



AFTER THE CLEAR-CUTTING

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Even when I was very young, writing was always one of my favorite things to do. I remember writing books between the ages of four and seven, just for the pleasure of writing them. My young eyes saw beauty everywhere they looked, especially in the mundane things—necklaces were amulets full of secret power and meaning; ordinary keys unlocked doors that didn't exist on the physical plane; empty cardboard boxes opened to reveal Narnia-esque lands out of time. I reveled in the worlds my words could create.

At some point in my education, though, writing stopped being fun. It stopped being an outlet. It stopped being a passion and started being an assignment. I developed a new style of writing. It had five paragraphs, no "I," and was only about the assigned reading. My opinions and thoughts were encouraged less and less: I learned how to summarize effectively and neglected my own questions to answer questions from a textbook.

All the same, I never actively disliked writing—I was lucky enough to be what my teachers deemed a "good writer." As a generally inarticulate person, I actually took comfort in my writing growing up. It was my chance to communicate in a voice that sounded polished and intelligent, rather than one full of likes, ums, questionable word choices, and obsolete references. I could tweak and edit what I wanted to say, even as I was saying it. But as I developed my new voice, I saw a growing struggle in my peers. As we got older, the same people who had co-written some of my early masterpieces started feeling less and less secure in their ability to write. They lived in fear of having "See me" scrawled across the bottom of their papers, which were returned with harsh, red-penned criticisms.

Maybe that seems a bit overdramatic to some. But really, few who progress through our educational system escape the trauma of having their writing torn to shreds. The dominant paradigm in our English/Language Arts classrooms is that only criticism can improve writing, and any criticism helps. While many teachers may grade ruthlessly with the best of intentions and the highest of hopes, those criticisms don't foster any kind of pleasure in writing.

In fact, it's just the opposite—where once a forest of creativity thrived, lush greenery of thoughts and emotions pouring out onto a page, only stumps now remain. So many teachers see these forests not as the complex ecosystems that they are, but as something to be clear-cut—mined for productivity.

It's hard not to take criticism to heart, especially when it's about something as personal as writing. When someone attacks your writing, they're attacking your voice and what you have to say. And for many, the cuts from a red pen don't heal quickly.

In my work as a tutor, I see the aftermath of this often. People come into the Writing Center, sit down across the Formica table, slide their paper over to me, and proceed to claim that they're "really not good at writing." Whatever the quality of their work, this state of mind is incredibly harmful. It can both prevent a writer from writing, and prevent what they've written from ever seeming good to them.

Actually, some of the best work I've seen has been from people who don't see themselves as good writers. "Good" is a problematic word because so much of the narrative when we're learning to write isn't about what "good" *is*, but rather about what it *isn't*. "Good" fails to take voice and originality into account. Our teachers spend so much time telling us what we *shouldn't* do that by the time we sit down to write, all we can think of is what *not* to do.

A clear-cut forest is a stark and painful sight. Clearcutting stamps out the most obvious signs of forest life: the trees. But if you look deep down, among the stumps of your clear-cut creative forest, you'll find green things: little shoots of burgeoning life growing from the ground. The green things and the crawlies of your imagination can feed on the sparse remains of your educational trauma—you just have to let them.

The person who writes a perfect first draft doesn't exist. Nor does the person who has never struggled with organization, spelling, punctuation, or really any other aspect of writing. It took me a long time to figure that out, but all I had to do was start talking to people about their writing. For me, tutoring has meant a return to the way I saw writing as a child: an act of communication and creativity. Nowadays, an empty cardboard box usually opens to reveal—well, the inside of a cardboard box. But instead of feeling obligated to write about the inside of a box, my writing has become my chance to fill it with whatever I want.