THIS TEACHING LAND:
LEARNING HERMENEUTICALLY
IN THE ENGLISH 9 CLASSROOM

by

Jacklyn Maureen Wittman
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Jacklyn Maureen Wittman, 1995
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Department of Language Education
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

This thesis in the spirit of hermeneutic inquiry tells the story of a teacher facing challenges in her grade nine English classroom. It is an exposition of reflective narrative, poetry and hermeneutic writing for the purpose of deconstructing stale attitudes and searching under cliched stereotypes with regard to how early adolescents deal with the English curriculum, the pedagogy and the interactive dynamics in the classroom. The reflective narrative presents events, successes, failures and perplexities as they occurred throughout one year of teaching. The hermeneutic process reveals assumptions, traces background knowledge, questions power and gender and acknowledges the effects of mothering/teaching. It explores the value of writing inside and outside the classroom by both teachers and students as a trace of growth in learning.

Most importantly, this thesis presents the intrigue of metaphor and poetry as a radical hermeneutic in the quest for understanding. The poetry reveals perceptions about the complexity of the multiple relationships that are formed in a classroom. Each poem testifies to the intensity of the lived experience and provides visionary opportunities for further understanding.

The complete narrative takes place in a metaphorical geography where landforms are mixed: bog, rugged terrain,
open plain and seashore. Each location is analogous to the state of the struggle toward understanding and learning. Students and teacher live and learn together in this figurative land. Sometimes they are foe, sometimes they are friend. The metaphors that bring understanding change as the writer's perceptions change.

This work acclaims the value of the hermeneutic circle in its embrace of all individuals struggling and learning in language together. It is a celebration of hermeneutic inquiry and what it reveals about the mystery and power of language in writing.
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1. This Teaching Land

As a high-school English teacher, I have read many opening lines. I have offered them to my students, but they have stayed with me, too: "If you really want to hear about it . . ." (Salinger, 1947, 1); "You don't know me without you have read a book by the name of . . . by Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly." (Twain, 1885, 3). Opening lines lure us into the story, grant us permission to anticipate, wonder, and share. Opening lines are important. They can introduce subject or character, locate the situation, set the tone, and invite the reader. Often, opening lines emphasize setting. They describe location and invite readers to situate themselves alongside the storyteller or place themselves right in the midst of the action. Through the setting, readers locate their imagination, and put the subject and action into a context. W.O. Mitchell, in Who Has Seen the Wind, places his reader on the very ground that shapes the lives of his characters.

Here was the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky--Saskatchewan prairie. (Mitchell, 1947, 3)

I hope my own opening lines will accomplish similar goals.

Setting

My geography is essential. If I couldn't locate myself, where would I be? I define myself by where I come
from as much as by what I do. And what I do grows and branches out from my roots. So my task in writing these opening lines is to locate myself and the writing of this text in a grounded context. The text is my experience, my feelings and understandings about my work, my teaching ability, and my students. The text is also how my feelings grow and change from where they have been. The ground that nourishes it is the theory of hermeneutic inquiry.

To locate my text, I visualize a metaphorical geography of changing landforms: bog, rugged terrain, open plain and ocean shore. Sometime, a bog can meld into the roughness of scrag and hill; another time, all landforms exist spatially apart. The magnitude and direction of my thoughts measure their distance from one another. Each landform gives shape and texture to the referents of my writing: presumptions, attitudes, responses, hopes and desires. My stagnant ideas, past views, break down and decay in a bog. The tensions between the seeds of these old ideas and new understandings take place on unlevel ground where the travel is not smooth and I struggle to find my way. When I see more clearly, I feel as if I am on an open plain where understanding replaces intolerance. It is at the seaside that I choose to bask in the sunshine of reflection and interpretation. All this is a very earthy arrangement for the abstractions of my writing. But I write about real life experiences and they belong in a time and a place, for now.
...I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away. (Atwood, 1988, 3)

Background

Nineteen years after I taught my first class, I took a leave. It wasn't the first leave that I had taken, but it was a crucial leave: a leave from my profession to take stock. The other leaves, one personal leave to travel and two maternity leaves, were temporary turns from the demands of daily teaching routines to enjoy life's other riches. But this last leave was a break from teaching for the primary purpose of leaving teaching. I had had enough.

I was tired of the classroom routine. The demands of my life, raising two children (one child with severe disabilities) and looking after a disabled father, kept me from enriching my teaching experience with new approaches, new methods, new materials. I felt stale and, even if I did have some windows to new ideas during a class, by the time I was finished with the duties on the home front, the shades had long been drawn and I could no longer remember what they might have been, never mind find the energy to work up the plans and gather the materials.

I believed I had gone as far as I should go in my profession. I also felt my teaching had become mediocre. I
had promised myself that if I ever fought going to work, I would quit. That nineteenth year, I dreaded going to work. I forgot students’ names. I even forgot the name of a poetic device in the middle of a statement about a poem. Mediocre? I felt worse, but I still had a conscience: I left.

The decision to leave, however, was not driven entirely by altruistic values. A selfish force was at work. I had never planned to remain in the classroom this long. I felt that I would teach for a while and then go back to school for a Master’s Degree. I had planned at one time to work in curriculum development or even write teaching materials. I liked the theory as well as the practice. Then, in that nineteenth year, I looked long at the fact that I had not gone on with my plans. I, once a progressive, energetic teacher, was not making any progress.

I did not take an educational leave for the purpose of enrolling in graduate school. I took time off. Three years of personal leave. But I could not stay away, and, in that first year off, I found myself back in the trenches of the Education Faculty. If I could not teach, maybe I could learn.

I addressed myself as a student once again. Distance from the classroom was a reprieve that allowed retrospection, reflection and a sort of resurrection. I recovered a sense of excitement about teaching and learning.
I enjoyed myself as a learner and re-valued myself as a teacher. My time in the "trenches" was not a battle but a re-acquaintance with the very soil beneath my teacher feet! I re-grounded myself, nourished my roots and felt ready to branch out. I dis/covered why I had not resigned. I was not ready to wither and fade away. What I had needed was energy--not a rest but a change.

Discovery

In the spatial and temporal distance that I located for myself after I left teaching, I encountered new ideas and new people. Probably the most influential encounter was in my course on the theory of written composition. Before taking this course, I had studied the work of recent scholars and researchers, debated new theory, analyzed new methods, but I had not immersed myself in the learning process. Other courses demanded an objectified view of content. This writing course demanded more of me. When Carl Leggo, a professor in the Department of Language Education at the University of British Columbia, spoke to our class about writing from the heart, about feminist knowledge, phenomenology, deconstruction and post-modernism, I felt both empowered and ignorant. Until then, I had admired writers and wished that I could write. In an instant, I no longer wistfully dreamed of writing; instead, I seized the opportunity and began writing. It was as if I
had needed permission to write. All my other writing had been academic, objective, never-say-I writing. But, as Carl had talked about writing from the heart, he also introduced concepts of deconstruction and post-modernism to me. What was this? Did some academics (not your ordinary kind of people) accept alternate approaches to meaning, embedded meanings in texts? Did they recognize the person, the reader, the individual background knowledge brought to a text? Could there be other stories, stories that slide out from under the ma[s]ter narrative? I could feel doors opening, landscapes broadening, a whole panorama of scenes to be played out. This writing course for me was extremely liberating. I discovered parts of me I had never known. I felt free to say things in my writing that I had hardly allowed myself to think.

It seems just in time that I located myself amid these new ways of knowing. My leave was up and I had to return to the classroom. No outside force was actually compelling me; however, just as I had felt compelled to leave, I now felt compelled to return. In my new state of knowing, I felt excited about re-entering the classroom with my newly acknowledged self, my new approaches to teaching and learning.

Relocating

When I left the classroom, I had been a senior member
of an English Department and I taught senior courses. Returning from leave, I had a choice of teaching all senior courses at one school or a mix of grades nine and eleven at another. I chose the latter. Junior grades do not seem as prestigious; they are not looked upon as the "cream" of the English Department. Grade nine, in particular, is most challenging. You have to get beyond tricks of classroom management before you can exchange ideas. Grade nine students need behavioural specialists. Or so I had believed. Why, then, did I choose the junior grades?

My writing course and my subsequent personal writing had helped me see beneath my facade. At the end of my writing course I wrote,

...this writing course has brought me closer to the truth of my life, closer than I have allowed myself to be for a long time. It is interesting that I have never found time to write from my heart. I have a lot of heart in me. Sometimes it has fairly burst with feelings but I have had to pen them in. Sometimes, the feelings seeded small stories begging to be told. But they have just been there in little glimpses as if I have always kept a veil over them. I could not claim a validity for them; I could not find a reason to write them down, to lift off the veil, to take a chisel to the surface and give these thoughts and feelings a shape. I have always felt that if I cracked the surface, I would expose a lot of raw, disconnected and embarrassing parts of me. Better to keep undercover. (Journal, Mar. 93)
I suspected that under cover of the label, "senior English teacher," might hide an incompetent and insecure teacher of junior grades. Did I know how to "teach" these new adolescents with their boundless energy and unharnessed attention? I had to lift the veil and find out. Now, empowered with a new sense of ability, and fortified with new ideas, I was ready to tackle my past inadequacies. In September 1993, I stepped back into the Grade nine classroom.

Each class, shaped by the interactions of various individuals, seems to develop its own personality. Of the two grade nine classes that I taught, my Block G class fit the facetious description of the class from hell. There were twenty-three students: small in size but big in challenges. Eight of the ten girls were very quiet; seven of the thirteen boys were extremely noisy. As in most Vancouver schools in the nineties, this class was a mix of ethnicity and race. The dominant forces for me to deal with, however, seemed to be personality and gender. The noisy boys grouped together in each class at the back of the room. They were actively involved in whole class discussions and group webbing exercises on the overhead projector. In small groups, however, they became counter-productive and disruptive. Sometimes they were downright troublesome, always demanding special attention to stay on track.
My attempts to challenge my students to speak and write about human values and social issues found in literature and real life were often scuttled by the group of dominant personalities whose moments of serious consideration could not fend off the sudden and numerous attacks of attention-grabbing, sensation-setting silliness.

The clash of expectations for classroom demeanour created a tension, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes creative, that moved me to reflect in writing on my relationship with the students and my reactions to the classroom events. My writing became my tool for reflection, interpretation and problem-solving. I was astounded at how my writing allowed me to articulate my own concerns and illuminate my own reactions. Writing pulled deep understandings out of me, but my re-reading of my writing and my interpretation of it showed me more. When I first wrote a poem about one especially troubling student, I was so stirred by the connections my poem allowed me to make that I decided to write about other students and then about the whole class. Eventually, I realized I was keeping a journal. I did not record every day’s events, but I did write when something happened that caused consternation or revelation. Much of the time I would begin writing in the mode of reflective narrative, but often I would turn to a poetic mode to capture some perception or feeling that I found difficult to articulate in prose. My poetry became a
medium through which I could communicate my deeper responses and through which I could see new ways to understand.

My writing throughout is interpretive in my attempt to describe the energy and the opposing forces in this class. I set my conflicts on a landscape that changes form with the forces of my experience. As I journey from a decaying bog through the challenges of a rugged terrain and under the clear wide skies of an open plain to the restorative seaside, I present battle scenes, detentes and reprieves. The metaphor of battle plays an important role on this journey, but the moments of real harmony and epiphany charge the spirit.
This Teaching Land

I have found in the land
of teaching
a rich domain
that offers fertile soil
for its hearty crop

colourful folk
all toiling
in great devotion
to the task of
learning

I have read in a range
of regions
how powerful demagogues
mind their own
sufferance and promotion

all subjects
bent together
sowing seeds
of changing
times

I have stayed awhile to write
a golden harvest
of fruitful growing
a thoughtful tending
to wheat and chaff

feasting celebrants
for future states
when the spirit
will search
anew
This thesis, in the spirit of radical hermeneutics is a re-interpretation of my school-year-long experience as it re/presents meaning for me at this phase of my teaching career. My understanding of the theories of hermeneutic phenomenology and my experience in the grade nine classroom come together in this writing and I offer them here for reading in the hope that they will be as insightful to the reader as they have been to me. The process of reflective narrative and hermeneutic inquiry has been a great teacher. Through these processes, I have been able to de/center myself and offer an autobiographical writing that reveals my personal stories, memories from the distant and recent past. So in the spirit of other opening lines, I begin.

The truth seems to be, however, that when he [sic] casts . . . leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand . . . better than most . . . . Some authors, indeed, do far more than this, and indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed only and exclusively to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large on the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it. (Hawthorne, 15)

I invite you to explore with me, as I shed past attitudes, tread new ground and find wide skies of possibilities.
2. **Minding the Landscape**

**Finding a Path**

In an attempt to locate my teaching/self, I look for paths of inquiry, familiar, well-worn paths, new inviting paths, paths with challenge. I try them out, testing the ground, looking at the twists and turns, and hoping for some grand vistas along the way. But in my search, I am bothered by a sense of dis/placement and I feel compelled to re/locate certain mis/understandings of a teaching self discarded somewhere in a bog of failure, stuck and abandoned, while part of me sets off on safer missions.

This year, I trekked around that bog where I had abandoned the problems and challenges of teaching young adolescents in English 9. And this re/visitation was the beginning of a whole new journey of discovery, a journey to new and different places; yet, the setting off was from that bog. Yes, I began with a re/tracing of my steps, my attitudes and assumptions about the fourteen and fifteen-year-olds who embody that in-between-life that is neither naive nor informed, a murky testing ground for the challenges of life that is to come. On the surface, young adolescents approximate adults. They can pretend, assume, and experiment; they can model adult behaviour, adult under/standing; but they are beings filled with insecurity, uncertainty and impropriety. As I write these descriptors
and judgments, I feel as if I am betraying them because this is sometimes what they seem and most of the time what they are not. But, when I left that part of me that otherwise would engage in teaching/learning with these adolescents, I left myself, in that regard, in a boggy mire of mis/understandings and negative judgments. I embraced a univocal pronouncement of the sum total of their being. There was nothing else to them and I chose another course.

Now, I have gone on too long without so much as a backward glance. But I cannot forget them or that part of me that is abandoned in that bog. It becomes a mire of my own misgivings.

secret scars

i deny defeat
do not discuss
scars on my psyche
left from travels
through dark times

shiny badges
banners of brighter colour
swaddled by wounded pride
pronounce the battles won
but bind me to a place
i want to leave

i must un/stick myself
from that [m]/ir[e]
re/visit my darkness
un/swaddle un/growing
and get on with my journey
As I get on with my journey, and attempt to unstick myself from the mire, I find myself face-to-face with grade nine English students who, for years, I had avoided teaching. To teach was to battle for control; to take them on a journey was to get bogged down. These are but two metaphors that come to mind as I seek to describe my experience with this age group. But, as I engage in a new teaching/learning experience with them after ten years, I find myself ready to "re/visit the darkness," to expose the wounds and the sense of defeat, to try to understand.

Hermeneutic "self-understanding" begins at this Wound: the place of weakness and pain--the place of "openness" and "porousness" and "connectedness". . . .

This reading of the Wound reminds us that our children are of our flesh and our pedagogies must not pathologize the living and the coming and the going in the embrace of the Earth. (Jardine, 1992, 45)

In my search for understanding I look for paths, for directions, for signs. I am on a testing ground, and I want to know where I am going. I ask questions. What do I [not] know? About my teacher/self? About my learner/students? About my subject/English? How do I [not] know? How can I [not] know? The negations, the denials, the unknowns are enclosed there--the other side of the coin, the counter-balance, the inter-play between the question and the
answer. They are there when I am not, when I stop travelling along my journey. They are there when I have to change my course. But I learn that if I begin my mission of discovery, I open myself up to knowing, and to not knowing.

The Mode of Travel

In my search for understanding, I begin writing. I am drawn to the path of reflective narrative. It satisfies my desire to write, my mode of travel, and it allows me to place before me all the points of interest along the way.

From a phenomenological point of view, to research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live....Phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a philosophy of the unique, it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable.... Phenomenological research sponsors a certain attentiveness to the details and seemingly trivial dimensions of our everyday educational lives. (van Manen, 1984b, 160-68 in Brown, 1991, 57)

The points of interest compel me, give me inter/est: about my/self/my students/my relationship with my students. In my inter/est I gain knowledge about my attitudes, my beliefs, my hopes, my frustrations, my fears, my battles, my pain and my joy. My inter/est interjects me into the middle of my/self (my esse) and I re/member a basic philosophical principle: esse est percipi (to be is to be perceived)
(George Berkeley, 1685-1753). My writing, my narrative, becomes me, is me. In another sense, I become my writing.

So I have a body of narratives that I want to understand. They are my thoughts and my feelings and I read and re/read them, write about them and re/write them and re/read the re/writing about them. In this process I have layers upon layers of perceptions. And I model Berkeley’s phrase: to write is to perceive and to be perceived. But this whole act of writing is a weaving of writing modes and perspectives: writing narratives, reflecting and interpreting, writing poetry, having my narratives inspire my poetry and my poetry inspire my narratives. It is both a pursuit of knowledge, a journey toward understanding, and a statement of a temporary understanding along the way.

One of the essential characteristics of narrative is that it includes change. If anything at all is to happen in the story, change must occur. And change takes time. In a narrative the timespan encompassed can be anything from a second to centuries, but there is recognition of time passing. . . . Discursive writing, however, is dated. When we read it, we want to know when it was written and take the time of writing into account as we read . . . . [It] requires a date of writing as a guide to the context within which it must be interpreted. Neither of these conditions is necessary for poetry. To the extent that a poem deals with universalities, it is eternity in a moment. (Hunsberger, 1991, 78)
Travel Guides

All these writings weave a continuous journey throughout my being and, as I journey, my layers alter my understanding, add to my understanding and negate my understanding. My narratives and my poetry remain true to me, but my discourses about them are not constant. I begin to question my own questions, doubt my own knowledge. I feel somewhat disoriented along my journey and I search for travel guides along the way.

Patti Lather in Getting Smart introduces me to Michel Foucault who argues for

an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which our critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (38)

Lather goes on to say that the critique Foucault talks about shifts the focus from a search for formal structures and universal values to how we are constituted as subjects of our own knowledge. This work done at the intersection of knowledge is neither for or against the Enlightenment. It is, rather, against that which presents itself as finished and authoritarian, and for that which is "indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects"—a permanent critique of ourselves, "always in the position of beginning again." (38)
This is part of my discovery from this trip of mine back to that bog. Now that I have revisited the bog, I see that the mire is no longer so murky. My perspective has changed. I see it from a different vantage point and it has changed. Oh, there are familiar sights, some tangled web of seaweed and reeds that darken the waters, decomposing woodchips and peat moss that threaten to stop me in the guagmire. But now I see them as part of my trip where I walk unsure of foot, part of my development, part of life's journey, not meant to deny or negate but rather to reveal and teach.

I re/call this bog as the repository of many lost battles, internal within myself and between my students and me. Strangely, now my battles are fought on a different plain and for different reasons. The more I journey through my writing and gain new perspectives, the more I cannot see whole vistas without knowing that there are separate parts, part of the whole and very separate at the same time. And I refuse to generalize when I know there are generalities, don't want to stereotype when I battle the dominant patterns.

