



WRITING FROM LIFE: A NON-TRADITIONAL CONUNDRUM

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Imagine if you will, commodifying your own life. How many credits do you think it would be worth? More importantly, what would you discover about yourself? These are questions that many students returning to Evergreen—often considered non-traditional by a system that likes to qualify such things—confront on a daily basis. These are questions that I ask myself. But what does it mean to be considered non-traditional? The label implies a sense of otherness that, for me, is a bit of a conundrum.

Let me explain.

I have never really considered myself a nontraditional student, but I suppose, by Evergreen standards, I fit the description. I am in my forties, after all, and before enrolling at Evergreen it had been nearly twenty years since I had last attended college. It is just that the designation nontraditional seems so... *not me*. In fact, the very nature of the epithet “*non-traditional student*” points to the fact, in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable, that I am older than most of the students you typically find at Evergreen—and that is the last thing I feel most of the time. I would like to think I look thirty and act twenty, but really, who wants to be that guy?

Fortunately, I am not alone, mostly because Evergreen is a friendly institution when it comes to accepting students with diverse educational experiences. As a result, there are quite a few non-traditional students on campus, which for the purpose of this article refers to (*ahem!*) older students like myself.

In fact, you have probably seen us—that is to say, you have probably seen me—in every lecture, every seminar, nervous as hell, and usually sitting in the front row. Maybe I talk too much, or maybe not at all. Sometimes I have a lot to say, but I am afraid to say it for fear of looking or sounding foolish. Even now I am the oldest “young scholar” in class—and this can feel a little lonely sometimes.

But for many students like myself, college is not viewed as a rite of passage in the traditional sense that it is for someone leaving home for the first time. My reason for being here at Evergreen is not

to discover who I am in the fundamental way that is a privilege of youth. Rather, my goal has always been to finish my education, obtaining a degree that will allow me to move forward professionally.

To be fair, I was not such a good student when I was eighteen: I was always late to class; I never did the reading; and I failed an exam or two (I am looking at you, Organic Chemistry!). Plus, I was just coming out during a time when being gay was either kept well-hidden or simply not discussed, at least not at school. Suffice it to say that college the first time around was nothing short of an unmitigated disaster.

So, for me, attending Evergreen has been a breath of fresh air. My experience here has shown me a new view of education that is hands-on and place-based and *in-your-face*. Like I said, Evergreen has given me the opportunity to go back in time and finally finish what I started.

I guess time travel can be considered non-traditional, but I digress...

Now, I often find myself trying to reconcile twenty years of lived experience with my current experience as a college undergrad—at times the two experiences do not feel concomitant. As a tutor in the Writing Center, I see this all the time. Many writers of all ages come into the Writing Center not sure of themselves, not sure of their experiences, and in fact, they do not even see themselves as writers.

Non-traditional students, especially the older ones, often lack self-confidence in their writing; the reason, I am guessing, is that it has been years since they have had to write anything considered even remotely academic. Perhaps somewhere along the way someone has even told them that their writing is lousy. What I find surprising is that so many of my peers lack confidence in their own life stories.

Yet when I take a moment and consider my own journey at Evergreen, I understand the fear of committing your history to paper. There are times when I feel exactly the same way. I mean, really, who on Earth (besides my mother) would possibly be interested in what I was doing in the *mid-nineties*? And I have certainly agonized over being told that my own writing was not up to par (by grad students no less!). Although, perhaps this is only what I was focused on hearing at the time. Either way, it feels the same: *Shitty*.

But just ask any writer about their writing and you will probably begin to see that the writing process is complicated. Good writing takes practice, and confidence must be cultivated. What I mean to say is this: over time I have gained a sense of perspective and self-confidence, mostly through trial and error, that I did not always feel as a young adult. The thing is, being grounded in my point of view, my voice, has allowed me to take a step back from the pressure that often accompanies writing.

I do not have to prove anything to anyone. Now I can just enjoy the writing process, knowing that one piece of writing does not define who I am.

And the perspective I have now *feels* different than it did when I was eighteen. After plenty of successes and an equal number of failures, I am not the writer I was twenty years ago. When I work with older students I often remind myself that their writing does not define who they are either, but rather should be seen as an opportunity for them to share their stories—and for me this sharing is a privilege.

The Evergreen State College is distinct because its student population is so diverse. Not every college offers programs like *Prior Learning from Experience (PLE)* or *Writing From Life*. As these program titles suggest, students are given the opportunity (and I do not use this phrase lightly) to write documents detailing their life experience in order to receive academic credit. This is no easy task for even the most gifted writer, so these folks deserve nothing but admiration for conquering this massive undertaking.

Many of these students are returning to college life after a long absence or are attending college for the first time (in fact, I am the first person in my family to do so). Many students I work with are in their fifties or sixties. Some are even ex- Marines or super-athletes. Many of them already have full-time jobs and families. The point is these are all students with amazing stories that need to be told.

So, what have I discovered about myself? I will tell you this: The answer is not found in the number of credits I have received, but in the stories I can tell.