



TUTORING AS A STATE OF BEING

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Three years ago, for the first incarnation of *Inkwell*, I wrote an essay titled, “Tutoring as a Radical Act: Changing the World One by One.” I’d been a writing tutor for a little over a year by then, and I had experienced much of what makes being a tutor so amazing, but in the two years since, my insight has deepened and solidified into a conviction: Not only is tutoring a radical act, it is a state of being: one where openness and attention are founding principles, where dedication, rigor, and service meet curiosity and delight, and where the goal is to assist another person in the task of representing their self.

I sometimes joke that I get paid to have conversations all day, but it is true: I meet with a writer, and we have a conversation. We talk about the piece of writing, them, their process, their class, the world, philosophy, politics, poetry, whatever the conversation requires. But one thing that every conversation requires is engagement: I must bring my mind and my empathy to the table if I’m to be of any use to the writer. It is my duty to be attentive, and to ask genuine questions about their ideas and needs, not formulaic questions I’ve copied down from the latest management technique manual, but questions that arise from the content and form of their writing, and my own curiosity and concern about that content and the student. A good tutoring session can empower a student to become a more critical thinker, and can give birth to a new philosopher, poet, or community organizer.

A good tutoring session can be frustrating, yet yield sweeter and richer fruit for the author, as well as for the tutor. A good tutoring session can give a writer, every writer, wings.

I often hear students say: Oh, I’m not a writer; I hate to write. And I think: But you *are* a writer: you are writing every day, with every choice you make, and every sentence you utter.

I suppose if all you do is parrot your lines from tv shows and movies, then you are just performing someone else’s script; but even that is a choice: you are still writing, you just aren’t being very original. It can be safer and easier to perform what someone else has written—less risky than cultivating your own style and imagination. Besides, most schools have a habit of slapping your own style and imagination right out of you.

But you can reclaim that.

Some students come into the Writing Center asking to be “edited,” “fixed,” asking someone to make their paper “right.” And I wonder: What is right? Yes, there are standard conventions we employ—writing includes, after all, the idea of the desire to communicate to the outside world, and that requires consensus as to symbols, and a degree of skill with those symbols—but “right” seems to imply there is some absolute model of perfection. And I wonder: What is perfection?

Perfection is most certainly a relative concept. It is different for Virginia Woolf than it is for Ernest Hemingway, different for John Steinbeck than it is for Lemony Snicket, different for Jane Austen than it is for Toni Morrison. And it follows that one teacher’s idea of perfection might be another’s idea of nightmare. Just because some folks want it one way doesn’t mean it works for everyone, or anyone, else.

Ultimately, one must rely on one’s own inner ideals, and these can be hard to establish, let alone achieve. From early on, our ideas are shaped and judged for us. And most of the definitive right and wrong stuff, especially when it comes to what is and isn’t “acceptable” in writing, stems from cultural biases and models.

The cultural model we’re working with is Hierarchical, with a Patriarchal bias. And more specifically, we’re deep in American Standard. This gives us things like Rational Thought being valued over Emotional Content, Logic over Intuition, Active Voice over Passive Voice, and Thesis-Driven papers: Take a Stand, get straight to the Point and PROVE it; Don’t Pull Out, don’t doubt yourself, do as you’re told, and don’t dawdle along the way to look at the flowers, or the bees...

This model also determines the general practices of our academic institutions: the experts hand information down to the students whom they are watching and assessing, and from whom they want little argument. In this model, teachers dictate and Show You How, especially How To Write. They often write for you, in blaring red across all of your precious and hard-wrought words, showing you how it SHOULD be done, how they want it.

And perhaps over time it becomes easier to let someone else make these determinations; you might even get the knack of writing just the way they want you to. Many students try writing the way they think their professors want, and get sick of it and bored, even resentful, of the whole process. Who wouldn’t? These students are no longer writing for themselves, they are no longer thinking for themselves; their hearts are no longer in it. Of course, it is challenging when your grade or your evaluation, your movement forward, depends on someone who has power over you (again with the hierarchy), but ultimately, it is your own life, and it is important that you discover what is true and right for you.

I get uncomfortable if someone wants to abdicate all their authority to me. I prefer a more Humanistic experience, one that is more circular, where there is sharing of knowledge, ideas, and opinions. It is when things get mixed together that newness flourishes, and we already have enough of the mass-produced monocrop business.

I am not a tutor so I can show someone the “right” way to write; I am a tutor because I believe in each person’s radical, creative, and thinking self. I am there to share with them whatever I have learned about writing and reading, thinking, even about grammatical mechanicals; and I am there to kindle each writer’s own abilities and own voice. And though a tutoring session focuses on the work of the writer, as a tutor I am often the beneficiary of the exchange.

When a writer invites me into conversation, I enter with my whole being engaged, curious, attentive, and open to possibility, and we embark on a journey. Together we work to excavate their ideas, to uncover their perspectives, to enhance their skills; together we unravel the content before us and their process. Together we explore philosophies. Together we spark and create new planets for both of us to play on.

It would not serve my ego to know that a student merely left a tutoring session with a paper I’d “perfected” for them from some vision I have of perfection, which very likely ascribes to someone else’s vision of perfection.

What does serve my ego is to see a light go on in a writer’s face, a sense of empowerment rising up in them. When a writer leaves a session a few grammar tips richer and glowing with the realization that they have more to say than they’d thought, I feel I’ve done my job. Over time, with practice, and a little bit of encouragement, that writer will become able to tutor their own writing, and that’s when our conversation, and their writing, will deepen.

Out of all the billions of people on earth, no two are alike. As our culture heads deeper into conformity and quotas and standardized tests, our uniqueness is more threatened than ever. Being a writing tutor is one way I connect with the humanity and uniqueness of people, and help them to connect with the humanity and uniqueness of themselves.

I encourage each writer to learn as much as they can, to think for themselves, then speak with their own authority, and craft their written words with the style and flourish their own imagination deserves.

And I encourage us all to practice being tutors: genuinely engage in conversations, listen and attend to each other, ask questions, seek out deeper content, and cultivate each other’s voices.

So go ahead, open your windows, open your doors, and experience the world in a radical state.