This perplexing new set of contradictions defies my old perspectives and leads me into a post/modern position from which to interpret my experiences.
The idea of the text introduces the notion of multiple, or even conflicting interpretations. If all the world is like a text then everyone becomes a reader (and an author). And the question arises, whose reading, whose interpretation, is the correct one. (van Manen, 1990, 39)

At times, I know that I have much to learn from my students. I rely on my writing to highlight, focus, give insight, a kind of spotlight or magnification under which I see the unseen, look past the shadows and walls, see the parts of the whole. But, as Jardine writes,

Interpretive-interpretable writing is full of weakness and frailties, open-textured, leaving room for the new eruption of meaning, leaving room for the new, leaving room in anticipation of the agonizing, re-generative and fucking dangerous arrival of the young, (77)

and I admit that my writing has no one insight or clear vision. I doubt, question, even chide myself for my self-deceit. What do I think I have discovered about these re/current grade nines? Have I re-immersed myself in the bog? But there can be no turning around. I began this journey to look back and forward at the same time and I am committed to continuing it, for now. I write and read. What do I discover?
If the present is structured by the past, it is also pressured by the future. We always have the awareness that the present, however idyllic, is bound to give way to the future. And the future brings an ending. Only if awareness of the future and endings can be escaped can the present have a vestige of timelessness. Is that possible? "The knowledge is inherent in human awareness that our existence stretches along from birth to death. We cannot step out of time or keep the future from becoming the past. We are radically temporal. (Polkinghorne, 1988, 129, in Hunsberger, 1991, 90)

I find that, as I journey onward, I am caught in the tangled web of new ideas. Post-modern. Post-structural. Deconstructive. Post-Marxist. Post-Positivist. Feminist. Some of these concepts are so generally labelled that their meaning escapes me. Is there a meaning? Do I impart the meaning? Does any of it have meaning? Do I have a meaning? When I question my meaning, I question my own perception of myself. This new perception clashes with the old esse est percipi. If I am not perceived, do I not exist? There it is: nihilism. The criticism of all this post-modern deconstruction is that it verges on disorder and chaos, even nihilism (Lather, 40). But nihilism, without the I may not have meaning. Surely, with the multipresent I, the self is intensified in subjectivity and cannot be denied. Or looking at it from another perspective: nihilism. Nil is him. Can my feminism annihilate? There is negativism and violence in here somehow. Is it in
the new ideas themselves or is it with the new ideas that I
become more aware of the [d]angers lurking amidst it all.
De[con]struct. The possibility is there that with [con
structivism] new thinking patterns, I do not have to
destruct anything. In my new post-structuralist stance, my
referenced power structure fades and I co-exist with my
students, struggling against/with/for them. I want to
empower myself and also empower them. The [d]angers that
exist still raise doubts and fears, but the situation and
all its constituent parts are clearer. Yes, there is a fear
in all this. In the midst of all these "post-isms" and
"de[con]structivisms" is the fear of being so self-analyzed,
so "other" negative that I become completely undefined, at
the edge, open-ended and I ask, "So What?," and look for
comfort.

The nihilistic forgetfulness of the
essence of our being as teachers
curiously turns loose a certain self-
destructiveness. This is evident in the
problem lately referred to as teacher
burn-out. Teacher burn-out is the
modern case of the enduring problem of
nihilism: the higher values are losing
their value. The ends are lacking,
said Nietzsche; there is no answer to
this question: "What's the use?" And
actually the nihilistic "what's the use"
is less a question than a sigh, a
shrugging-off of any suggestion that
there might be cause for hope. Teacher
burn-out is not necessarily a symptom of
excessive output of effort, of being
over-worked. It may be the condition
that ensues when as teachers we no
longer know why we are doing what we are
doing. Teacher burn-out is hopeless in that nobody can make us believe there is an answer to the sigh, "What's the use?" (van Manen, 1990, 123)

Reading about deconstructivism and post-modern/post-structuralism allows me to place my narrative with its de/centered stories with/in a philosophical orientation—a broader base of similar approaches to pedagogy. And reading such pedagogues as Lather (Getting Smart, 1992), Jardine (Speaking with a Boneless Tongue, 1994) and van Manen (Researching Lived Experience, 1990), I feel comforted that my stories and my sensibilities have company with the understandings of others. These authors touch me with their articulation of attitudes, orientations, understandings and I experience a heartfelt kinship with their minds.

When I was an undergraduate, the modernists had shaped my thinking. I read Joyce and accepted his acclaim:

"[a]s the great age of Modernism recedes, it grows increasingly clear that the decisive English Language book of the century was Ulysses, the first pivotal book in English since Paradise Lost". (Hugh Kenner, 1978, in Heilbrun, 1990, 67)

I re/think about Joyce and how I held his writing in awe, unquestioningly. Now, I think about my aw[e]ful acceptance and non-understanding of how it re/presented a knowledge.
structure. I was quite drawn to the modern age angst of loneliness and alienation amid a vast world of mechanization. I had read about the shallowness of human relationships, the loss of human feeling, the superficiality of society amid cynicism, skepticism, and war. But now, I understand more clearly, more truly, for this instance in my life, Virginia Woolf's point of view.

"Where Woolf departs from Joyce is in her thorough skepticism about the structures (Joyce's micro-and macrocosms) western culture has constructed on the 'void incertitude' and in her radical inquiry into the grounds and legitimacy of the authority commanded by the phantom power of history, society, and religion over life itself." (Maria DiBattista, 1980, in Heilbrun, 1990, 83)

In my poetry classes, I embraced the Imagists!

The truth is that the writer's art consists above all in making us forget that he uses words. The harmony he seeks is a certain correspondence between the movements of his mind and the phrasing of his speech, a correspondence so perfect that the undulations of his thought, born of the sentence, stir us sympathetically; consequently the words, taken individually no longer count. There is nothing left but the flow of meaning which pervades the words, nothing but two minds, without the presence of an intermediary, which appear to vibrate sympathetically. The rhythm of speech has, then, no other object than the reproduction of the rhythm of thought. (Henri Bergson, cited in The Modern Age, 46)
Does post-modernism negate the value of these past ideas? I read Jardine’s quoting of William Carlos William’s "Red Wheelbarrow" and revisit my first excitement about this presentation of reality.

This luscious release into the stubborn particulars of a life actually lived, with all its kin abounding--this is one of the deep haunts of phenomenology--a life-world and the deep love of the particulars of the Earthworld wormed down, fleshbound.

... The heat and the howl of loving suspicion as the core of interpretation. Reading the world and its pungent signs and marks left on trails and on faces and etched in soft underbelly utterance and hiss of living texts. (Jardine, 1992, xix)

Acculturating

But I have adopted positivist/structuralist/humanist systems of analysis in the examination of some theory or its implications for practice and sometimes lost the sense of the experimental and divergent perspective. As I think now in terms of post-modernism/post-structuralism, phenomenology, interpretive narrative and deconstruction, I feel an excitement, a comfort likened to the feeling of coming home after a long time of being away, or perhaps finding a home after a long time of wandering homeless. Is this my feminine "odyssey?" All the "structured" analysis
seems very distanced from the heart of the matter now. It was distanced from the heart of me and it was distanced from the heart of my pedagogy: life in the classroom!

So I look into the phenomena of my classroom life and there I find the direction for my cerebral wanderings. The lived experience I share with my students so compels me to write that I stumble upon the path for my discoveries. I begin writing, first about one student. And I discover more about that student and my relationship with him. In a deconstructivist mode I see his name has a message for me and I write a poem. I am hooked on this class. The writing has connected me, has made this revisitation exciting, challenging and promising of many discoveries.

My journey of discovery through writing presents many points of interest, sites along the way that invite me to pause and reflect. They remain highlighted in my memory, but reflection and revisitation reveal shapes and patterns in new ways. These points of interest are interpreted through my narrative and reflected upon in my re/reading and re/writing for how they re/shape my teacher/self.

Souvenirs of the Journey

The retelling of my journey into the English 9 classroom shows me patterns, heals certain wounds and opens others. My writing presents a movement from external visions of the whole with vague assumptions and acceptances
to the face-to-face spontaneity of individual contact with all its reactions, emotions and judgments. This movement allows me to reconstruct the whole, a whole that cannot be packaged and sealed but must remain open for inspection when it leaves its point of departure as a souvenir of a journey unfinished.

My journey begins with a brief re/turn to my "Bog" of assumptions and expectations, hopes and dreams for my English 9 students, for the class as a whole and for the individuals. In this stage of my journey, I confront my past understandings of my relationship with my students and my problems with control.

The theoretical language of child "science" so easily makes us look past each child's uniqueness toward common characteristics that allow us to group, sort, sift, measure, manage, and respond to children in preconceived ways. . . . Putting children away by means of technical or instrumental language is really a kind of spiritual abandonment. (van Manen, 1986, 18)

I do not stay long in this repository of old views but move on quickly to a more rugged terrain where I carry the deconstructive mode into an on-going struggle. As if in a new land, I immerse myself in a foreign culture, try to learn a new language, test new ways of knowing. At this stage I explore risky areas, examine the least "safe" regions of travel. I feel "foreign", unaccepted and, at the
same time, I find it impossible to condone the alternate values. I feel opposition. This new land is certainly uneven and rugged. It feels like a battlefield.

But time and careful observation allow me to see the individuals, their public selves, their armoured, private selves and I make a connection with them that looks for their worth, their problems, their promises. Here I stay awhile to live with them, relate to them, learn their language. I see this phase geographically on an open plain.

The . . . pedagogue is oriented toward the child in a special way. While being concerned with maturation, growth and learning, I do this: I immediately enter a very personal relationship with the child. There is a fellow feeling between us but at the same time another and new distantiation which makes me "his [her] observer". Since I "know" this child I can hold back superficial judgments about him [her]. And in this holding back I create another "distance", but now of a different order of objectivity than the distance of the outside observer. "Simultaneously I stand closer but also further away." There is a maximal closeness with the maintenance of distance. This is what Beets means when he says "pedagogic observation is: discovering and meeting the other in the heart of personal existence." (van Manen, 1979, 14)

Having engaged in battle and ventured out in the open with my concerns and interpretations, I allow myself to think about the relationships I have formed through my writing about my individual "at risk" students. These
students were my warriors, my strongest visible opposition. They have shaped my journey this past year and made me more aware of the battle, but I have learned that they weren't just fighting me, nor me them.

At the end of my journey I stop at the seaside for reflection. In this re/treat I can leave the individuals and search for my/self again. In this search for my/self, I let the teacher/self break away and examine the part of me that does the relating, the learning and the teaching. I see issues in my life. I re/cognize and re/think my past understandings. I address conflict, try to label it and place it in a broader world beyond this classroom. During this re/treat I look at myself and my perspective. I see myself as a woman/teacher. I see myself as a mother/teacher with memories of my girl/self and my own mother/model and father/model and teacher/model. I look to my growing past and wonder about the metamorphosis of my ever present. Here I in/flect what I may have de/flected before and my re/fle[x]ion is re/vitalizing.

We must recognize what the past suggests: women are well beyond youth when they begin often unconsciously to create another story. Not even then do they recognize it as another story. Usually they believe that the obvious reasons for what they are doing are the only ones; only in hindsight... can the concealed story be surmised. (Heilbrun, 1988)
My writing becomes a metaphorical travel log, a souvenir of my personal journey. Maybe I can package it with some kind of mailing stamp and description of the contents, place it in a temporal location for all my relatives, for any connections that I have made along the way, and for myself as a map tracing my journey on into the future.

Becomings belong to geography, they are orientations, directions, entries and exits. There is a woman-becoming which is not the same as women, their past and their future, and it is essential that women enter this becoming to get out of their past and their future, their history. (Deleuze and Parnel, "Dialogues", 2)
becoming

i
we/nt to europe
to find myself
in the s[event]ies

i wasn’t
t[her]e

i wasn’t
anyw[her]e

because
all t[his] time
i
have been
b[eco]ming

in this
ne/w age of ex/ploration

i un/mesh myself
re/lease my life
from my /pa/st

point
to the future
still be/com/ing
but k/now/ing
w[here] to look
3. From Bog to Battlefield

Bog

I conceptualize my experience teaching English 9 this past year as a journey that begins with a return to an abandoned place in my teaching history. I had found teaching grade nines to be demanding and unpleasant. I did not relate well to that age, nor had I been successful at managing their classroom interactions. I had not taught English 9 for ten years. I recognize that it is not the English 9 class, the English 9 fourteen-year-olds, but rather, I, as teacher of fourteen-year-olds, who was stagnant. I had allowed my teacher-self, as a teacher of fourteen-year-olds to die, or at least to lie dormant somewhere, sometimes stifled in the stagnation of negative feelings.

As I re/member, I metaphorically locate my ideas on a spatial plain where concepts, beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, feelings, biases, seem intertwined and tangled, decomposing, decaying. I think of classroom antics and self-centered students, boisterous, shy, awkward, boasting, little offering of thoughtful minds with which to reflect on language and literature. Most of my feelings (beliefs, concepts = feelings) had been so shaded by negative memories that they blocked any desire to enter the English 9 classroom again or to feel a sense of hope for
what I thought to be the "un/teachability" of the age. I likened this state of my mind to a bog that has had its natural life processes impeded by unsound environmental practices. Too much rot!

Bogs are old geographical areas created by deposits of wood and fibre carried along riverways. Over the ages, debris builds up and the river forges new courses in the delta, moves away from the bogs, with sediment and marshlands in-between. Yet, the bog is not devoid of life. There, bushes grow instead of trees, and other small life forms such as insects and rabbits thrive in this habitat. Decomposed fibres form peat that can be extracted to mix into other soils to fertilize stronger growth elsewhere.

My past feelings, my attitudes are dead wood discarded and de/composing, but as I revis/it the site, I notice that all is not dead. (Journal Entry, October, '93)

When I venture into the bog, I find the ground is unstable, spongy and constantly moving beneath my feet. The bog is not an easy place to be. I have to look hard in concentrated study to determine the life-forms there. In and under the grey intertwining of twisted branches and over the spongy peat, the song birds twitter that hope and promise are alive.
Avoidance of the bog had allowed me to ignore the lifeforms there, had fostered a belief that all was dead, worthless. But closer study now shows me that every bit of nature has its useful purpose just as every age of student has lessons to learn and worth to discover. (Journal Entry, Oct. '93)

It was with this sense of location that I began teaching grade nines again. I had a lot of untangling to do. I was returning to teaching from a three year leave. Part of that leave had been spent in graduate studies re/discovering myself as teacher, and part of it had been spent in the home with my family, my husband and my two sons, now aged 12 and 15. My oldest son was entering grade nine. Did the fact that I was mothering a son of the same age cut through the negative memories and allow me to feel hope and new interest in this age group? I did not want my son abandoned in some bog. My love and concern for my own children, and, certainly, my interest in the needs of my eldest son who lives with multiple handicaps, predisposed in me a readiness to re-enter the grade nine classroom. So, as I was struggling on the home-front to gain understanding of my growing son, I entered into the classroom to begin another struggle, a struggle to overcome certain past feelings, mis/understandings and a struggle to enter into a positive teacher-student relationship with these students.
I readily entered the classroom clearly conscious of the unsteady ground of the bog where many of my feelings still lay. I had embarked on a journey into this bog, a journey of investigation and discovery, a journey of careful seeing into areas that I had dis/regarded before. As I attempted to establish teacher-learner rapport, I stumbled in the mire, not once but several times, and felt threatened by the dangerous tangle of sticks and barbs. At times this bog seemed benign enough in its de/composed state; at other times it raged a malignant battle both privately within myself and publicly between me and my students; but there were still other times when the bog rang out its own rejoices of new-found composition.

Treading into the bog was clearly an intrusion, an imposition of new energy into old dying forms. Awareness of this created a sense of tension in myself. At some point in the fall of the year, I began keeping a journal. My reading of it now is another re/visitation of discovery where I re/encounter meaning in my battles, my joys, and my fear of being stuck again. The dominant discovery is my growing understanding, but in my growth I am fraught with tension about my mis[sed]understanding from past experiences and my growing sense of caring for each student despite the sometimes state of conflict we are in.
The difference between the educator and the student is a phenomenon involving a certain permanent tension, which is, after all, the same tension that exists between theory and practice, between authority and freedom, and perhaps between yesterday and today.

When educators are conscious of this tension and this difference, they must be constantly alert to not letting these differences become antagonistic. What we have to do is to live each day with the learners and cope with this tension between us—a tension that is reconcilable. Recognizing this situation as reconcilable, and not antagonistic, qualifies us as democratic educators, not elitists and authoritarianists. (Freire, 1985, 177)

The Classroom as Battlefield

When I re-faced a resistance to engage in learning as I prescribed it for this class, I remembered the reasons that I got "bogged down."

Students come into the classroom with their armour on, ready for the full frontal attack. At best they are cautious. Singled out, they are defensive; in groups they can be offensive and, at any moment, they are quick to retreat. Even if I, as teacher, do not feel at all militaristic, the class begins with the imaginary battle lines drawn where teacher and student enter into a kind of no man’s land tentatively unsure of where the first shot will come from. At best, diplomacy rules, treaties are agreed upon and a general detente ensues. (Journal Entry, Oct. ’93)
At a distance now, from this class, I re/read this explanation of the way things happened in this class as highly generalized and tense. My view of this now is a re/view and I know that the individuals in this class have formed real relationships with me. I smart at this description. I want to change it. From another perspective, I wonder whether it was not I who felt militaristic and tense. After all, I was struggling to battle past failures. In another journal entry I acknowledge my discomfort with this description:

This was a new perspective. I have been away from teaching for three years. I do not remember ever thinking of my teaching in a metaphor of war. But then, I had purposely avoided grade nine and ten students because I did not like to fight. There seemed to me always too much to battle before I could have a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. I was in a position of avoidance rationalized with superiority and achieved by seniority. It had been much easier to teach grade elevens and twelves. So I prided myself with having a better ability with the senior grades and dismissed the grade nine and ten students as being too involved with raging hormones for sensitivity and insight. I would take them when they were ready for personal growth and intelligent thought. Are they really unteachable? I have to find out. Was it me or them? I cannot allow myself to continue in the avoidance mode. (Journal Entry, Oct. '93)
I doubt that grade nine students have changed all that much since I last encountered them. "Was it me or them?"
Phrased in the colloquial, this question now seems rhetorical as I create some distance from my own words. Of course it was "me." Or the "me" that I used to be. Yes, they presented challenges, but I cringe now at my thinking of them as "unteachable." In a deconstructive mode, I challenge myself:

un/teach/able
un[able]to [t]each
  each
  able
  to
un/teach

Freire’s words about tension and antagonism express a truth that guides me in my personal interactions and, as such, in my teaching, but their focussed articulation clarifies my orientation and gives me a new understanding of the tension that I feel with my grade nine students.

Initially, I remembered this tension as antagonistic. I used the battle metaphor to describe by relationship with my students because I saw my relationship with them as one of conflict. They were my "foes." Their very presence seemed a block to my teaching because I remembered grade nine students as being "unteachable." Indeed, I saw my
students as "foes" and when I entered the grade nine classroom I imagined that I walked out on the battlefield!

