

INKWELL



THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE WRITING CENTER
REPRINTED FROM *INKWELL* VOLUME 2 • EVERGREEN.EDU/WRITINGCENTER/INKWELL

INKING VOICE: A RADICAL ACT

VICTORIA LARKIN

The power of the Word: We know it exists: Books have been banned and burned, people have been killed for writing publicly and privately. The written word has been the catalyst for both liberation and enslavement. It was death to teach a “slave” to read and write, death to be a slave learning to read and write. Ideas committed to print and to circulation have shaped our lives: they have created and altered perceptions held by human kind, for better and for worse.

Writing all of myself into my little journals, small enough to carry in my pocket, thinking about/ writing about the crazy world I lived in, the beautiful, the sad, the amazingly inexplicable world... Writing me into my book, wondering if one day I'd write out loud...

*The Bible had been The Book about the origin of our species, until Charles Darwin wrote one that challenged the belief that humans sprang from a Creator; in 1774 Thomas Paine wrote a little pamphlet, titled *Common Sense*, which denounced British rule and led us all the way to the Declaration of Independence; through fiction, writers from Charles Dickens to Harriet Becher Stowe, James Baldwin, and John Steinbeck have all used the pen to tell stories of the struggles of people under the lash of one kind or another. Writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Jean Genet have broken language and thought wide open, and have caused people to think differently, just by putting themselves onto paper.*

After years of solitary scribblings, I went back to school eager to be given challenges, to test my wisdom and my ability to convey. I wanted something demanded of me, and I wanted someone else's eyes on my work. I wanted feedback. I loved having professors read my clever and well-supported rantings. Getting a good grade and a few comments in the margins tickled me to write even more.

Writing takes courage. It means drawing from your own ideas and stories and carving into the book. It is saying: Here I am, and this is what I think. Writing is setting your self down on the line. Writing is claiming voice.

I never went to a tutor until I enrolled in the Practice of Professional Tutoring class at Evergreen. All those notebooks, poems, essays and grades, and I'd never had a conversation with another person about my writing.

Within my first few tutoring sessions, my conceptions about being tutored changed entirely. I'd expected someone to tell me what to do with my own writing, which I knew I wouldn't like. But something different happened: as I sat nervously over my paper across from a perfect stranger, windows opened and blossoms occurred. I was entreated to share my thoughts; I was given new perspectives; I came up with new ideas; I learned more about what I didn't know. In order to be clear about what I was saying, I had to be mindful with my language. My writing got refined, coming ever closer to my desires for it. I was inspired; I was renewed. All of this happened during face-to-face dialogues with other people who wanted to talk about ideas, about language, and about my writing achieving its fullest potential, representing me, the individual that I am. In these experiences with tutors at the Writing Center I was not prescribed to, I was cultivated.

We live in a world full of the written word, which has shaped us and which we can shape. Much of what has been written does not speak in our languages, or of our experiences. Only by writing our own words can we put ourselves into the book.

Words are the most fluid and precise medium we have to communicate with others about ourselves; they can bring us closer to understanding, and they can break us apart. Considering exactness, fullness, and tone becomes imperative. In order to be precise, we have to think about what we think, what we know, and what we truly want to say.

One of the first things to go in repressive times is the right to voice thoughts of one's own. Our school system is not known for cultivating originality. From early on, kids are drilled into regurgitating prescribed formulas. As a tutor, I notice how hard it can be to get people to write without censoring themselves. I notice many folks trying to satisfy the powers that be, to write what they think their professors want them to write. The idea of a unique style is often discouraged/overcomplicated/overlooked in academia. Yet even in a research paper there is style and subjectivity: the author of the text chooses a thesis, reaches a conclusion, and sets the whole tone of the piece by their choice of trajectory and language. Each choice reveals something about the individual behind it.

Writing is a brain exercise: You have to think to write; you have to process and to analyze. You have to organize your thoughts more scrupulously than when just speaking, or emailing. You have to think hard about how to communicate ideas in coherent form.

Tutoring is working with the exercise of writing. Dialogue between a tutor and a writer forces both to think critically, and to wrestle with ideas. A good conversation about writing and its subject matter can illuminate hidden pathways and buried gems. Different facets shimmer and new perspectives occur when things are said out loud. Think about times you've told a dream to somebody, and only in the act of telling did you achieve insight. The power of engagement with the other is that it fosters new knowledge to arise.

Engagement is what tutoring is all about. We gather around tables with writers and have conversations about what they're writing and how they're writing it. Together, tutor and writer excavate ideas, polish them and show them off in their strongest voice. We help writers uncover and flourish their selves in their writing.

Writing is a radical act, an act that has set and changed the course of history. Individuals have spoken to/written to millennia after them by writing down their unique experiences, perspectives, and wisdoms. Tutoring is one way of cultivating the unique voice of an individual. Empowering others/tutoring others to write in their own voices, to write themselves into the book, using their own turn of the pen, is radical, and it is my underground response to armed combat.