thoughts in the expected ways. He was so concerned to follow the expected pattern--and of course, he could never find such a pattern, at least such as satisfied him--that he had difficulty getting started. His paper for the course was overdue. Each day he promised me that it would be the next day. Each day he told me that he was working--but stuck. Nothing made sense. Then came the last day of class. It was a summer school class and lasted two hours. The first hour he was not present. The second hour he came in halfway through the class, and at the end he apologetically handed me twenty-five sheets of paper which he said were just plain chaotic hell. He had tried, he told me, to write down everything that he had been thinking about during three years of college concerning poetry, not only romantic poetry, the subject of the class. The sheets were of different sizes, some were perforated (my pet peeve) and the scribbling was difficult to read, especially since there were interlinear comments, asterisks telling me to turn to page nine (on the back) where the idea was continued and then I had to turn back to page five where I left off.

The ideas were just as chaotic. He had written a jumble of ideas he had thought about, some of which he liked and said so, others of which he dismissed after he had tried them out on paper. There were a number of false starts. All were dismissed as inadequate. In the end he knew he had been defeated: he had attempted a task too difficult for him. I gave the paper an A. Why? For two reasons, mainly. In the first place, it was obvious that the student had tried hard to think as thoroughly as possible about the subject and that it had turned out to be too much for him. He simply discovered that he had not yet developed the sophistication and skill to read a poem from any clearly developed point of view. Still he was searching. I find that refreshing. He had learned that right often has a long and intricate name. In the second place, he had achieved a voice which for all its confusion was his own. He had been a very quiet, taciturn, often skeptical student. Here he had become himself; he had discovered his chaotic condition. He

had created a voice that was different from any of the others more conventionally acceptable papers. There was no question that there was a human voice here, an anguished, confused, chaotic, tired, disillusioned voice, yes, but a human voice, nevertheless.

At this point I find myself somewhat in the same dilemma as my student. I am more sure than he was what I wanted and still want to do, but I am less sure that I have discovered my voice in which I want to do it. Nor am I absolutely sure that what I have tried to do hangs together or that I can tie it together. I am not sure that I care so long as my basic concern is felt: that teachers should teach writing and should write. We need to keep in touch because life, apparently, is tough and a mystery. And Dr. Johnson has reminded us that "The only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it." He could have added that writing also makes life more enjoyable and more endurable. And we ought not to expect writing to be easy, just as enjoying and enduring life is not easy.

When I was a teaching assistant our supervisor once assured us that we should not be alarmed if our students or we as teachers found writing difficult. He reminded us of an old and revered professor of his, the author of many books and articles, a stylist of some repute, who had told him one day that after almost daily practice of the art of writing, it was still difficult for him, after almost forty years, to construct a well honed sentence and to say what he meant. It isn't easy, never was, never will be. But we must try again, and again.

For it is joyful agony. J. Mitchell Morse in The Irrevelant English Teacher argues that "the contemplation of a well-made sentence is the second greatest pleasure in life. The greatest of course, is to write such a sentence oneself. What did you think it was?"

I think perhaps that I better not push my point much farther. I might repeat myself again. And I will. English teachers should teach writing. English teachers should work to become good writers. At least they should write. Incessantly. Every day. Everywhere. Good writing requires incessant practice and indefatigable zeal. But writing is an important way of keeping in touch.

As the editor of an affiliate journal whose function it has been to serve as an outlet not only for the practical concerns and issues facing English teachers today but also of the creative works of the members of that state council served by the journal, I conceive of the affiliate journal as an important instrument--the most important instrument--in giving

to the teacher of writing a viable outlet for his concerns both practical and creative, of keeping in touch.

We are all aware that we work better if we are doing real things under real conditions, rather than doing things artificially. Most of us are not going to write just for the sake of writing. We are going to write only if there is an outlet for our writing. Affiliate journals should, I think, be such an outlet. I hope the Minnesota English Journal has been. I hope it will continue to be. There is a security--and it isn't silly-to be read by a few. Most of us won't be immortalized, but we can be in touch, if only by a ditto machine. And that's good.

I can think of so many things that high school and college English teachers have strong feelings on that I can't conceivably imagine a situation in which affiliate journals ought not to be indundated with materials for publication, materials worthy of publication. Yet I haven't been. I would want to go on record as saying that there is no excuse that I can see for people who believe in the importance of writing not to make use of the affiliate journals as a forum in which there is constant and lively discussion about writing. Even more important these affiliate journals ought to exemplify the best writing that English teachers and their students can achieve. Editors may have to go into the highways and byways, may have to cajole, coerce, perhaps even force their members to write. But write we must. Write not only because we need to learn the craft but to show our students that writing can be lively, invigorating and interesting.

I began with a poem in which I suggested that there is in all human beings--and in spite of what some people may think that includes both students and teachers--a desire to send messages no matter how garbled or incomprehensible they may be in the sending and the receiving. We may not know why, but it is still true that "somehow it's good to be in touch." I would like to end with William Stafford's comment in "An Introduction to Some Poems" in Someday Maybe that no life is complete which is not somehow told, which is not in some way formulated into the exact shape needed to round out that life. Our efforts at dreaming the exact dream, at finding the precise curve that makes our life authentic may be fuzzy, may be wavery, but we should dream the dream and follow the line that leads to the authentic. We may not be able to sing, but we can moan, and we can hold the dreams we shape into stories among our most valuable experiences and teach our students these values.

A Postscript: My term as editor of MEJ is over. This is my last issue. In a way I'm glad. I will be able to spend more time

struggling with words that someone may some day stumble across. But is has been interesting to read the words of others who have tried to get in touch with others, with themselves. I will miss those words.

I won't miss seeing that the manuscripts come in, that they are typed and delivered to the printer--usually late--and mailed. That's boring. A time-consuming job at best.

I would add once more my old plea: send in articles, poems, satire, short stories, helpful hints, anything. Keep the editor busy. Force the new editor to edit, not to print whatever is sent. Force the editor to discriminate, to choose. The new editor will enjoy that, I'm sure.

Old Family Pictures

I

Great-great Grandmother Gislason
Looks out fiercely
From under her Icelandic bonney
Like an owl who has just discovered
She is a mathematical prodigy.

This is not a woman
To be monkeyed with!

II

Great-great Grandfather Gislason
Points toward the earth
With his whole body;
His long white beard
Like a sad Old Testament prophet's
who no longer believes in God
Seems made of lead
Not hair--

The farmer's shoulders
The great heavy nose
Droop--

He has accepted the unfairness of the universe
With good humor.

He lives with
Great-great Grandmother Gislason.

WILLIAM HOLM