My most obvious "warriors" are but a handful of boisterous noisy types: Neil Ritchie, Chuck Kingsley, Eric Wong, Dee Fernandez. They, with a few quieter supporters, in their ranks lead the front every class. The rest of the students are behind their line, either quietly enjoying the fray or resenting the stalling tactics. I feel pressure. I am pressured by my own desire to help these soldiers at the front (back) drop their armour and gain some ground through thoughtfulness and intelligent growth and I am pressured by the students who lay back quietly, unable to come to the front. The quiet ones fight their battle silently. Their writing reveals a sensitivity or at least an honest attempt. They don't talk, but they pass. But I fear that the battalion of mercenaries that leave with a prize after every class causes everyone to lose: the quieter ones who never brave the fray or proffer sentiments, insights or questions and the warriors themselves who only learn that they can toss a grenade with abandon, destroy a class and leave us all scarred with the shrapnel of insensitivity and ignorance. (Journal Entry, Oct. '93)

But, as Freire goes on to say,

the very practice of teaching involves learning on the part of those we are teaching, as well as learning, or relearning, on the part of those who teach ...in a real learning situation
where the object of knowledge becomes a critical agent, rather than a possession. This kind of situation mediates the critical agent, the educators and the learners. It is impossible to experience and appreciate someone in this concrete relationship if the educator and the learner do not know about one another, and if they do not teach one another. (177)

**Surveillance**

Over the years of my avoidance of grade nines, I set up walls between who I am and who they are. A decade or so ago, I had little understanding of fourteen-year-olds. I remember the tension and frustration, the antagonism. I remember the sometime feeling of distaste for their humour, their appearance, their behaviour. I paid lip-service to the idea that their whole demeanor was a necessary part of their development, but I questioned whether it really was necessary. Was it not possible for fourteen-year-olds to be sensitive, compassionate, reflective and mature? That question makes me laugh now. Now I question why I am ready to stop and think? What has made me "more mature," "more reflective" in my approach to fourteen-year-olds in the classroom. Surely, those intervening years of mothering, of bringing a child to the point of being fourteen, of teaching, helping, guiding, worrying, of watching his peer group so closely, of investing my very soul into the heart of beginning adolescence, have shaped me. No, I do not want simply to impart some body of knowledge to them, I want to
interact, share, relate and under/stand with them. That object of knowledge that I bring into the classroom for them is only the "critical agent" (Freire, 1989) that mediates my relationship with them. Now I understand that it is impossible to have a relationship with my students if I do not under/stand them and allow myself to learn from them as well. Now that I want to know them better, now that I watch them with a mother's eyes, I learn that, while they can be highly sensitive and compassionate, they have trouble understanding their own sensitivity and compassion and they have yet to learn how to express their feelings clearly.

But why did I expect them to be mature? They were only fourteen! Reflection is a thinking process that needs to be guided not only in the young. Do they ever stop and think? Isn't that part of my job as a mature and reflective adult to help them learn reflection as a teach/ability? Yes, I look back on my antagonistic stance toward my previous grade nines and I laugh. How foolish I was! How immature in my understanding of my relationship with them. How I did not know them! How I did not know myself! I had not stopped to think. In this new stance, my writing makes me stop and question and, through it, I watch my students carefully. This process of writing/reading/re-writing and re-reading re/minds me of my challenges and goals for this class this past year. My challenges were battles: battles with myself and my attitudes; battles with my students about attention.
and behaviour; battles helping them fight their battles; battles meeting our goals. All was not easy. My first battle was to get out of my "bog" and then I struggled to remain out. Battles within battles, concentric battles, layers of battles, reprieve from battle, surrender, defeat, victory.

I see, through my writing, a battle raging within myself. I felt pulled by the needs of all my students, the warriors and the passive ones. I was entrenched and learning about life in my bog, not out in the open but hiding amid the brambles. In the public of class discussion or social interaction I faced the silly remarks, loud disturbances, interruptions or the unresponsive, passive silence, but as I wrote, I began to understand.
blue canopy

a blue canopy
coolly lures me
from
a
grey brier

i
test
the lush green ground
tentatively

hot red poppies
flare their petals
mockingly
purple irises
silently sway
against the reeds

i'm in a place
where
th/ under c/ loud/ s
can do/ use the
o range and yell ow
s park sand dazzle
electrical

energy
of
life

43
Hermeneutically, I was finding my way out of my bog of past attitudes and dis/missives. Even though I was fighting, I sensed something luring me into a more positive attitude toward my teaching/students. I have already addressed part of that lure: the sense of nurturing (life-giving) that I felt toward students of this age. But there was, along with this awakened sense of nurturing, some re-awakened interest in the tools of teaching. Classroom strategies, activities, learning strategies that I had re/newed my acquaintance with while I was in grad-school. New ideas about writing, re/mindedness about classroom talk and teacher-fronted versus student participatory activities. I was excited and challenged and, with new armour of my own, ready to put theory into practice, but, as this re/newed inter/est lured me from the theoretical posturings of grad-school papers into the classroom, I re/faced some old battles in the poppies and the irises.

Interactions in the classroom aroused in me a sense of battle. I longed for a celebration of new insights and personal revelations in class discussions. I wanted considered comments and owned pronouncements. In my colourful visions I hoped for a warm and secure classroom:
The classroom should be perceived as a ring, a pitch, a place to center oneself. And periods should be colored fragments that make the day.

The shape speaks the color it most easily harbors. Gold, yellow, orange, red—the embodiment of a circle—give us warmth. The shape is reflective of the voices that are allowed to speak harmoniously or in conflict....A circle generates intimate friends. It generates warmth and intimate exchange. The conversation becomes more than two people. It evokes voices of an ancestral past that has spoken on similar themes. It demands that color be more musical and fluid, not attached to the rigors of form but released to form its own harmonics of exchange....The music in our schools has a harmony. We feel it in the halls, in our classes, in the lunchrooms. The buzz, the whispers, the shrills tell us the states of our bodies. (jagodzinski, 1992, 163)

In teacher-dominated talk, students are cautious, scared and conceding. Even with group work and free discussion, classroom talk only reveals public selves, only follows prescribed formulae. How, then, can that individual connection be made? Not in the dynamics of classroom talk. It's a phony dynamic.
Teacher (me): Good morning class!

Students (them): (some talk among themselves; some look up with baleful eyes; some mutter embarrassedly, "Good morning.")

Teacher (me:) Well, I can see you're in good form this morning. Energetic. Ready to grasp the moment.

Students (them): (expectant, suspicious, disinterested, bored, silent)

What follows usually is a period of question and answer. I refer to the subject, most likely an episode from a short story or novel. I ask leading questions to elicit a desired response. Sometimes, I am pleasantly surprised by the insightful comments. Sometimes, I have to give my own interpretation. If all goes well, I can invite students to respond to each other. Most commonly, this sort of talk is structured or "staged." Both the students and I know it and we go through our routines.

If the subject is about personal or "real life" issues, the students feel more control. They have authority over their comments. But still, that public self usually frames the response. Motives get in the way and I doubt the sincerity. Very rarely are the comments reflective and deep, although they might lead to further thought in writing. All too often, personal issues are subject to disparaging comments, smart aleck responses and other attention getting remarks by classroom bamboozlers uncomfortable with themselves.
As initial contact, classroom talk is simply teacher elicited response, framed discussion, distorted messages that come amid the unstructured dynamic and cry for decoding. I can see from my scripted notes that I feel frustrated with classroom talk at this level. My last remark is sarcastic. Perhaps, I am guilty of providing a situation where students feel set up. At this point, it is clear that there is no sincerity. I do not have a class yet; I am part of a collective of isolated individuals who stretch tentative tentacles of speech across a sea of fear and uncertainty. (Journal, Oct. '93)

There is no circle shape in my classroom with this kind of talk. My students face me like a battalion under inspection. Do they "pass muster"? It is no wonder that I feel embattled. I am besieged by old style teaching, conducting. I do not see or feel any colour but khaki and the camouflage of battle fatigues. Without writing about my classroom "talk," I would not have thought about the shape or colour of my classroom. I would not have seen myself as some kind of army sergeant full of sarcasm. My re/reading interprets this sarcasm as a begrudging remark. I am annoyed that they do not talk to me readily and I am trying to goad them into talking. In their silence is the power and control of passivity and resistance. I now think this problem I face with classroom talk has something to do with the problem of power and dominance. I want to control them.
I dominate them. There are tensions over knowledge and power between adults and children.

Personality is exposed color. The tension of the circle, the tension between the binary oppositions of hot and cold, between laughing and crying, the extremes of our body’s psychological and physiological tolerance, can only be maintained by "blanket" spaces. The "blanket" has to be a security force that allows one to speak, to be exposed in a community of friends. The blanket forms a canopy, a temporary space like a tent or igloo so that talk might begin. It prevents the danger of shame and embarrassment that is worn on the surface of the skin. Symbols such as the crown, the hood, the tiara, the helmet suggest privileges in the conversation. (jagodzinski, 1992, 163-164)

The canopy that had lured me from my bog promised comfort and security with my new desire to get to know my students and to put to practice my re/newed theories. But staying out of the bog, under that canopy was difficult. I could not always feel the warmth of colour rather than the chill of grey. The canopy, I felt, seemed to be for me alone. I felt the privilege to speak. What kind of symbolic head gear did I wear? My warriors wore helmets as part of their armour. What about the others?

As I re/read my journal comments, I am embarrassed at the finality of my pronouncements about classroom talk. Is this the last Word? If so, then what hope is there to
engage in classroom talk any further? Perhaps the hope lies in this hermeneutic interpretation:

Hermeneutics wants to recover the original difficulties of life, difficulties that are concealed in technical-scientific reconstructions, concealed in the attempt to render human life objectively presentable. "Original" in this usage does not mean a longing for some unspecifiable past "before" technology . . . . It is a longing for fundamental questions of how life together can go on in such a way that new life is possible in our midst. (Smith, 1988, in Jardine, 1991, 118)

In the inner tension between illumination and concealment, the elusive Word can live. Hermeneutically conceived, the task of inquiry is not to dispel this tension, but to live and speak from within it. It is this tension that propels the generativity of the Word—that makes education hopeful, that makes it possible. It is its love of this generativity that makes hermeneutics appear so negative in regard to certain forms of inquiry and discourse. It is this love that undergirds hermeneutics' intolerance of those who would traffic in the business of education as if it were as meaningless, as deadened, as unthankful and unthinking as they propose it to be. It is unimaginable to bring new life into a world in which there is nothing left to say, in which the Word no longer lives. Detached from this original, vibrant difficulty, the original ambiguity, inquiry, and discourse become degenerative, wanting to have the last Word. How can we want this and be educators as well? (Jardine, 1991, 126)
I question how I can now create a canopy under which all my students and I can relate and share. Do my feelings of embattlement have to do with shape? Literally, the configured set up of students in desks in rows? Or figuratively, the shape I create for each lesson, equalizing participation? Do I create this shape? How?

Yes, classroom talk seems to be the mystifier, with charlatans and bamboozlers in force at the front. It is with these bamboozlers, most curiously, that the writing is the clue. For the most puzzling of student there is hope that the writing can crack the code and reveal the real person, slowly. Making it real, making the teacher-student scene sincere, happens only when the contact has been made, individually, from the writing first. It's in the individual pieces of writing that glimmers, hopes, inner feelings slip out of the crack in the armour. It's in the writing where the defences are dropped. The writing establishes a peace treaty, a calm surrender of false pretenses and an opening into a private world.

Classroom talk and public statements are where these warriors display their warfare. In the writing, if they are given proper training, and reinforced with medals of encouragement and praise, they turn their bravado into courage and start reaching into the depths of themselves, sometimes finding foes to face and battle
privately and sometimes finding friends to strengthen themselves from within so that they do not need so much outer armour. (Journal Entry, Oct. '93)

Can one imagine being a teacher without having hope for children? Is such person still a teacher or would the meaning of teaching lose its fundamental meaning if it were not sustained by hope? (van Manen, 1990, 109)

**Emissary**

Before I saw hope in this new battle of mine, I was on the edge of defeat. The class had fallen apart. I had lost focus amid the foolery. There was no nastiness. There had just been a battle over control of focus and I had lost. I had wanted discussion and I had received nonsense, flippant retorts and skewed remarks and silence. Group work lacked depth or didn’t get finished. The class wasn’t a complete disaster, but it certainly wasn’t a place I had wanted to be.

I had been lured by a freshness and promise of blossoms, but I had found a lot of scrag and rock, a rugged terrain, indeed. I need a map, a guide, a prompt to keep on going. And then something happened. One flagrant force cracked but a little. Chuck Kingsley.
Chuck had enrolled in the class about three weeks after the first day. A late timetable transfer. I quickly learned why he might not have been wanted by some other teacher. After handing me his transfer-in slip, he nodded his head in a second’s blink and flipped his blond forelock out of his blue eyes, icily. He strolled to an empty seat at the side, just down two seats from Karla, a girl who, for some reason, seemed ostracised by the rest of the class. Chuck made it obvious. He snorted crudely several times. Each snort was accompanied by a sideways sneer at Karla. After politely asking him three times, to refrain from making rude noises, I told him to stand in the open doorway until I could speak to him. I did not go to him until the end of the class. Then, I simply told him that I was confused about what he was doing or why he was doing it and I needed an explanation. I refused to fight. Interestingly, he conceded that his actions had just been "stupid". I agreed and added "senseless" and expressed my hope that we could get to know each other more congenially next class. Chuck did not come to the next class. I phoned home, spoke to his mother and Chuck came to the class after that. (Journal Entry, Oct. ’93)

Chuck was the catalyst for my experience writing about this class. There was something about him that inspired me to write, but I did not feel it right away. Initially, I was curious about who he was and why he behaved the way he did, but it was not until he handed in his first writing assignment that the contradiction between his public "self,"
the persona he presented to the class, and the more private self emerged from his writing. Then I picked up my pen and started writing as a way to sort out my feelings about this particularly challenging group of students.

I had encountered Chuck's public self and then I had read some of his writing where he had revealed some personal pain and very idealistic personal goals. This great gulf between the insensitivity and the sensitivity made me think of all my students in a different light.

In his first piece of writing, Chuck wrote about big changes. We had read a story by Anne Hart called "The Friday Everything Changed." The story, set in the thirties in rural Alberta, is about a young girl daring to demand equal time with the boys who are allowed time away from the one room school house to go fetch water from a pump down the road. The boys get free time while the girls sit dutifully doing their work. It is a story about boys dominating, about gender lines being drawn and not questioned, until one small female voice booms out a challenge. I couldn't seem to get the gender issue off the ground in discussion. Girls in the classroom were not about to use their booming voices. Quietly they expressed an understanding of the conflict in the story, but did not acknowledge a semblance of that issue in everyday life. They thought they got equal time carrying and fetching for the classroom teacher! I think back now and see the need to explore this theme in different ways and
with different applications. Then, I broadened the scope of their writing assignment and asked them to write about change.

Most of the students wrote about significant change in their own lives. Chuck wrote about a cataclysmic disaster in the universe. It was not at all personal, but, in his writing, I sensed turmoil. I also saw in it a creative, imaginative spark. I took a lot of time to respond to his statements. In actuality, his command of grammatical structures and vocabulary was quite sound. I pointed out where he might extend his ideas or provide more description. I asked him to revise his writing. I asked for peer response. I asked for yet another revision and the finished product earned him a "B." All the students had to go through the same process. But Chuck surprised me by showing me a crack in his outer shield. I was hooked on Chuck. After class, I sat at my desk and wrote a poem about him.
CHUCK [IS] KING/SLEY

So curtly, he chucks retorts
across new meetings
fearfully, he stalks a fight
from each new foe
fencing himself in with
that's my name
waddyawannamakuvit!

Feeling set up
like a tentative Dauphin
he hasn't earned a crown
and he knows it
doubting his own curtness
he is a young pretender
beneath the ice blue glaze

In time he will look
more warmly
as he cuts his own jewels
and polishes them
fortifies his castle with grace
tenders his throne
crowns himself
King
As I re/read this reflection, almost a year later, I am surprised that this is how I started telling the story of this class. But I remember now that it was with a writing exercise that I first made contact with one particularly difficult student. A student who had presented problems in the public arena of the classroom, but who had shown me something else about himself in the privacy of his writing. My encounter with this student was the beginning of my journey. My relationship with him awakened questions in me and I began a quest for answers through my own writing.

The heart of the matter comes from writing and engaging in the writing activity with my students. I can only feel an excitement about teaching if I connect in a meaningful way with each student—individual. One or two connections begin the process. Individuals, not a whole class, make the first contact. Student to teacher, teacher to student, students to students and, not suddenly, but somehow, serendipitously, there is the class—mine, theirs, ours.

each
able
to
un/teach
My class is beginning that journey toward real meaningful sharing. Can I make it happen? At the moment I still feel on the battleground with this class. There are a few worrisome warriors that do battle with me and the aims of every lesson. But I have seen some cracks in the armour and I have hopes of a real peace treaty and a wonderful celebration to follow. (Journal Entry, Nov. '93)

Why do I see my classes from this perspective? I've been teaching for over twenty years. I have always enjoyed classroom talk. I've relished the moments of shared sensitivity in response to problems of literary figures. This reflective mode awakens my memory and I reach over a span of some sixteen years to the enrapt faces of students of another time listening to my discussion of W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*.

I can still see that class so utterly still while I read how Saint Sammy screamed his prairie visions to Brian. *Who has Seen the Wind* commanded a special reflection and could hush the classroom banter more carefully than any other piece on the Grade Ten reading list. I had read that passage to a rowdy class and they were silently awed by it. That was it. In precious moments, when insight rivetted students together at a depth so well beneath their publicly shared selves, there was no talk. They sat alone and silent in the sea of unshared insight. I remember gathering my own self for public presentation. I broke the silence with
questions of meaning and interpretation, questions that requested spoken understanding or similar experiences. The moment sank once again beneath fear and uncertainty. There was nothing. And after much prodding, only a few whispered explanations.

There have been many other riveting moments in response to truths revealed through literature, but this one, sixteen years ago, remains very clear in my memory. Perhaps it made such a lasting impression because the class was particularly boisterous, with most of the students unwilling to go deep enough to find their true feelings and clear thoughts. I remember that moment in crystal clarity as if the clouds cleared and a rainbow quietly arced over a sleepy valley. One brief moment of sunshine beaming on a ray of beauty. But, as I remember, it was not until they had to find Saint Sammy in their own world and speak to Brian in their own writing that each of my students became a gem with facets reflecting a spectrum of their own vibrant colour.

I wish I had kept samples of their writing. I am only left with a feeling. I seem to recall that every one of those students shared such a sensitive viewpoint that I, in those early years of my teaching, felt a moment of clearest learning. Learning about those armoured soldiers in front of me. I had learned about the battleground and the need to help them trust enough to drop their defences, at least in
their writing. I remember the strength of the connection I felt with them. Some of the toughest students with the most elaborate armour had revealed through the smallest crack a poignancy of feeling that established a bond between us and, when I handed back their writing assignment, I knew the white flags of surrender were waving on both my and their fronts. It was a different class after that, from my perspective.

When I think back now, I can not remember the distinct difference in the classroom talk. I would like to think that there was. My memory only serves to remind me of the sensitive, intuitive, intelligent individuals that I was so overjoyed to find beneath the public statement.

I guess what I did not know, in those days, was how to let them share those feelings with each other. Their writing was a personal connection between each of them and me, but I do not think it ever became public. Now, when I face a similar class, I am overwhelmed with the need to stop the public battle. I do not want to deal on a battleground and, yet, I see the warriors in front of me.

So. This is the battle that I face this year with this class. It is a challenge to reach my students. All of them. From my new perspective, I want the warriors to take off the armour. I want them to sign their own peace treaties with themselves. I want them to write and, through writing, learn more about themselves. I want them
to lay down their arms and reveal their innermost thoughts. I want them to find ways to express themselves so that their thoughts accurately portray who they are and what they think and feel. And then I want them to be brave enough, once they are decorated with their new courage, to proclaim their ideas and feelings across the class, share their ideas bravely and invite others to share theirs, in an open exchange and a dynamic learning environment. (Journal Entry, Oct. '93)

As I remember through my writing, I re/mind myself that perhaps my previous experiences teaching junior grades had not been all negative. I had only remembered the negative. The negative memories served to keep me away from the junior grades, away from the battles I would have to fight there, a kind of justification. I cannot trust memory to reveal a truth, only a partial truth, only a relevance.

Just as it was relevant for those negative memories to keep me away from the demands of the English 9 classroom for ten years, so now was it relevant for me to muster up the energy and the belief that these English 9 students and I had things to do together. One of their greatest challenges to me was to cope with their "electrical energy of life," match their "sparks and dazzle" and keep hoping that they would reach for that cool canopy of mutual teaching and learning. Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn’t.

The factors that contribute to this feeling of mutuality are elusive. Do I have control? Do the students?
Sometimes I think the answer hinges on how I deal with the class, but then one student can seem to be the main factor.

Chuck has found his way beneath my own armour. He touched my heart and now I delight when he flicks his forelock out of his eyes so that I can see a glint, just a hint of a warm glow. He had written more. He had revealed some of the pain that must have demanded the first layer of armour. He wrote a piece on "Fathers". The writing came after studying three stories which portrayed fathers from different viewpoints. I was saddened to read his revealing comments about his own father and the pain he caused Chuck. But I was astounded at the strength of his voice. He seemed to have reached into his core for this writing and found a gemstone. Chuck wrote of his own ideals and his own aspirations about fatherhood. I received sensitive pieces of writing from my other students, but somehow Chuck's writing had the loudest voice.

Every class seems to reveal a warmer Chuck. He happily produced his Mini-Novel study and marched it up to the front of the class to find its place on the blackboard ledge, displayed proudly next to the others. He did not strut, he did not snort, he did not flick his forelock. Somewhat modestly, he remarked that he wasn't that much of an artist. But then, some students drew wonderful book covers and some didn't. There they all stood admiring the display of each other's work. Chuck's work was there with them. A very solid "B."

In a moment, there was my class, mutually sharing,
sincerely congratulating. We felt like a class—mine, theirs, ours. Can one student be responsible for such a change in this class? This doesn't seem like the Grade Nine class that had almost reinforced my belief that all Grade Nines were reprobates, lured by their hormones into senselessness that defied all learning. Has Chuck effected a change in me? He certainly has inspired me. Has he somehow quelled the urges toward foolery in some of the other students? Perhaps. There are others. (Journal, Dec. '93)

Truce

It seemed for a while that I had managed to quell the rebellious forces in the classroom. I basked in the warmth of my own success. I was out of the bog. The poppies were stunning! Students brain-stormed writing topics with me on the over-head projector. They formed peer response groups for their writing exercises. We discussed racism, wrote letters to Amnesty International, read about civil rights.

Now, as I engage in the Grade Nine process with this class, I feel an integrated part of their development. I am learning too and I feel a positive energy driven by my personal investment in our learning process. I want to write more. I want to write about them, about me, about us. I want to write with them. I want to meet on some golden prairie like Saint Sammy and Brian in Who Has Seen the Wind where communication is real, where ideas are shared sincerely out in the open. (Journal Entry, Nov. 1993)
I felt, at this time, that I had travelled a great distance from that bog. I had been lured onto the battlefield with determination to fight my past feelings of inadequacies. I had been lured by the promise of flowering youth, displaying their own seasonal blossoms. But, as a clash of different desires poked holes in my cool canopy of control, I saw the terrain in all its ruggedness. Yet, I struggled on in the hope that this brief moment of accomplishment and unity in the classroom would bind us into common purpose and mutual respect, and, in time, carry us off the battlefield.

I looked to writing activities for a binding force. I hoped writing would be a key to my relationship with my students: their writing assignments and reader response journals, my dialoguing feedback. I realistically did not expect their quest for knowledge to meet the fervour of Saint Sammy’s words, but the image of Brian’s desire to learn continued to inspire me. I wanted it for them and for me.

...for breathless moments he had been alive as he had never been before, passionate for the thing that slipped through the grasp of his understanding and eluded him. If only he could throw his cap over it; if it were something that a person could trap. If he could lie outstretched on the prairie while he lifted one edge of his cap and peeked under to see. That was all he wanted—one look. More than anything! (Who Has Seen the Wind, 199)
all the school-long year

some days
mouths in motion
slide smoothly
over the hints
of friction

some times
unfocussed
creativity
erupts
through
wide-open chasm
of opposed goals

clapping its
cacophonous clatter
a class
on a
collision course

some moments
bring luscious quietude
silent smiles
proud pleasure
just becoming
thoughtful

some
brief
moments
4. The Open Plain
(or struggling to stay out of the bog)

peace - n. 1. the normal, nonwarring condition of a nation, group of nations, or the world. 2. an agreement or treaty between warring or antagonistic nations, groups, etc., to end hostilities and abstain from further fighting or antagonism...3. a state of mutual harmony between people or groups, esp. in personal relations... 4. the normal freedom from civil commotion and violence of a community; public order and security...5. the cessation of or freedom from any strife or dissension. 6. freedom of the mind from any source of annoyance, distraction, anxiety, an obsession, etc.; tranquility; serenity.7. a state of tranquility or serenity. (Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1989, 1060)

A Different Kind of Peace

If I thought that I had established balance or even rapport with my students, then I was guilty of mis[sed]understanding in my hermeneutic inquiry. Once I had rid myself of my preconceptions, my past assumptions, did I think that I had encountered real and permanent understanding? Did I think I had created my own bog and that I could dry it up at will? Did I think that, once I had met my enemy face to face, I would attain an armistice? I believed for some time that the path to peaceful co-learning with my students was through their writing. I felt that the battle was fought in the oral discourse, in the public arena of the classroom. In writing, I felt the students would relate the self behind the public facade and the individual relationships would develop into general accord in the classroom. However, the ongoing discourses, written and oral, showed me that, by any definition of
peace, I did not have it in my classroom, and I did not have it within myself.

For Gadamer, human understanding involves a constant temporal process of revision; it is always finite, temporal, circular; an incomplete interpretation because of the existential temporal structure of human existence. (Gallagher, 1992, 62)

* * * * *

If fulfilled, the preconception is reinforced and continues to condition our understanding; if disappointed, the preconception is forced to undergo revision, which in turn continues to condition our understanding. (Gallager, 1992, 64)

It wasn’t long after my smugness over a successful novel assignment that I got stuck in a mire again. My old attitudes resurfaced, my preconceptions were reinforced.

The rosy glow through which I saw my class has darkened. I can see the petals limp and black at the edges fall on the floor like drops of blood. Someone is spilling blood. Someone must be wounded. I am wounded, saddened by this latest stab. (Journal, Nov. 93)

As I re-read this journal entry I wonder what happened to my stunning poppies. What were the poppies? Were they my students? My feelings about my students? My feelings about
the momentary rapport between my students and me? Taken in
the context of this new experience, the poppies represent a
temporal and fleeting delight covered by a rosy hue of warm
desire for it to last. But the rapport was not to be
constant. My students were yet to display a passion for
knowledge as Brian had in *Who Has Seen The Wind* (or the kind
of knowledge I wanted them to seek) and their peculiar
fervour might have just driven me out from under my blue
canopy to some barren prairie or back to the dying bog.

**Disturbing the Hegemony**

Chuck had come into the classroom that day in a
noticeable tension. He had not completed his
over-due assignments and I allowed him to sit in
the carrel at the back of the class to get caught
up. I was attempting to engage the class in a
discussion of events in the novel, *To Kill A
Mockingbird*, when peace was disrupted.

At some point, an airplane sailed halfway across
the classroom from Chuck’s carrell . . . I
generally find it difficult to get angry about
this sort of thing. I usually see it in a
humorous light . . . At that point they were still
"on track" (or so I thought).

Re-interpreting this incident, and trying to remind
myself of the discussion, I see a multitude of
interpretations. What was focus for the class? What was my
focus? What was the focus of some students? Others? There was more than one mild misde/mean/our, I think. I wanted them to consider the judgement of Boo's father as he sentenced Boo to fifteen years of confinement for prankish tricks with his comrades.

There I had Chuck secluded (or so I thought) in his carrell and the others ready (or so I thought) to be compassionate with me. What predisposed me to my feelings for Boo? I felt so sorry for Boo and his solitary confinement. Fifteen only when he was removed from the mainstream of life. I looked out at any of the soon-to-be fifteen-year-olds in front of me. I wanted them to imagine the magnitude of such a fate for themselves! Could they imagine?

There seemed to be a slight "squirmish" at the back of the class within the vicinity of Chuck's carrell. The class was becoming distracted.

A note, a piece of paper folded tightly four times, was lying on the floor. I stopped. All eyes turned to the back. I walked down the aisle and picked up the paper. The class grew silent and noisy at the same time. Someone jeered, "Yeah!" Someone else shouted, "Read it!" The whole class started to chant, "Read it. Read it. Read it." I was momentarily engaged in mob control. I turned and walked to the front of my room. I could have thrown it directly into the garbage. The thought crossed my mind. But I
didn’t. I opened the paper slowly, one fold at a time until I had the full notebook-size sheet suspended between me and my class. The class was absolutely silent. And I scanned the sheet very silently, my heart sinking as I looked at the obscene cartoon caricatures of two class members and the captioned comments beside them. Karla’s mother was depicted as a dog. Donald Lu (a very sullen, quiet boy who remains uninvolved and despondent in the middle front seat of the class) had been depicted with astute accuracy. A pig with a caption reading "Snort!" and the name "Karla" appeared at the bottom of the page. I could feel Chuck’s eyes turn to ice under his forelock. But I couldn’t see him. He remained in his carrell. (Journal Entry, Nov. ’93)

. . . everything is not beyond suspicion with respect to conversation. If the conversation of mankind, ideally conceived, ought to be free of hegemony, ought to lack hierarchy, and ought not to require credentials for participation, still, it is not difficult to discover that some voices dominate and others are excluded. (Gallager, 1992, 308)

This is clearly Foucault’s position with respect to the discourse of modern societies. Voices are excluded: the mad, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the minorities have very little if any voice where it counts. Conversation in reality is hegemonic . . . . (Gallager, 1992, 309)
Within normal discourse one can locate trust (good will) and consensus. In general terms, normal discourse tends toward reproduction; it operated within already accepted paradigms and language games. Abnormal discourse, or what Rorty calls "edifying conversation," involves a suspicion and incommensurability .... Abnormal discourse occurs when someone joins the ongoing conversation "who is ignorant of conventions or who sets them aside ...." (Gallager, 1992, 309-10)

When I re-interpret this episode in my English class, I think of my class discussion and the value of our literature study in a new light. Was I imposing a hierarchy of knowledge on our conversation? If so, is this what lost some of my students into enterprise of their own demise? Undoubtedly they had come to class with a set of their own preconceptions. What did I learn from this situation? What do I learn from this interpretation?

...if the teacher herself is to learn something through her teaching, there must be some kind of interchange between her understanding and her presentation. In that interchange the teacher's understanding might govern her presentation, or, in a special sense of discovery, her pedagogical presentation might lead her to a new understanding or at least open up to question her current understanding. (Gallagher, 1992, 37)

I had been trying to bring the class to accept my understanding of the oppressiveness of Boo Radley's father.
I interpreted Boo's circumstances from Scout's implied understanding of Atticus' insinuation that perhaps Boo had been dealt a severe blow of "injustice." My presentation was to hint at this by implication, by suggestion. My presentation was to make the suggestion and, through a series of questions, hope to take the students through a thought process that would lead them to the same understanding. But I had no idea what each of their preconceptions were. I suspected that some of my students might have been sympathetic to Boo's alienation. But now I see that I was only acting on my own suspicions; yet, where I suspected, I did not know what their suspicions were. Could I have allowed for them to express theirs? Some of them may not be able to see Boo as I saw him. Some of them still believed him to be their neighbourhood demon. Perhaps some of them identified with him. Now, in retrospect, my suspicions are confounded. I suspect my classroom talk, similar to my earlier described opening dialogue, fits Rorty's classification of "abnormal discourse" or "edifying conversation" where several of my students were ignorant of the ongoing conventions or merely set them aside.

From this point of distance, as I search for further understanding, I see that suspicion and curiosity battled for a forefront position amid the tension in the class. All conversation had ceased and instead of interchange we seemed to have retreated to our separate camps. The surge of
battle had erupted within me again and I re/call the desire to throw up my hands in defeat. Yet, instead of allowing myself a re/treat into passivity and disgust, I fought a cynicism to remain on a shared field of communication.

The cynicism is strongest when discussions fail, when the "culprit" gets away and the "jig" is up. Then am I most painfully aware that, despite my good intentions, I can't know for sure what my students really think. Sometimes students offer pre-programmed responses in an attempt to give me what they think I want. Sometimes they rebel and do the opposite.
The Jig is Up

The classroom scene
is a
set up

framed
to corner
the culprit
who sneaks
into a daydream
ignoring
clues

under cover
of
benevolence

the teacher
[s] talks
testing

	
teasing tenets

like
tentacles
to
snare
the discussion

detecting
false evidence

learning
Of course, I did not tell the class what the paper revealed, but I said I felt very sad and I think my whole being reflected that feeling. I spoke of my desire to have honest sharing and respect for one another and I told them that the note had revealed a bitterness and hatred that I hoped could be replaced by consideration and caring about each other.

I turned back to the reading assignment. Back to the novel—a novel full of bitterness and hatred and wonder at the existence of cruelty in the human heart. But soon, the bell rang.

Chuck came to the front of the room with his writing. He had one short piece about how he could not identify with the feelings toward the father in the story "A Penny in the Dust" and another piece that was not completed. In the short piece he talked about not having a good role model for a father. He mentioned having an uncle to whom he had been close but that he had lost him too because his uncle had been murdered! Not much else was discussed. I questioned him about his uncle and he said that he did not know the specifics but that his uncle had been killed downtown somewhere.

I then asked him about the note. He denied having anything to do with it. He said he could not divulge the information about the authorship of
the note but he swore he did not "write" it. I just responded that I did not expect him to "tell on" his friends and gave him the opportunity to finish his second piece at home. He thanked me for that and left.

When I looked at the note a second time, I felt convinced that Chuck, in fact, was the author. Had he not snorted at Karla so vulgarly the first day in this class? I believe at this point that he lied to me and I am astounded with the coolness with which he looked straight at me and denounced, without a trace of guilt or any other emotion that I could detect, having anything to do with it. Now I have a dilemma. If I let it go, I let Chuck think that I am a "push over," someone he would not respect. If I tell him that I disbelieve him, then he will just deny it anyway, see me as someone else out there who does not like him, and probably become obstreperous and counterproductive to say the least. It is clear to me that I need time to think.

But, as I think a little more, I begin to doubt myself. Chuck said that he was not a "good" artist. Maybe he did not author these drawings after all. Paul Ledge, on the other hand, can draw. Paul Ledge is quiet. He also sits at the back of the room. He does not write much and when he does, he does not reveal much about himself. However, he did do a wonderful book cover for his mini-novel assignment. Could Paul have been solely responsible or is this a collaborative effort? It looked like Chuck's printing.
I feel like a detective, not an English teacher. Does it matter? What does it have to do with the goals of my English course. Here I am caught again in the middle of a squirmish. I struggle internally trying to determine whether to ignore the whole episode and get on with the novel. I have to get on with the novel. I have to concentrate on their learning. But this classroom scene, as the hidden agenda, perhaps unplanned, attacks the underpinnings of the syllabus. It seems I cannot stay off the battlefield for long. Perhaps I can write. (Journal Entry, Dec. '93)
Discord

A shadow darkened the rosy glow
and cast a pall over the happy air
Heavy silence weighted the focus
down to where it lay

Sensitivity dead and buried
under the token remembrance
of a good-bye note

I can almost touch blood red petals
limp and tarnished black at the edge
bleeding their dead rosiness
through hurtful slurs

Someone laughs at the cruelty
pierces the harmony
with a sour note

But I refuse to let this discord
become a destructive din

Somewhere
someone is playing a violin
Can those pure melodious sounds
ever soothe the cacophony here?
The metaphor with which I described the occurrence may seem somewhat overstated. I wonder. The bleeding is figurative; the petals are symbolic; the glow was a feeling. It is all so nebulous, and intangible that, if I do not anchor it with some "concrete" image, I cannot capture the mood; I cannot grasp the moment and bring it into focus, take it in my hands and turn it around to view it from all sides. (Journal Entry, Nov. 1993)

Trust

Yes, the day before, with my block F Grade 11 English class, my students had graced my classroom with insightful and poignant dramatic presentations about Holden in Catcher in the Rye. I am always in awe when these fresh minds get their chance to hold each other in the palm of their hands. They perform so well! They are so sensitive and clear in the understanding they reveal. And they share honestly. Yesterday, Jerry, a student of the violin, brought his violin to class so that his group’s skit could have a musical background. The clarity of his bow across the strings was cleansing. I felt the whole class let go and give themselves to the performance. The skit was good in itself, but Jerry’s extra gift brought us all together in perfect momentary appreciation. I invited him to play a complete piece and we sat deeper in our seats to receive the
moment, together. After the class, the teacher next door came to thank me (or Jerry) for bringing a dimension of surprise and pleasure to her class as well.

These students are two years older than the students in my grade nine class. What is it that happens over a two year time span that seems to rid the classroom of the charlatans, paraders, dissenters? Are they still there, silent, better socialized to the point that they don’t dare break rank with desultory heckles? Or have they found a purer focus? It’s reasonable to expect them to be more able to focus and take responsibility for their work. Perhaps it is reasonable for them to feel more respectful of the entire class, and the lesson, now that they have been systemized in secondary school for three years instead of one. If that is the case and this change is due only to time and maturation, why do I bother? I should skulk back to my past position of teaching only senior grades. I should admit that I have lost the battle. I just can’t wage it with the grade nines. I do not think I am sufficiently armed for their battle.

Reflection, not only detective work, brings discovery. A different idea occurs to me about the change I see in my classes at the grade eleven level. Certainly, maturation, time and, dare I think, education have smoothed the edges and deepened the understanding. Students are more aware, more able to grasp abstract concepts and, generally, more sensitive. Where are the dissenters? Where are the desultory remarks? Have
they all vanished through maturation and systemization? I do not think so. I think that dissension is no longer prevalent because the grade nine dissenters are no longer with us. Somewhere between grade nine and eleven, students like Chuck and Paul drop out. These are students at risk. Without a solid support structure propping them up through the treacherous years of early adolescence, they go down in defeat. The battle is fought on many fronts not so readily seen from my perspective.

No, I have never won the arms race against grade nines. Put another way, I seem to be lacking in classroom management techniques to quell their urges and at least make them keep themselves in check. It seems as if I grant a kind of permission that allows them to take the risk. Maybe there is no risk in my class because I do not fight back. I do not "blow them away" with can[n]ons. I do not send them to the office. I do not keep them after school. I do not want them to fail. I do not want to "whip them into shape". Those are tactics I know others have used.

(Journal Entry, Jan. '94)

Down with the Despots!

Now I want to make peace with this concept of hegemony in conversation. Is classroom discussion a legitimate conversation or is it not? If I assume a hegemonic position, or if my students presume that I hold such a position, can I ever expect to make classroom talk real conversation? This is where I fight my battle; this is the
disputed territory between me and the grade nine students. The "me" that fights is their preconceptions of me; the "me" I offer is a mixture of who I want to be and who I think I should be and who is shaped by my past conceptions. The many voices that lurk behind our talking faces originate from other settings.

I think of the experience my class had on a trip to our school library. We had read *A Night to Remember* and, after having considered the enormous waste of lives and the individual stories of courage and stoicism, we focussed on the reporting techniques that had been used to gather the details of the disaster. Our library research project into disasters throughout history had been carefully designed by me and the librarian.

*My trip with them to the library got off to an unsettling start. On the way down to the library I was stopped by some students in another class. By the time I had answered their questions, my own students had arrived in the library and come under the responsibility of the librarian in his domain, not mine. It had only been a matter of minutes, but this change of venue had proved too great for Paul to handle. The librarian had asked the class to sit down at the conference area. Paul either ignored his request or did not hear him. He had travelled beyond the conference area and had headed upstairs (I guess just to see who was there). The librarian did not give him a second chance. He was already sending him out (kicking
him out) by the time I arrived! What?? What has possibly happened in this short period of time for me to lose Paul? I wanted him to be part of this. I had hopes that he would enjoy this assignment. I knew that he would feel more comfortable about it than any of the others that had troubled him so much. I was upset but quickly caught Paul on his way out the door and told him to go back to the classroom and wait for me to come up there to talk to him.

Then I went back to the group to watch as the librarian introduced the topic of disaster and attempted to engage in some question/answer type of discussion. What followed was even more disconcerting. There were my students, my precious proteges, looking awkward and uncomfortable. The librarian asked a question and Neil, quick off the mark, flung back an answer. It wasn't rude or disrespectful; it was just too quick and not according to the librarian's own sense of order. Clearly his sense of order was much different than mine. He immediately scolded Neil for not putting up his hand and for breaking the rules of propriety, the rules of power and authority. He informed them that they must not speak until spoken to and that no one was to speak without putting up her/his hand and waiting a turn that was acknowledged by him. My poor students! I felt embarrassed because they were being judged as unruly. I felt embarrassed because of their discomfort. They were so restrained. I could see their anger. I knew they felt demeaned and insulted. I was surprised that this librarian dare speak to my students in such a disrespectful
fashion. I felt frustrated that he had denied Paul the right to take part. I was angry that he had overstepped his authority and interfered with my class. Did I have a right to feel this? My class was in his domain. There were different rules now. Needless to say, the discussion period fell flat. My usually boisterous students sat quiet, sullen and unresponsive. Not one of them answered his questions. So, he told them his answers and sent them away to find topics.

(Journal Entry, Mar. 94)

The Reins of Control

I search my memory for past teacher models who ruled a classroom as a despot. I had experienced one or two in my school years, but not many. I knew about some teachers who apparently ran a "tight ship." Yes, this "teaching" style was not new to me, but I had never felt the effrontery in this way before. There was something protective in me that had come from wanting to nurture these students, wanting to battle myself and my feelings in order to reach them. I had seen their spontaneity and free spirit. I had embraced them and decided to like them. I did not want them to grab for power, control and domination so I did not want to model it for them. These students had angered me and disappointed me, but they had excited me and encouraged me as well. I could never forget that.
It had been such a long time since I had been able to collect my thoughts about this class. Returning to them, after Christmas break, I could feel the distance. They were connected by unravelling yarn, the loose weave unhooking itself and falling in kinked, tangled pieces. It was after the Christmas break, a month ago, when we reconvened that I found it most difficult to gather them together—no tightly knit group here—no woven fabric cloaking the same heart. The shreds and fragments still hung loosely together, but something had weakened the fabric. Was it just the break, or was it my energy level that was too low to pick up the stitches and continue to knit and perl? (Journal Entry, Feb. ’94)

Trying to understand this feeling of disconnectedness in retrospect is difficult. There were some loose ends to pick up after the holidays; some assignments to return, some refocussing about writing to be done. I think everyone had to be brought together. One dominant mood of sadness prevailed as the whole school was in shock with the news that a very popular boy had been killed in a car accident over the holidays. The grade nines were not closely affected but they all knew the boy who had been in the band, on the student council and a straight A, model student. That first week the trauma counsellors were in the school and all classes had taken time to express their sadness. It is difficult to say what kind of effect this loss had on the grade nines, but generally the holiday spirit was dampened and instead of welcoming everyone back with cheery chatter of holiday fun, we all talked about the
meaninglessness of such a death. The energy that otherwise would have been positive and fresh was not there. But to dwell on the sadness was not helpful. Clearly the students needed to get on with their school life. I needed to collect myself and get on with it. I had had a particularly tiring "holiday" and had returned to work for a rest. My home was still full of house guests and it seemed that preparation time and marking time were non-existent. I managed to direct myself to a loose plan for the unit on poetry: hand-out the texts. Teaching poetry can be tightly structured--line by line analysis, scanning, identifying devices, writing from models. Each class a tight lesson of read, analyze, model, write, share. That could be it. Maybe I needed that structure. Maybe that would be the approach I would take. I dug out my old folders full of poetry worksheets (what an anathema!), handout definitions, examples of different poem types, the ballad, the epic, the narrative, the ode, sonnet, lyric, haiku, blank verse, free verse. It was all there, in the folders, but it was not in my heart. For some reason I could not get excited about teaching simile and metaphor. Yet, I love the compressed comparison, the abstract juxtaposition! Where was my spirit? Was it the low energy or was it the inability to deal with that kind of structure? Now that I had written my own poetry, I did not want to take an analytical, academic approach to studying poetry. Instead, I wanted the poetry unit to be an experience and an enjoyment. In an oral review with the devices on the overhead, I ascertained that somebody had already taught them
the devices anyway—at least simile, metaphor, alliteration and onomatopoeia. We could pick up personification as it came out. Imagery would just happen, I felt sure. As for the others—metonymy and synecdoche—this was, after all, only grade nine and hyperbole they had already mastered.

So...without a delineated plan, a unit with goals and methods predesigned, I handed out the text. It was a royal-blue and sea-green hardback. If the students looked carefully, they would see sky and water, sand and a sea-shell. If they had it pointed out, it could be a conceptually inviting cover. As for the rest of it, I was dismayed to find this "new" edition to be a rather drab and, seemingly, boring presentation. Apart from some pen and ink type sketches on the introductory page of each section, the poems rely on the appearance of the printed page, arrangement in black and white, to draw the reader in. Would this work for grade nine roustabouts, grade nine boys, in particular, raised on video games, sports channel and violent cartoons? What would this two-dimensional presentation do for them? What did I expect from a poetry text? The very label, textbook, might have prepared me: canned poetry, pre-cooked, pre-arranged and preserved, ready for the shelf!

Most of my students did not take time to look at the cover, but since the books were brand new, with an "open-me first" kind of appeal, they didn't waste time getting into them. Something in the presentation had eluded me. Something in the
poems themselves. Something...? What was it? The energy that erupted in the classroom of students with this book in their hands was both amazing and scary. "Oh...look at this one, page 3!" Ha! The questions are longer than the poem. Three words!" "Yeah, well look at this one, page 70." "Mrs. Wittman, read the one on page 146." "Can I read this one, page 45?" "Hey, there's an ice-cream cone in here!" I don't ever recall describing students taking to a book as boys to a hockey rink, but the analogy seems to fit here. What a rush! What end-to-end action! What a breakaway! As I watched the scramble, I began to worry about a pile up. There didn't seem to be any rules. (Journal Entry, Jan. '94)

Yes, their reaction was both amazing and scary. Never had I seen them drawn to something with such electric energy. I wasn't sure I could plug into the current and feel that charged myself. It felt like good energy and I wanted to keep it flowing. Could I? I needed time to reflect, time to plan. I began to write. The hockey metaphor would not work. It was a momentary feeling. What prevailed was the incredible energy. I could still feel the pulsing as I came home.
Electricity in the Poetry Class

electrical charges
transmit impulses
fly....flare....fuse!
moments of direct current
hum along charged lines
of poetic discourse

seconds of silence
sing harmonic thoughts
into intermittent spaces
between

demands  reactions  examples
that
heat up
the conductor
of
free read poetry session
where
impulses surge and flash
converge
to
calm
collected
concentration
before
interference
charges again
with
interjection
gesticulation
wonder confusion humour

What spontaneity set off
Such electrical fireworks in dynamic display?
What calm will trace
The thrill of such a show?
(Should this overload blow a fuse,
will we reset the current?)

O, ohms, volts, amperes,
Measure your wattage here!
Select your conduits carefully
Insulate against shock
So some elusive physic
Can keep this energy charged.
Working and Learning Together

Oh, the stress of teaching! I'm sure those not in the field, particularly the field of teaching English, would scoff at my losing sleep over the excitement of my class. But, I had become intensely connected to them. During that poetry session, I truly stood back in amazement. I still remember the feeling of awe and disbelief as I watched them jump and dive after each new poem, find their own places to call out their requests, and read their selections. I remember feeling nervous. This was something I had not designed and something over which I had no control, except to stop it and I did not want to do that. I gave the period over to them. I read when they asked me to, but, most of the time, I simply watched. I knew that we could not continue in that fervour, but I was afraid of "blowing it" altogether and losing something wonderful. My synapses were so scintillated that night that I tossed and turned with their images, with their exclamations.

I decided to go into the next class with a few fun poetry games, the kind which I had played in my own graduate writing class. They could experiment with one-word shape poems, with the letters of the words ping pong, with the letters u_and i. When my graduate colleagues and I had cranked our creative imaginations over these games, we were surprised at the perspectives, themes and images that could be compacted into the suggestibility of
a couple of letters. I wondered how my students would do? Would this be one way of keeping the positive energy alive? Well, they tried it out. Some of them protested mildly and wanted to have some more latitude than the constraint of using a restricted number of letters, but I controlled this element and laid down the rules. So within the confines of ping pong, they drew their ping pong tables and illustrated the ball being swiped by the paddle. Some went so far as to show the competition and the winning side. The shape poems with flower names and animal games were fun, cute and pretty, but the greatest success came from the poems they wrote with the letters u and i. Implicit in the confines of those two letters is a relationship, so I suppose I should not be too surprised at the soft and gentle poetry that they created. And yet, the spectrum of sensibilities in that class ranged from fourteen-year-old romantics and idealists yearning for love (the sleeping beauties waiting for their prince charmings) to the burly, bombastic crudites I have previously called my "warriors" fighting for no altruistic cause (perhaps they are indeed the frog princes after all). Without exception, they all wrote love poetry, gentle, sensitive and idealistic! When I told them I was surprised, they unabashedly explained that I should not be because, after all, love was the only thing that ever counted in their lives. I was now not only amazed but puzzled. Had I thought I understood Paul? Did I think that Neil had such a hardened shell that he did not ever address those kinds of needs? Chuck, I knew, did, in his writing, but not ever in public. There they all were, al
twenty three of them, no splinter groups denying or sabotaging. They all were firmly and quietly affirming their certainty of one value in life: love. Could I keep this going for more classes yet? What did I want them to get out of this poetry unit? I wanted them to write. I reminded myself of my original goal in this English class: it was to develop thinking skills through writing—to help them report, describe, narrate, analyze, conclude, theorize, speculate, wonder, create, problem-solve—to help them along their course as thinking individuals by stimulating thoughts through writing. I wanted them to write poetry and to respond to poetry in a sensitive thoughtful way. Well, then, that would be it. They would read and write poetry.

The next few days we relied heavily on the text to guide us in our study. We looked at poems as they were categorized by their form and structure. The poetry text presents poems according to how the poet has used language to express images and meanings. The text illustrates that this use of language is part of the creative process, not just an outward expression of the creative process. When we read poems with similes, the students tried to describe something using a set of similes. Their poems were fun and some were surprisingly insightful and effective.

We looked at metaphor, personification, irony, tone. I felt the students needed something simple, not too abstract in its concepts. As concrete as a metaphor can be, the juxtaposition and suggested comparison still eludes a lot of
students at this age. I felt the narrative might
give them the impetus to write their own stories
in poetic form. As straightforward as it seems,
the concept of narrative as opposed to descriptive
in poetry was not easily clarified by the
students' poems. I felt baffled and a little
frustrated when students brought their work and
asked, "Is this a narrative?" My assumption was
that the narrative was the easiest of writing or
speaking styles. What happens next? And then
what? As the students say, "He goes and then she
goes." Why were they having so much trouble? I
could see from their uncertainty that even for a
narrative they worried about form and image. They
were not sure whether their stories revealed an
insight or truth. Just because the details
proceed from one thing to the next does not add up
to a narrative poem.

We read Margaret Atwood's "Game after Supper" and
other narrative poems for them to see some clear
statement or even lesson learned that can come out
of a narrative. When their writing session in
class had not provided enough time for a finished
poem, they were assigned homework to develop,
change, revise or rewrite, but to come to class
the next period with a finished narrative poem.
Some English teachers like to have control over
the authenticity of the writing by requiring all
writing to be done in the class. I do not follow
this precept very committedly. I hardly follow
this precept at all. I know that I write my best
when I can seclude myself and get into my own
feelings. The classroom's lack of solitude and
quietude is definitely not conducive to a lot of

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creative, sensitive thought.

Why, then, would I impose an unreal writing environment on the student? I also trust my students, maybe somewhat naively, to want to learn and grow in their abilities, to want to own their work and to accept credit because it is due. There is not much glory in getting a good grade if it is for someone else's work. Most of my students work hard and take pride in their own accomplishments. The grade is good but better is their sense of worth. So... they wrote most of their poems at home. The day I assigned the narrative, I told them that I would write one too. At this point in time I loved this class. I still felt excited and positive. I wanted to write about each of them individually, but I had to admit I did not know them all. I had to admit that individually I may not be able to write a poem that I would want to share with a particular student. I love the class and its challenges. I am determined to provide a positive learning experience for everyone. I am trying to like Neil and Paul and Tom and Chuck and Eric and Basil and Isaac and Dee. As I tell my own children, it's not that I do not like them, it's just that, sometimes, I do not like what they say or do. How could I write personal poems to share with them? That would cross some kind of boundary that perhaps should not be crossed. Besides, if I did write poems more perceptive of some and not others, it might show some kind of favouritism. It is not favouritism; it is just that some students reveal more of themselves than others do. My exuberance about each and every one of them
could not be displayed on a personal level. I had wanted so badly to reach each one personally, to let each one know that he or she can be the subject of poetry, of the noblest form of expressive language, that each one of them is a noble subject! But I can get emotionally carried away. I deferred to professional distance, time and expediency and wrote a poem to the class as a whole. Even then, I let my focus settle on my warriors. But, then, they do shape this class. (Journal Entry, Feb.'94)
A Complicated Lot

I'll tell you a story about Block G
Where my students often perplex me.
They love to laugh, create a din.
They offer jokes to my chagrin.

Why can't I see what makes them think?
Why won't they tell me, clearly, in ink?
Their words...they throw them at the air.
Sometimes I catch them in despair.

And, then, in failure, I often wonder
Should I tear their jokes asunder?
Why do they sit in tight little groups
and refuse to jump my crafted hoops?

No serious personal heartfelt comments
about adult philosophy and life's laments.
Instead, they cling to their own mirth,
A happy lot amid their dearth

of video games and T.V. cartoons
and stunts attributed to such goons
as Bart Simpson and even the Terminator
or they read King and other germinators
of dark and dangerous and gruelling scenes
of violence and death and deeds of fiends.

Where are the simple, young and innocent
minds that dream of moments pleasant
like love and friendship and family fun,
beauty and truth and heroic deeds done?

I suspect that deep inside it's there;
I saw it yesterday; they let me share
their delight in poems of frivolous thought,
but unsuspecting, they were caught.

Between the letters i and u,
they revealed a thing or two.
Every verse of theirs comprised the knowledge
of basic truths not learned in college.

Between u and i, I saw a lot
about life and love and the human plot.
So even though they still perplex me,
I find hope, not despair, in their complexity!
This poem was fun to write with its Hudibrastic
doggerel. The imposed rhyme scheme and iambic rhythm helped
me satirize myself (with kindness) and compliment them at
the same time. Finding the thoughts and feelings was not a
new discovery. What was interesting was having the
framework find the expression of the feelings, fixing the
feeling to the structure, attaching feeling to form. Using
the structure to create the lines had been the discovery.
Could I share that process with them? Hmm...I was so happy
to be able to express my honest feelings in a positive way.
It would be taking a big risk to share this poem with a lot
of them. The risk was not only in what I was revealing to
them, but in how I was saying it to them. Would I set
myself up for target practice? Give them license to be even
sillier? Allow them to see that my poetry was not any
better than theirs, or conversely that their poetry was
better than mine. "That doesn't even rhyme!" "Those lines
have a different beat!" I had purposely written the poem
with an aabb rhyme scheme and a mix of iambic and anapestic
rhythm so that it would skip along, sing-song fashion. I
thought it would be a simpler form for them to read. More
importantly, I wanted to show them that I was vulnerable to
the process as well. Knowing this possible principle of
learning that was inherent with my sharing the poem with the
class, I decided to risk exposing my own absurdity.
Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience
the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rime
to a high wire of his own making
(Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in Theme & Image, 179)

I made enough copies for each member of the class
and the next day, when I asked for the submission
of their narrative poems, I handed mine over to
them. Interestingly, they responded in a way very
like their initial response to the poetry text.
They took immediately to it--no first silent read-
no reflection. Immediately they started reading
it out loud, just one or two at first but by the
end of the first line when Neil read "Block G" and
then said, "Hey, what block is this? Is this
about us?", the rest of the class sang out the
lines together. There was that energy again.
First, all the class, then just Basil reading a
verse, and then over to Dee, back to Neil, over to
Eric, then back to Basil and Chuck. It sounded as
if I was back on the hockey rink with these kids!
I was thrilled about their choral reading. What
fun! After they finished, however, there was no
comment. The class was momentarily silent. There
was no smart-alecky remark as I had feared. There
was no thanks. Nothing. So I simply talked over
their quiet and told them that I was truly
interested in reading their narratives, and if
they had given them the same sincere efforts as
they had with their previous poems, I would be
pleased. We went on to share some other poems that I had collected for group sharing and responding.

The response to my poem was not a let-down. It had not fallen flat. What had I expected? I had worried about ridicule. I had certainly not wanted praise. I guess I wanted someone to acknowledge the relationship, but no one did—at that point. Maybe they needed time to think, because, later, in a personal response journal I read some positive reflections on the poem. These individuals talked about the element of students in the class that create the "goon-like" atmosphere. Yet, they also saw that the poem dealt with the generation gap that they experience between themselves and their parents. I felt gratified that they had read my feelings. (Journal Entry, Feb. 1994)

Once again, I felt a tentative peace on this open plain of mutual sharing. They took risks, exposed their vulnerability underneath the armour and so did I. We shared our poems. I only offered them one more with its didactic message.
Outside Inside

Smiles on the outside
invite a closer look
where gestures from
an enigmatic Mona Lisa
turn pleasure into
perplexing
puzzling
poesy

pouting protests
from generations of students
miss the secret
message

under magnification
it's a mystery

What does it mean?
How does it work?

wipe off the outward smile
look inside
there tentative teeth
bite off bits
of simile and metaphor
for a quick chew

but find the allusion
harder to swallow

Relax Don’t Worry Be Happy!

Poetry doesn’t want to be dissected
or digested in bits and pieces

Ingest it whole
the outside
smile
enigma
and all

taste
the art and music
of language
it can feed your soul!
This poetry unit provided the most gratifying time I spent with these grade nine students. I had originally hoped that our struggles would be eased through their writing. I had meant their interpretive and reflective writing. Sadly, I did not find reward there. Most of the students, particularly the problematic ones, were resistant to that kind of writing. Either they could not reflect or they refused to allow me to see that part of them. Yet, in a different way, it was, indeed, the writing that brought us together. It was through the poetry that we shared a closer rapport, on an open plain and under the blue canopy of a peaceful prairie sky!

There is, here, the issue of the nature of writing and the nature of breath and the arcs of family resemblance that bind text and breath and author and topic and the semantic-etymologic buzz and bump and humus, "winding around forgotten syntax." (Jardine, 1992, 111)

My students worked on the creation of their own poetry anthologies where they had to compile a variety of poems. They read and selected poems from published poets. They organized them into categories of their own choosing and they wrote personal responses to several individual poems. The most exciting part of the work was in the inclusion of their own poems in the anthology. These poems were accompanied by explanations of some important incentive in the writing of the poems; as well, students illustrated some of the poems. These anthologies engaged their imagination,
their skill with language and their creativity. Their poems were indeed the writing I had longed for.

The rhythm of a song or a poem rises, no doubt, in reference to the pulse and breath of the poet. But that is too specialized an accounting; it rises also in reference to daily and seasonal—and surely even longer—rhythms in the life of the poet and in the life that surrounds him. The rhythm of a poem resonates with these larger rhythms that surround it; it fills its environment with sympathetic vibrations. Rhyme, which is a function of rhythm, may suggest this sort of resonance; it marks the coincidence of smaller structures with larger ones, as when the day, the month, and the year all end at the same moment. Song, then, is a force opposed to speciality and to isolation. It is the testimony of the singer's inescapable relation to the earth, to the human community, and also to tradition. (Wendell Berry in Jardine, 1992, 112)

The open plain of poetry allowed me to confirm my distance from my bog. I had indeed travelled across a rugged terrain and engaged in many battles. My teaching land was a metaphorical plain on which I located myself, but my movement about that land was vectorially determined by the forces I encountered. This poetry unit directed me in all its magnitude to that peaceful plain, but, through my growing understanding, I knew I would not stay there for long.
The poetry was but one part of the course; we were a diverse and complicated group. We would continue to talk, to challenge, to resist, and we would continue to wear our public selves.

A New Understanding of Power

If I accept Foucault’s view that conversation in reality is hegemonic, then I feel that there is no possibility for me to win my battle with these grade nines. Indeed, the struggles that abound in any oral discourse in the classroom seem to be all about power and control. My students either submit to my position of power, challenge it or rebel against it. Amongst themselves there are some voices that dominate and others that are excluded. How, then, can I make peace with this dilemma? I want to establish rapport and have discussions free from suspicion. Rorty’s concept of abnormal and normal discourse leads me to work toward a degree of commensurability where we can communicate within a set of conventions that we all can agree upon. It certainly seems easier with the senior grades. Perhaps their proximity to adulthood makes them less suspicious of my power, and also makes them surer in their own voices so that they do not feel the need to struggle for power so intensely.

Whatever I have learned about my grade nine
battlefield, I know this now. I have established a new perspective. My sense of being bogged down, of battling to get out, is now a sense of not being stuck, but of being in constant movement. There are many possibilities, many situations, many interpretations. The best I can hope for is some meeting, some moments of contact and mutual understanding. Some impressions and insights that will last as guides to further understandings.

I think now about the difference between the "truths" or real selves I thought would be revealed to me through the writing and the selves revealed to me in the oral discourse. Of course there is a difference. But it still has to do with hegemony. The public and common confrontation of power as I represent it in the classroom is different than the private and individual interchange with my "power" in a writing assignment. I wield heavier-handed power there. I levy a grade, make a judgment, condemn and sentence. The power I presume (or they presume me) to have in the classroom is at the same time less shaped and more defined: an easier, less threatening target.
learning

i felt the bog
in a spongy mist
i could not see

my own resistance
to learn

& other
resistance fighters
around that bog

cried their discontent

on all sides

until I gave up
my resistance
and embraced
the learner
within me
5. The Warriors

Taking off the Armour

I think over where I have been: the tanglement of the bog, the ruggedness of the battlefield, the clearness of the open plain. I find the golden plain in the working classroom where newly acquired knowledge, loss of ignorance and shared understanding, blesses us with growth and learning. As I continue to strive for some visible and tangible ground, I see through my battle metaphor the dynamic, the growth, the fighting spirit to confront the bog, to stand on it and meet my warriors face to face. I decide that most battles, once they are acknowledged, are fought out in the open. They are noisy and clamorous, not secretive ambush. I have been wanting to claim the plain, gain the territory, without allowing the battle. But now I realize, even as I fight for it, I have to share the battle.

My blue canopy is no longer just a lure. I erect it at will and know its purpose in calm control. It is like an ocean breeze that cools my synapses and distances me for reflection. I do not "see red" and react, even though my "poppies flare." I would not like to see them growing in some kind of imaginary Flanders Field—dead even in memory. I want them to live in celebration of battles that are mutually won, with all of us surviving. There must be room
on this plain for all of us. We must lay down our armour, expose ourselves, take risks and be kind—fight together, for a common cause, our own learning, our own growth.

As I present my warriors, here, I become more entangled in my own armour and attempt to take it off. Perhaps I can only take off mine; maybe, hopefully, in doing so, I can allow my warrior/students to shed some of theirs.

This class continues to challenge me and, although there have been some positive times (the mini-novel, discussions around To Kill A Mockingbird, the poetry classes), there has also been much concern and frustration on my part. My frustration is around the "warriors." They refuse to surrender and, yet, I do not want to conquer them. What I want is a "truce," some sort of peace treaty that allows them to retain their spirit, but not step over the bounds of respect for others. There are just a few of them now. Basil, Chuck, and Isaac seem to have a conscious awareness of when they have to restrain themselves. In fact, the dynamic with Chuck has changed altogether. He seems to be quite alone these days. He continues to write reflectively and with a sense of pain, but he does not seem to seek notoriety in the class. Basil has settled down and does not seem to get too carried away. Neil, Eric, Paul and sometimes Sam seem incorrigible. Eric and Sam are silly and love the supposed acceptance of the big guys, Neil and Paul. But both Neil and Paul are menacing. If I look hard, I can determine that both Neil and Paul
have made some progress. Their percentage grades have improved since the last reporting period. Neil is writing with more awareness of his audience and more control over his urges to shock and appall. I still don't think that his writing is genuine, but he seems to have learned that he should "tow the line" and write with a modicum of decency. Paul, too, is within the bounds of respectability. (Journal Entry, Dec. 1993)

Neil

The very first student in this class to draw my attention was Neil Ritchie. Neil is a burly character. Built like a tractor, squat and strong, he throws his weight around with guffaws and snappy comebacks. He's big, but he has a ridiculous giggle, high and shrill, that breaks the class into gales of laughter even if they don't think his actual remarks are funny. His whole demeanour creates an impact. But I think he really means no harm. He is just foolish, and something other than careful thought seems to direct his actions. Other descriptions of him have ranged from "sexist," "racist," to "mean" and "ignorant." A strong condemnation for someone so young and silly.

My concern about Neil is that I might be too forgiving and too kind. His first writing, "Secrets I want to know/tell" reveal some peculiar sensitivity. He writes that he saved a dog from drowning last summer. However, he will not describe the situation or his feelings about it.
When pressed for greater details, he refuses to reveal any more and expresses regret that he has told as much as he had. Subsequent writings have been the odd few lines here or there and he still has not handed in a piece on "Fathers". It is not quite happening with Neil...yet. (Journal Entry, Nov. '93)

NEIL

a loud mouthy roar
announces the feat
and bellows with belches
the spoils of the kill
and yet, the beast, unsated
hungers for more

What will it take
to fill such a big maw
already so full
of himself?
Not a very pretty picture. What does it say about Neil? What does it say about my attitude to Neil? I haven't captured his silly giggle. I clearly have expressed my sense of failure in reaching him. My poem in its ugliness really depicts Neil's own unsatisfied needs. He does not relish his accomplishments. It seems as if they are most ungratifying as he bellows and belches. My question shows me that he is only substituting his own blustering for an emptiness he feels. It is my responsibility as a teacher to answer my last question. But what will it take? I must return to his "Secrets" assignment and ask for another revision. I must collect his writing on "Fathers". It is not that I want to know his deepest secrets; it is that I believe if I can help him discover himself in his writing, if I can help him validate his feelings and take some risks, then he can clear the way for learning and growth. (Journal Entry, Nov. '93)

A re-read of my journal entry raises the challenge of hermeneutics. Oh-ho! So I thought my poem revealed clearly Neil's unsatisfied needs, did I? A distanced look now shows me that his poem more likely reveals my own unsatisfied need: my great gaping need to quiet him, meld him into some refined, rule-obeying academe. He had the "smarts" for it, but he didn't have the demeanour. I come value-laden into the classroom and set out to "teach" values. Can I? Should I? I do not value the macho, braggadocio demonstrated by Neil. I do not value his sexist or his racist remarks.
My classroom is my battlefield for such foes.

Neil's poetry assignment was a pleasant surprise. He had used Norton's Anthology as a resource and he chose older poems, John Donne, Wordsworth, Milton. His choice of poems indicates an innate ability to grasp complex intellectual concepts. The resource also indicates that he did not have to look too far afield for good examples of literature. Although picking Norton's Anthology off the family bookshelf does not take much effort, it is obvious that, amid the 1000 or so entries in the collection, he made some personal and thoughtful choices. More than that, he responded in writing to these poems with intelligence and sensitivity. Neil's poetry "project" was exciting to read. His efforts were serious. The poetry he wrote was surprising and somewhat disturbing. In one poem, his narrative, he tells of his walk around a park. The hair on my spine stood on end when the very same words I had chosen to describe him in my poem were the words he chose to describe himself. I felt nasty and cruel in my initial description of Neil; yet, here he was using the same description. The poem indicated a slight embarrassment or self-consciousness of his own behaviour. Maybe, he is beginning to change.

Another poem, however, represents an attitude that I find difficult to deal with in the class—an attitude of racial intolerance. In this poem, Neil questions the concept of "native land" when he looks around himself and does not understand
the language spoken by his "compatriots." I do not know whether Neil is "racist" or not. Some other teachers have described his comments as "racist." I don't know whether he thinks it is de rigueur to make "racist" comments, but I have heard him "joke" about Chinese stereotypes and black stereotypes. His remarks are off-handed and a cautioning look on my part usually drops the matter. The poem, however, was blatant in its expression of Neil's discomfort or confusion about his position amid so many "immigrants," non-native speakers. Curiously, Neil's own father speaks with an accent. (Journal Entry, Feb. '94)

I hope still to look at racism in an investigative and structured way in the classroom. At this point, however, I do not want to make an issue with Neil about his personal attitudes. Generally, his poems reveal an exciting intelligence, a clever ability with words. The question gets bigger: Why is he not using his talents to some positive end? Why doesn't he write? Why has he chosen to rebel and subvert rather than to achieve and excel? Neil both baffles me and annoys me. I don't know that I will ever know why Neil is the way he is. It is not my purpose as an English teacher to psycho-analyze, but I question whether I can really facilitate learning if I do not take each student as an individual and relate naturally and honestly with each one. I would not be honest if I denied being curious about Neil. It would be unnatural for me not to care about him as a person. But the more I think about him, the more I care that he is
the way he is, and the more frustrated I feel, the more annoyed I get. These feelings fester just below the surface of my smiling professional face as I relate to the class. Lurking behind my mask of pleasant tolerance is a desire to take Neil and shake the nonsense out of him. Just below my distanced rapport is a desire to reach out gently and smooth his rough edges. I can still see the baby fat, the mischievous laughing eyes, hear the silly giggle. But does he know that I can also see those eyes darkening cruelly, hear that giggle hardening sharply, see that dimpled figure hulking menacingly not far into the nearing future? Where is he going? How long will it be before his playfulness turns bad? What do I fear? (Journal Entry, March '94)

All of these feelings have wrestled with me behind my classroom facade. I have checked them and calmed them until now. I did not want face-to-face combat; I did not want a duel and I did not want an outright battle. Better to be diplomatic and smile insincerely in the pretence that all was in control. One day a week ago, however, the feelings behind the mask erupted. The mask came off and I revealed my true feelings. I did not mean to reveal the strength of my anger. I did not even realize the strength of my anger, but there it was at the end of a trying class raging through my hardened voice at Rick, demanding that he remain after class and account for his behaviour. What had happened for me to tear off the mask and stand so exposed?
The class had been working on debates for two weeks. We had brainstormed for issues, formed resolutions and then they had formed teams, either affirmative or negative and planned their debating arguments. I had provided information about debating rules, the burden of proof carried by the affirmative, the responsibility of the negative to clash. I had helped them plan their speeches, guided them to their points. They had prepared and practiced and hopefully worked in a cooperative manner so that each member of the team augmented the other. I had counselled them about good oratory skills. The week and a half of preparation had been trying to say the least. The likes of Eric, Neil and Paul in one group proved somewhat difficult to monitor and yet my arbitrary numbering system to divide the students had created just what I had wanted to avoid: the wrong combination of personalities. One student, Leo, a serious self-motivator, joined their ranks and I had felt hopeful that he might be able to tone down some of their blatant nonsense. They knew that he was a good mind to do some of their serious debating, but they still found it difficult to remain serious themselves. When their resolution, "Movies should be censored," was the first to be debated, it was evident that the planning time had been abused and that, individually, Leo, Neil and Eric had speeches, but they did not collaboratively build a solid argument and they really had not known what each other was going to say. Eric and Leonard had prepared speeches. Neil delivered his "off-the-cuff," perhaps with some planned thought, but he had nothing written, and Peter simply did not
prepare anything and, in fact, let the others down. The affirmative side were able to build a strong case in support of their resolution and the negative side did not strongly clash. The class judge determined that the affirmative had won the debate. I was marking the teams on their arguments: their organization, material, delivery, refutation and cross-examination. I felt that Eric and Leo and Neil should not be penalized for Paul's lack of effort and told them that they would be given individual marks based on a total mark divided by three, not four. That being said, we moved on to the other debates.

If preparing the debate had been a challenge for Paul, then listening to the others was even more so. He did not attend to either of the next two debates. During the debate on abortion, Paul whispered, nudged, made wise cracks and loud exhortations that did not even relate to the topic of discussion. I stopped the debate several times to reprimand him and, finally, when he chased Eric out of his desk, I told Paul to leave the room and go to the office. I had given him too much line. His piece of yarn had become completely unravelled and I finally cut him loose. Neil, all this time, was heckling the debaters. He was more a part of the discussion but still had one eye on Paul and Eric for his support. Eric and Neil continued to be somewhat disturbing during the questioning period—just too ready to joke around. My patience was very thin. When I realized that the bell was about to ring and the last set of debaters was not going to finish, I stopped them and announced to the class that we would have to
continue beyond the bell. It was only fair to allow this group to complete their debate and have their arguments heard. It would be difficult to pick up and carry on next day. Most of the class seemed to understand. Neil and Eric complained. They could not wait; they had to leave immediately; they moaned and whined and still made it difficult for the debaters to finish. When the debate closed, I thanked the majority of the class for waiting, but when I turned to Neil and Eric, I became completely unraveled myself and sternly told them that they would have to remain after the class had left to account for why they thought it was reasonable to waste everyone else's time and not want to "waste" their own. At this point of rebuke, my tone erupted in anger and I informed both of them that they could sit silently until which time they thought they could account for their actions and apologize. It took Eric about twenty minutes of silence before he meekly admitted that he had got too carried away. He apologized and I let him leave. Neil was a harder nut to crack. He sat sullenly for over forty-five minutes during which time he rolled his eyeballs and stared coldly. He never did speak and I realized that I had a real stand-off. I did not want to stay longer so I informed him that I would not let him waste any more of my time and that I would have to write an interim home to his father. He left and I promptly wrote out my concerns:

Neil has consistently been disruptive, noisy, disrespectful and inattentive in class.

(Journal Entry, Mar. '94)
At home that evening, I found that I could not forget my anger. My anger was at myself. I had failed. I had been out of control. I had failed to provide the control and discipline in the class so that the debates of all the students could be beneficial to all. What kind of teacher was I anyway? How could I keep up the pretence of being a competent, experienced teacher if I could not manage a grade nine class better than that? It was not Neil at whom I directed my anger. I knew clearly that the whole debacle had been my fault. My anger sank into despair. I did not feel as if I could face this class and I was happy to have a day of reprieve before I next met them.

The next morning I spoke to Neil’s counsellor. I had put the interim report in his letter box and he did not seem worried about the strength of my judgements. He acknowledged that Neil was a continuing problem in other classes, but that Neil’s father was particularly supportive of teachers. He encouraged me to send the report and to set up a meeting with Neil’s father. These grade nines demand a lot more energy than I have to give.
Battle Fatigue

I stand beaten on the battle field
beleaguered by foes

Despairing the defeat
I am a sad negotiator
no longer able
to reason out
the differences
or smile benignly
in the face
of their fervent opposition

Respect and allowance
come from a foreign language

mistranslated
too cheap free-for-all
anarchical accommodation
of a rampant rabble

Looting losses with laughter
they suffer
the spoils of war
in everyone's defeat
I had to remind myself that I only felt exasperation and failure because of Neil and Paul's debate. My sense of defeat, some distance from the event, allows me to see that it was not a failure for everyone. Other students had been organized, articulate, logical and quite exuberant about their positions. Now I think that the debate exercise was useful. I had wanted unqualified success, but if I kept my feet planted firmly on the ground, did not turn my back and retreat to my bog, I would accept the qualifications of all my evaluations. Sometimes progress was two steps forward and one step back. Sometimes success was singular, not collective, individual, not the whole class. Yet, for Neil, I had to look further, longer, harder to see what he was about.

I love the English curriculum for the opportunity it provides the teacher to encounter the various faces and characters of her students! The writing offers more private thoughts, the classroom chatter and banter, their social selves; the novel, a chance to relate their experiences to identify, criticize and question; poetry, their more sensitive, playful, wistful or sometimes mournful selves; non-fiction, their pragmatic, business-like sensible selves, and, now the drama, a time to take on disguise but also drop their disguise. (Journal Entry, Apr. 1994)
Drama, if studied as script, can offer the same opportunities for critical thinking and appreciation as the novel. When it is acted out, it offers some students a chance to lose themselves and try out other parts in disguise, while, with others like Neil, it lays them bare and vulnerable. There was Neil, without his armour, hoping no one would pull out a sword.

The next play was a television drama that did not get filmed so they acted it out in front of the class. It was a spoof on Aladdin. You guessed it! If any spoofing or fooling would be done in this class, it would be done by Neil and company: Isaac, Eric and Dee. They called their play Jarwaladdin. Jarwal was an East-Indian boy in my other grade nine class. I think the play on the name was without any harmful racist intent because Jarwal was a part of their group in other classes and at lunchtime. The play, itself, was fairly well-scripted.

My memory about the story Aladdin is vague and I do not know the movie. Alas! The weakness of an English teacher who doesn’t keep up on all the "pop" aspects of our "culture." How could I avoid seeing Aladdin even with my own kids? I sent them with someone else. Actually my twelve-year-old was not interested and my fifteen-year-old went with a friend. "Mom" was definitely not invited.

So there I was, trying to evaluate a spoof with only
one-half of the content at my reference. My students were aghast at the idea that I did not know the movie Aladdin. They assumed, without much thought, that all their interests were commonly held. Not wanting to dissuade them from the enthusiasm of their endeavour, I led them to believe that I knew enough about the story-line to be able to judge the merits of their spoof. At play time I had not so much as read my program. What was going on?

"Hasmine" (Dee) is being chased for stealing an apple and running away from a palace because she does not want to be betrothed to some sultan. Someone else (Isaac) comes and rescues her. Abou (Eric) finds a lamp and magically, "Jarwaladdin" (Neil) materializes to grant three wishes to "Hasmine." They have memorized their lines. Dee’s black eyes dance their delight at playing the distressed damsel whom Isaac carries off on his "cart" (an A.V. cart cum magic carpet); Eric occasionally calls for a prompt, but happily and clearly expresses his schemes. I am surprised when Isaac, with confidence (and a wonderful voice), sings "A Whole New World" as he collects "Hasmine" into his arms.

There they are, a good number of my "warrior" soldiers, having an innocent good time with this "love story." This is reminiscent of their surprising creation of soft and gentle love poems. There is no grisly murder, no whodunnit from these characters. This is simply good fun! They continue to delight and amaze me.
But here is Neil. When he comes amid imagined smoke out of the tin can lamp, there is no exotic flare or mystery. There is big, galumphing, attention-gathering Neil, very awkwardly and undramatically stating his lines almost under his breath, very self-consciously. He plays Jarwaladdin, but he is no eastern mystic with supernatural powers. Rather, he is Neil without his practiced role. Here he cannot deliver quick retorts, off-colour remarks or giggle or burp. His mask is off and he does not know how to assume a different role. (Journal Entry, Apr. '94)

This is another surprise. I found the real Neil exposed momentarily in the drama: out-of-character, out-of-place, full of self-doubt. Neil was awkward and almost shy. He was not delighted in this legitimate limelight. And only when he was sitting "off-stage" (in an empty desk at the side of the class), did he bring back his braggadocio with innuendo. Dee played the to-be-betrothed but undesired sultan. They had run out of males for their roles and had to have Julie double up as narrator and sultan. As he/she proclaimed his/her lines of devotion to "Hasmine," Neil suggestively slurred the shameful aspects of same-sex encounter. There was Neil heckling his own play. Was this macho put-down really homophobia in disguise? Hissssssss and boooooo to you too! But this was Neil's role in the class. This is classroom drama as it is always played out for him. No one seemed to mind but me. They all know their parts.
They laughed too.

But these warriors are really quite kind to each other. They aim their weapons at me and what I represent, but they would never really hurt each other. Maybe Karla. (Journal Entry, Apr. '94)

Karla

Where has Karla been through all this? Karla has been the class scapegoat. Or perhaps, more accurately, the scapegoat of this small group. Throughout the year, Karla sat at the front of the room. First, in the second row from my far left and, later, after I rearranged the seating plan, in the window row on my right. She placed herself at a distance from the likes of Neil, Paul, Eric and Chuck, but they still got to her. They did not care about being subversive or secretive. There was just the odd flippant remark. If ever there was a cause to single out someone with negativity, Karla’s name would be spoken out loud. That’s all that would be done: a simple flat statement, "Karla." And she would rise to her own defense, in a sense, on the offense: "Oh, why don’t you shut up!" Or she would appeal to me in a loud voice, "They just try to get me, you know. They bug me all the time. And you wonder why I sit here. I’m changing schools next year." The kids at the back would not even need to answer; in fact, they just enjoyed listening to her spout off. (Journal Entry, Apr. '94)
I felt sorry for Karla, but I saw that she was the root of the problem. She was an intriguing girl. She was extremely opinionated and, if she were to get all her marks from comments about the subject of study, she would do quite well. She loved to talk and she entered with enthusiasm into discussions about racism, discrimination, family problems, heroism, scapegoating. She loved the stories and loved to talk about them. But she rarely wrote and she would not be reflective in her writing.

The curious aspect to Karla was that she verbalized everything. I think that is why the other students like to ride her so much. She was outspoken and very open about her own situation. She had lived in numerous foster homes, not knowing her father and knowing that her mother had been abusive. Karla and her sister had been apprehended at a very early age. Each foster mother had been referred to as "my first mom" or "my second mom" or the "mom that I have now." When I had assigned the writing on "Fathers" early in the first term, Karla had refused to write about it. She pouted and brooded in her desk, whispering adamantly to me that she absolutely would not write as she did not have a father. I suggested that she could write about her ideas about fathers, or about not having a father, or about the father in the story, but she refused absolutely and picked up a library book to read. I let her be, not knowing exactly what else to do for the moment. Now, at the end of
the year, I look back and wonder what else I might have done.

As a teacher, I often never know what experiences my students bring to bear on any subject that we are dealing with in class. English class raises it all. Life in all its possibilities comes under scrutiny and we never objectify when we are so close to some issue. I feel strongest in my presentation of ideas and feelings when I own them, when I have lived through them and when I have a personal anecdote to support them. My students, too, are more able to discuss from the reality of their own experience. Oh, they extrapolate and theorize, but they don’t connect. And yet, they are so young and so easily wounded and so unsure that when they do connect, they are often silenced. Even Karla, who loved to opine, could be silenced when she was most hurt. The kids, for all their scapegoating efforts, never silenced her for very long. But the subject of "fathers" did.

Karla would often come up at the beginning of class and give me a hug, or hang around at recess, telling me stories of her "mom" (foster mother) and how she constantly approved or disapproved of what Karla did. She said her "mom" slapped her around, but that it was okay because it was getting better and that I should not tell anyone because it would cause more trouble for her. I did not tell anyone because I had had a note at the beginning of the year that
Karla was prone to stories such as this. It was not until late in the year that I listened to descriptions of something called fetal alcohol effect, a milder disabling condition than fetal alcohol syndrome. I could not stop my mind from juxtaposing Karla’s image next to what I was learning about this condition.

**silent suffering**

```
ees eyes spaced wide apart
    can’t see
        their own
        suspicious
        stare
        through
        fetal alcohol
        intoxication

    no official label
    her name is a tag
        saying
        kick me

    up front
    where everyone can see
    she licks her wounds
        in public

    nasty boys
        hurt
    momentarily

    she can not
    keep her distance

        but
        doesn’t
        know
    how
    to make friends
```
Many students at this age exhibit socially inappropriate behaviours. They are learning about mores and boundaries and they test. But Karla did not seem to understand the social ramifications of her actions at all. She was two years older than most of the students, but acted much younger. I do not know the nature of her problems, but I begin to question whether I could have found out more.

Chuck

I am tired and feeling defeated. I do not want to impose my goals anymore onto the "warriors" who put up so much resistance. Chuck has been missing from class now for more than a month. Sometimes I even forget that he was ever there and then something jogs my memory and, out of recognition for my role of responsibility, I worry. I feel disappointed that I have failed to "reach him." I had wanted him to write. I had wanted him to feel good about himself and find some connection with school and goals. I phoned his mother and talked for quite a while about his situation. His mother says he has a Jekyll and Hyde personality. Sometimes he is soft spoken and pleasant and other times he is violent. Now I would at least like to show him the poems I have written about him. Why do I feel this need to connect? (Journal Entry, Apr. '94)

It is amazing how one kid out of a couple of hundred can make or break your day in this profession. I had been
preparing myself for the start of another week, reminding myself that Chuck would most likely be missing from class and that Paul would not have his work done. Lana came up to me at the beginning of recess to inform me that her group had got together over the weekend to tape their play and that they had to do it without Chuck because, even though she had phoned him and he had agreed to come, he did not show up. With disappointment and resignation, I said that it was a good idea to have doubled up with his role and that they should proceed. The problem lay with Chuck. Lana looked sad as well, but pleased that they would not be penalized for Chuck's truancy.

It was interesting in the first place how this little group of academic girls welcomed Chuck to be part of their effort. As I watched them working together over the past two weeks, I believed that there was a truly cooperative effort going on, and when it came to the writing, Chuck had done a large part of it. That was surprising, considering the fact that both Lana and Charlene are particularly proud of their abilities to write good stories. Oh, the wonders of adolescent relationships! They seemed such an unlikely combination and yet it was working. I had seen them group together before with the debates, but Chuck did not show for the actual debate procedure, and I was not sure how much effort he had put forth. That was just at the time that he was fading from the classroom. I had no idea that the next
two months would be so difficult for him and that his whole presence in the class would be at risk. Indeed, as it stands now, I am not sure whether Chuck will pass. He has not done any work since spring break. I have given him a list of the writing assignments and he has not followed through. Clearly he needs more help, more structure, more support, more guidance. Will he take it? Today in class I saw a different Chuck. I guess he has been like that for a while now, but I have not really noticed, my attention being directed to Paul and Neil.

crowned too soon

Chuck did not cut and polish but put on a quick veneer while his gem was still in the rough his crown claimed prematurely sits lopsided over his forelock if he's not careful it will fall off with a clatter
Those days, Chuck did not wear a crown. If it was ever there, even prematurely, it toppled off, being far too weighty for his present stature. He was not ready. Any claim to his own kingship was weak, without substance, the lineage far too thin. When one facet of a gem glints briefly under the sun, it can temporarily blind and distract from the impurities in all the other facets. I only saw one facet of Chuck and was quickly dazzled, enticed to invest and dream. But I never realized all the cutting, chipping and grinding that would have to be done to rid that gem of all its impurities. How sad I felt that Chuck could not cope with all that work. It indeed was too much for him and I feared there is not a team of diamond cutters with enough time and skill to work on his gem. For a moment he could aim that one good side toward the light and reflect the glint and sparkle that gave me hope, but then another angle revealed the muddied, scratched surface, the clouding within, and the gem turned into a worthless stone kicked about and lying in the gravel.

That is how I saw Chuck then. He had rarely been to class and when he did come, he did not really work. Unlike those first few weeks, he did not flick his forelock or prance saucily, snorting steam in confrontation. He did not bother with such coarse greetings, but sidled in, hoping to remain unnoticed. In fact, I did not know what his hair looked like. He hid under a baseball cap, the peak low
enough to hide the once icy-blue eyes. They too seemed dull and clouded. No smart remark, no sensitive writing. What had happened?

Now, I no longer see any kingly traits. Chuck has cloistered himself in absence and silence. His hat, cowl-like, humbles him in the face of this robust lot as he sits apart, only now and then stealing a glance at the goings on. I saw him on the right of the class, slouched down in his seat, his left arm shading his profile from any view of the others. Quiet, passive and almost unresponsive when I spontaneously said, "Hi, Chuck, you're here!" I was so delighted to have him back, particularly, because after his absence the day before and after Lana's comment, I did not expect to see him. I think he was looking on, unaffected, before I spoke, but at my greeting he merely blinked and barely nodded and cloaked himself again. I see that he cannot be exposed. I can feel the rawness of his wounds, the inability to cope with the world about him, and I momentarily understand his need to hide. I know that he is hurting; and I am powerless to do anything about it. (Journal Entry, Apr. '94)
No one knows what he might have become
As now, in the drabness of his brown cloak
He wanders about homeless
Accepting alms from unsuspecting folk

Hiding in the shadows and behind walls
He sees the world from without
But monk-like though his guise
No spiritual light purifies his soul

Pulling him further toward his hell
His demons hover and threaten
While he in the heavy overcast
Haunts his hollow presence in the world

Fugue
I fear for Chuck in this limbic state. He has lost all substance, is rootless, disconnected and despondent. My temporary inclination is to try to save him myself. Offer my own home as a kind of refuge, a purgatory, not a state of limbo, a time to seek and cleanse. But that is a momentary dream. Reality aims its glaring spotlight on the facts of our lives. I have a family, husband, children and job--many personal demands that, if unmet, can make my own life a living hell. What kind of resources could I offer Chuck? What extra pressures would Chuck's presence in my personal life bring? Common sense and not my high-spirited desires to be Chuck's saviour must prevail. I am his English teacher if he so wishes to learn. Is that a cop-out? Is that the state of teaching today? No heart? No feeling? One-hour contact three times a week is all we're allowed to commit. Fat chance of meeting a whole person in that structure! And I, I would take him after school for extra help. I would see him in class time for individual planning. I would see him at lunch hour. But, for someone like Chuck, with so many needs, the school offers no help. Maybe we can keep him in class--physically, as he is now. But we cannot get at the black spot within, cut it out, grind and polish. No, my once almost-crowned King has to do it himself. I could help him show off that crown if he owned it. I would even support him in his claim if he raised it. But, when he turns his shining facet down and displays only his scars, when he wears his drab cowl and wayward roams about in his own personal wilderness, there is nothing I, as an English teacher, can do. Any alms I can share can never strengthen his lineage and bring him home. And that is the most glaring fact of his reality. (Journal Entry, Apr. '94)
So, amid all these ruminations about Chuck, how could I concentrate on the whole class, the drama presentations? I jotted a few notations and compartmentalized my individual concerns. I listened intently to the radio play by Brenda, Charlene, Lana, Cheryl and Chuck. The girls laughed with red faces. They were both proud and embarrassed by their efforts when, we, I and the whole class, listened to their play. But it was Chuck’s play too. He wrote a lot of those lines and stage directions. But he did not perform it. How was he feeling, sitting there, listening? Was he criticizing? Was he wishing he could have taken part? Was he glad he was not being heard?

The script, itself, was typical of the age group: Movie star about to receive an award has a birthday party and gets killed. The rest of the skit reads as a whodunnit. The dramatization is weak. The medium, however, a radio play, is well-developed with directive dialogue and good sound effects. Chuck could have basked in a little of this glory, but he didn’t. I concentrated on the play and merited them an 11/15, probably a bit of a gift, but this was a class that worked on appreciating literature, and on reading and writing more than on drama and acting. I could not discredit them for what they have not been taught.
Paul

Chuck has come to class the last two times and has come out from behind his cloak. He offered to play a part in another play. Sam, Basil, Isaac and Donald (yes, Donald Lu who had been at the brunt of the paper jokes made by Chuck and Paul) had written a script. Originally, Paul had been part of their group, but he was dragging them down, blocking any efforts to decide on a subject and to write any dialogue. Paul had been demonstrating particularly disturbing behaviour. He was not doing any of his assignments. He continued to sit on the ledge at the back of the room. Any polite requests to have him sit in a desk were ignored—not rudely, just passively, unresponsively. His whole demeanour was passive resistant. Writing that I commandeered almost with force (lifting it off his desk by having to pry his fingers off it) proved to be as inappropriate as his first efforts involving his supposed drunken cousin. Now, in my own defeat, I just turned it back and told him to redo it. It was never done. His passivity deteriorated to a lethargy and a seemingly deep malaise. His face grew increasingly sombre, his eyelids visibly drooped, hooping his eyes, and his voice muffled into a barely audible, inarticulate mumble. Responses to any question in discussion were faintly waved off. Pressed to individual accounting for work not done, he delivered half-sentences with predicates left floating in the air. Pressed further, he would sigh with feigned arrogance, "I really have no idea." When asked if he cared about his progress, he would answer, "I really don't know." All said with despondence. I became alarmed and angry at the same time. What was going on? Was he in the depths of a depression? Was he on drugs?
Was there more going on than "meets the eye"? Yes, I was alarmed, awakened to Paul’s problems. But I was angry too. I was angry at him because he was a bigger challenge than I had realized, because his passivity had successfully brought him to his own prescribed end: failure. Did he not believe in himself at all? I was also angry at myself for allowing this progression into bleakness and failure. I remembered my initial meeting with his parents and my goal to help Paul have a successful year. I had a choice. I could allow Paul to live out his own predictions, his own defeats or I could make a last ditch effort to save the year for him, to prove to him it did not have to end this way. I felt an urgency to act. I sent him to the office and told him to speak to the Vice-Principal about his reluctance to work. Unfortunately, the VP was not in and Paul wandered off when the bell rang. I needed to take further action.

I called his home and spoke in exasperation to his father. My feelings were echoed by him and reinforced. He felt the same way and said they had "thrown their hands up in the air" and tried to distance themselves from wanting to take control of their non-communicative son. I spoke also to his mother who made excuses for herself, saying that she was busy with an invalid mother-in-law and could not find the time to give Paul any more special attention. Between their words, I sensed the same exasperation and annoyance that I was feeling. Wasn’t it time for Paul to take some responsibility for himself? And yet, I could not just pronounce a failure and have Paul go to summer school. I did not see the sense. He did that last summer, passed English 8 and returned this year to repeat the same pattern. In fact, in one prolonged session with
Paul (prolonged meaning an exchange that went beyond two sentences) I cornered him until he admitted that there was not much point in doing anything because it was obvious that he was going to summer school anyway. He had given up. He had decreed his own failure. When had this happened? Probably a month or so ago when he failed to hand in his research assignments on "Disasters." (Journal Entry, May '94)
Paul

h
a
ng
s
at the edge
tall
blond neatly dressed
in no curious cipher
hard ly makes a mark
be neath seemingly
be nign smile
lurks
a hint of mis/chief
His secret
silence could
beguile a mona lisa
mystifying
denying
there and not there
Where is his story hiding?
The students had been reading *A Night to Remember*, a non-fictional accounting of the sinking of the Titanic. I felt the drama of this account, the detailed investigation and collaboration of personal stories, was worth study both for the impact of this disaster on the individuals as well as for the reporting techniques that were involved in the retelling of it.

We had read the story and discussed the personal responses from the sense of disbelief and infallibility that the travellers first felt upon hitting the iceberg to the growing sense of danger to sheer terror or stalwart acceptance of their fate. It proved to be a good medium to generate the students' response to the way different individuals on the ship had responded and to discuss how each one of them might respond in similar situations. This account provided a broad spectrum of human reactions by different personalities. Many were absolutely dumbfounded at John Jacob Astor's ability to stand steadfast and unmoving as the ship went down. Why? How? Most of the class thought it absurd that the band would keep playing until the end. Were people different in that time? Were the lives of women and children more valuable than those of the men? Or was it that the men saw themselves more invincible and more capable of withstanding death even unto the end? Despite the read being belaboured with small, seemingly disjointed details, the students seemed rivetted by the story and were actively engaged in discussions and questions. We watched the video and wrote personal responses.

The follow up assignment was a library research project, the
library project that became so disastrous for Paul. I had arranged with the librarian to "pull" all materials on disasters through-out history. The students would then go to the library, be introduced to the concept of disaster—human disaster, natural disaster, industrial disaster, any unplanned catastrophe. They were then to peruse the material displayed on the bookcases and table tops and select a topic for their further investigation. They would assume the role of a reporter and write up in the spirit of an on-the-spot journalist a hard news story as if it was fast-breaking news. I was also in the process of introducing news reporting as a particular writing style: the inverted pyramid structure, the sensational details first, the narrative details, the lesser side-effects—the descending order of importance. I had carefully planned this unit. The librarian and I had collaborated and he had drawn up a note-taking form which allowed them to make notes in a framework that would lead to the kind of journalistic organization of story details that makes for quick reading.

I had great hopes for this assignment. I wanted the students to take it seriously. I wanted them to be able to account for the human condition under dire circumstances. To look, to imagine and to detail. I also wanted them to take particular care with their presentation. They would design their own newspaper front page. This would involve computer work where they learned to work in columns and to "typeset," establish font and placement. It also was the kind of assignment that was not
personally threatening. They did not have to personalize. It was this personalization that seemed to pose such a problem for them. They could be detached observers...or could they?

Yes, if I thought about it carefully, this was where Paul stopped. I chose a book that offered a chronology of world disasters and took it to the classroom and told Paul that I was sorry he could not be with us in the library. I told him to look through the book and choose something to write about. I had checked the book (a big one) out in my own name so I asked Paul to return it to the check out desk at the end of the period. I did not see Paul at the end of the period and I had to trust that he had, indeed, done this. I believe that I should trust my students, but I always feel it is a bit of a risk-taking. I was relieved that Paul had turned in the book. But later classes revealed that he was not doing his assignment. The follow-up class in the computer lab was seemingly productive for Paul. He was more engrossed in writing than I had ever seen him. The librarian, not the same librarian that had sent him out, said that he is often there and obviously more motivated to work when he uses a computer. I was pleasantly surprised and hopeful that the "disaster" of the day before could be rectified. Sadly, Paul's assignment never materialized and he seemed to stop working from that point onward. So, his shut-down continued until the first week in May when I sent him out myself. I needed help and spoke to the Vice-Principal. If he had given up then he could give up somewhere else and allow the rest of the students to finish off their year successfully. That was the anger in me talking. (Journal Entry, May '94)
Stuck

Fading from focus
fuzzy headed, sleepy eyed
what dust has settled
into your inertia?
forcing your failure
...and mine/to anger

you sit on that shelf
like some unusable cipher
just for looks
only scratching a mark
in subversive notation
that muffles
your silent passive emptiness

that layer of dust
your aura
makes you fuzzy, out of focus
the armour
of some undercover agent
an unnoticed presence
who forgot his mission
quietly defied detection
and became
unconscious objector

what sticks you
where you cannot talk?

I took time to think and plan. Paul hated putting pen
to paper, but he liked the computer. Perhaps it would
help him get his work done. I talked to his parents,
the VP and Paul. The plan was for him to stay out of
class, report to the computer lab and work in the lab
until all his unfinished work was ready to hand in.
Then, he could return to class with work in hand and
try to reinstate himself. He was to report to me at
the beginning and end of each class. Paul did not show
much of a response, but he did report to class and
after ten days, he came into the classroom with three
assignments: his disaster newspaper article, one of
the best that had been done in that class; his writing, If I could be...(a famous athlete); and the summary of "Sneaky Fitch." His writing was mediocre but acceptable. His newspaper article was an exciting "A"!! (Journal Entry, end of May '94)

Re-reading this journal entry and my poems about Paul tell me that it takes time, and careful consideration to answer Paul's needs. Silence, inertia, non-communication are much more powerful than the boisterous acts of kids like Neil or Chuck. I still do not know the reasons for Paul's seeming complacency or passivity, but I do know that individualizing his method of work and place of work, individualizing his time-lines and his incentives, was the most expedient and practical way of helping him pass. My cipher metaphor speaks my frustration at his inability to communicate and the need I had to decode him. With individual support and direction, he revealed an ability and desire to be successful. My writing considerations reveal to me that his silent battle may not be purposely deceptive. He just may not be able to "fight" (for himself) on his own. I still do not know who or what his foes are, but I know Paul's cries for help are indirect, faint and unassertive and too easily unrecognizable.
I remember my first impression of Sam. He, with a cute, impish smile under his baseball cap, sat over on the right, near the front. He seemed younger than the others and didn't know where to place himself. Yet, I watched quietly as he eyed the boisterous types at the back, peering out beneath his rim, sneaking peeks at their "goings-on." He liked them, wanted to be with them and then he found a way. He slid down that row and perched himself next to Paul.

I didn't mind because I enjoyed knowing that he found comfort in their company. He wanted to be part of the fun and I wanted him to feel good. My first impression of Sam was that he was the child of Polish immigrants—a minority looking for a hook in. I imagined that he was lonely. He looked as if he was trying too hard—dressing in the skater look: big, wide pants hanging barely from the hip, crotch at knee level; baseball cap on backwards and long skirt-length shirt over the pants. He was a little boy trying hard at image. It all seemed benign enough. His first writings showed a little boyish aspect as well. The handwriting was big and sloppy with little attention to punctuation or paragraphing. And yet, there was an analytical perception revealed that belied the "simple-minded" appearance. I thought he would be alright.

Ashamedly, I admit that that is about as far as I thought about Sam. He always seemed to be laughing quietly at the others, never the instigator but revelling in their antics—-a
sideriner. I knew that he was flirting with danger, but I thought that he would keep himself out of the centre of it. I did not give Sam enough help. And then, I realized that he was going to fail if I didn't give him that last ditch chance to get his work done. The interim I had sent home did not seem to be enough. I outlined some outstanding assignments and gave him a deadline. If they weren't in by Monday, he would fail.

Monday came and went. Sam did not hand in the assignments. The last week of school came and went and I was doing my reports. I was horrified when I realized that of all my students, the most challenging ones, Paul and Chuck, had passed but Sam had failed. Had I failed Sam? If I had given him the same degree of attention that I had given Paul and Chuck, then, maybe this would not have happened. I did not have the assignments and his grade for the year was forty-four.
Sam

I saw him slide
far down
that right row
down that slippery run
to the ledge
where Paul perched
and Neil and Eric
Isaac Angela and Dee

So inviting it was,
that
downhill
slope
and he
in good skater fashion
had no other hope but
to ride snowboard
down
each
hour

rollicking
swooping
dipping
swivelling

never putting on the skids
to slow down and think
until the fall
The reports went out and I did not hear anything. Then I was clearing up the classroom files. There lay Sam's part of the bargain, his assignments caught between other papers on the side cupboard. I couldn't believe my eyes! Or the sinking of my heart! He had done his work, and I...I had misplaced the papers. I didn't even remember his handing them in. When? Now what? Had he done them well enough to pass?

I sat down to read the large, sloppy writing once again. Sure enough, his interpretation of the dialogue between Oberon and Puck indicated a competent grasp of the subject. His reflective response to the film, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, revealed a thoughtfulness and a questioning where he did not understand. And his short story about "Disaster on the Ski Slope" was an alternate assignment because he had not done the newspaper article, the disaster research assignment. The story had a good plot line, and good descriptive phrases. It was a solid first draft. Could I pass him?

I needed to think. I needed to calculate his percentage. What difference did that make? I had struck a bargain with him. I had not guaranteed a pass just for doing the work, but I had told him that if he did the work, he would have a chance to pass; if he did not do the work, he would definitely not pass. Now the question was twofold: did he reveal enough ability to move on to the grade
10 level and did he deserve to pass, despite his lack of effort and his poor attitude?

When I placed that failing grade on his report, I had rationalized that failure would be a good lesson for him. Failure would make him take summer school where he would have to work and build up some extra experience. I had no doubt that he would pass summer school and enroll in grade 10 in the fall.

I had flogged myself for not ensuring that Sam would pass the course. It was partially my fault for letting him slide. It had all been so slippery and I had lost a good grip. I had accepted the situation.

Now the picture changed. Not only had I let Sam slip toward failure, but I had failed to catch him as he reached out for that last hold. I had turned my head and missed his flailing arm! He had tried to stop his fall and I had not been there to catch him.

I did not want my own guilt to make me change the fail to a pass. I did not want to leave it as a fail if he indeed had upheld his end of the deal. In the end, I decided to change the grade and give him a pass.
Teaching is a big test: T or F?

trying tolerance on Neil
finding out it doesn't fit
teasing the talk out of Paul
forcing a fumble and a fidget

troubling over Chuck's terror
fusing it into a fugue
trusting Sam's teasing smile
foiling the heart of a fool

fugitives from truth
in the falsehood of time
thespians in frolic
forcing tales in a rime

oh teach what is fine
fight for their trust
tell them the truth
don't fumigate their fuss

or truss up their trouble
into thin lines of froth
but figurate, tribulate
texturize the cloth

feel for the fabric
don't teach to the test
there is no formula
it's all in the text

T or F?
My class this year has unknowingly accompanied me on my journey. My students have provided the ground, the sites, the tests. On the surface, they know that we have been on a journey together, encountering battles, reaching plateaus of discovery, impasse and sometimes failure. For me, however, my writing has made it "the journey of attention, of a perpetual walk toward an edge" (Jagodzinski, 160).

Heightened consciousness is the mediation between life and death; both inform and deform the moment of movement. Only then can new ground be found and life lived. To avoid the direction of the body, choreograph its trajectory, keep it on track without deviation, one must take risks; otherwise human flexibility is lost. Failure replaces tolerance. "Grades" are not lived as plateaus; they become the imprisonment of a letter. This stills the body needlessly. Its life is lost. (Jagodzinski, 161)

My writing intensified my relationship with my class and with each of my students. After writing about some issue of consternation, I could feel the pulse of the individual students the next day. I could step beyond my armour, beyond my skin, in my desire to get beneath theirs. The experience with this class, enriched by my heightened awareness of my particular "warriors," indeed was a "mediation between life and death." As new attitudes and understandings were born, so old ones died. My writing helped me perceive the dynamic vitality in this class. I
saw the class as a whole, living, breathing unit—a being in its entirety that I had become comfortable getting to know.

We have one more week to go and I feel a profound sense of pending loss. The students are giddy at the prospect of their escape into summer, and I must reconcile myself to letting them go. I've had my encounter. For a brief moment in time, we have learned together. As a whole unit, this class has reached its end. Individually they will go on, differently, each with a unique journey, each with a different set of battles. Perhaps their encounters with each other and with me will help shape their future. But this time, this phase of the journey has come to an end. The battles, here, are over, but the "war" will continue, on a different plain, at a future time.

(Journal Entry, June '94)
Class of 94

born
amid the seasons
of change
a living thing
pulses and throbs
within its walls
unconscious of its
near death

animus and anima
conjoin
blow their collective breath
into momentary briefness
undeveloped imago

so soon summer’s gleam pulls
and this entity
in heliotropic tension
bursts these cell walls
spitting all its organelles
into the vast formlessness
only its vapours
can now shape some future
memory
Future Faces

I see the face
distort momentarily
dissolve
reform
into yet another
from the past
and then again
a bulging and fading
into one more
all different
and somehow all
layer upon layer
disguised in one
another bit by bit

It is like some
computerized
television
trick
massed through
the media
of years of teaching

I used to know
them all by name
now my recall
plays with their history
this student in that class
This year, through my writing, I have learned much about my own armour, my battles, my bogs and my golden plains. I have learned a lot about writing. Through my writing I reached out and connected with my warriors, and got to think about my students and their challenges much more intimately than I ever would have if my communication with them had only been based on their writing and classroom talk. Their poems and my journals will keep this year alive in my memory for a while. But, in some future time, it will sit on a shelf, like Paul, as I leave it behind and write some other narrative, linked to this somehow, but different in this process of constant becoming. These students won’t be there then. Paul, I hope, will move off the shelf; Neil will learn to feed his soul some tempering food; Chuck will write a growing narrative of his own and Sam will learn to climb up the hill before he snow-boards down. The individuals will go on, the stories will grow and change, but this class, as it was for this time, will always find its own place on my shelf.
6. Writing in the Sand

The Ocean Shore

i quiet my thoughts
with the hush
of the ocean tide

whispers of white noise
soothe the synapses
in the rinse of
retreat

over the etched sand
i find the
shells and stones
for my collection

jasper and agate
tossed up from the deep
polished and shaped
amid the shell of life

gems of understanding
glint and flash
refract and absorb
and all the while

an afternoon breeze
laps at tidal pools
and waves away
the hazy air

Traces

My writing has transported me across the bogginess of
my shifting understanding. It reveals my own eco-system,
the balance I seek between who I think I am and what I think
I do. There is, however, more underbrush than I expected.
I see, now, that my bog in its very boggy nature will never
be all cleared, nor will it break down, decompose on its
own. Its tanglement of memory, assumption, desire and
interpretation has not only snared my relationship with the warriors I initially knew as the difficult rebels and revellers at the back of the class, but has also made me acutely aware of all the relationships, addressed or not, that I form every day. Through the medium of my writing, I have felt the stirring of phantoms: haunting warriors from my past, of my goals, in my strategies, behind my assumptions, my own invisible warriors that bog me down, hold me back or scrape me as I try to pass. All these pre/postions ground me, surround me and direct me, all at the same time.

My writing through the course of this past year with this particular class has expressed the tensions, problems and struggles I felt in the grade nine classroom. The hermeneutic inquiry into my writing deconstructed the battle metaphor and discovered layers of perplexity, struggle and insight. The class, now gone, remains with me for my further understanding. I am still "becoming" and, although I faced the battle, established a certain peace, I have not ended my journey. Where have I been? What have I seen?

As I re/read my writing, further shifts in my understanding confound my narrative. I have been on quite a journey in this land of teaching. I have recorded many experiences and they have shaped my understanding. But now, the travel over the land has come to a pause in this retreat. I envision a visit to the ocean shore and see
these writings as if they are in the sand. Until another
flow of tide washes across their impression, they are with
me. But I become all too aware of their temporality.

When I re/read my visible student/warriors, I must
acknowledge that, with the exception of Karla,
they are all male! I don’t know what this means.
Carl asked me if there are gender issues and I
know there are, but I cannot analyze them, the
boys at the back. There are boys all over this
class. Why would the boys at the back exemplify
maleness and aspirations to patriarchal power any
more than any of the other males in the class who
do not behave in the same way? There are also
girls at the back, girls cheering on these boys.
Are they part of a gender issue? (Journal Entry,
Mar. ‘94)

Hauntings

I could not begin to question while I was writing about
them so intensely in my journal. I felt so connected to
their individualities, their needs, that I could not
objectify any broader issues. If I acknowledged the gender
issues, I felt I would deny the person, the heart and soul
that I so wanted to reach. Was it their maleness, their
gender that made them thus or was it the individual
circumstances of their individual lives—or was it the
combination? It was surely bigger than what I could address
during the class. Maybe now.
Maybe the maleness
part of you
shielded your inner self
that I yearned to know

Maybe the maleness
was the menace
that muffled my message
and mocked my motherly
attempts to nurture a soul?

Was it your male gender
that armoured itself
against my intruding ideas?

I requested reflection
sought softness
and careful considerations
of human relationships

You fended off feelings
with retorts
and bullish bellows

You in your T.V. style
changed the channel
to high speed car chases
and violent adventure

Your communication was
instant replay
quick comebacks and
reluctant writing

drinking
serial killing
drugs
the negative
upheld
laughingly
in rebellious power
Is this a gender issue?
Each of you
just unnamed products
generic samples of
male power and domination

My reflective self
my woman's sense
my motherself
pains for your misdirection
sees past your shield
sometimes
intuits your inner self
so denied by you

Can I deny your outer shell
in my struggle to get past
your shield?
Can I still refuse
to see it
as part of your gender?

I immerse myself for the moment in my battlefield metaphor. Personally, I have often felt on one battlefield or another. When I was young, I battled with my father in my struggle to assert my independence, and my will, in frustration against his particular brand of fatherhood. There was definitely competition between us. The day after a huge confrontation with my father when I was twenty-four, I had a major car accident and was hospitalized. The first person leaning over me as I lay half-conscious in the emergency room was my father. He assured me that I would "make it" and later he revisited me with a tattooed wooden puppet in boxer shorts and boxer gloves to hang over my bed because I was his "fighter." That battle imagery has been
near me all my life but I have not thought about it until this writing.

In my struggle to raise my handicapped son, I have sometimes seen situations in a "me-versus-them" condition where I have expectations, make requests, make demands and "they" (doctors, educators, service providers) fail to meet my expectations, deny my requests, refuse my demands, or disagree with any number of countered acts. In such situations I fight fiercely with all my armour and I fight to win! What is my armour? Impassioned ideals about equality and the nobility of the human spirit. A belief in the magnanimity that reaches beyond individual differences and embraces fully each individual amid the masses. Above all else, a commitment to my son to ensure his fullest development as a whole person with equal worth and equal rights. Yes, this is my armour with which I fight that particular battle.

When I know the cause is worth fighting for, then I fight with full metal jacket of ideals and feelings and arguments. Good male imagery. Why do I use it? I must investigate this battle condition further. (Journal Entry, Mar. '94)

Does my battle metaphor spring from some hidden animosity I hold toward the opposite sex? Or is the tension and antagonism a natural state of existence between my femaleness and their maleness? Forever a difference;
forever a tension. The battle of the sexes. Particularly at a time when hormones rage in their initiation and race through veins unsure of themselves. First effects are shocking, funny, unsettling. I do not like it. I grew up in a female dominant family. My father, when he swore, was criticized, reprimanded. He was wrong. These boys are wrong. My father, when he was irreverent, was wrong! My father tried to be funny when he wrote,

I love you dearly; I love you mighty.
I wish my pyjamas were next to your nightie.
Now don't get so bashful; now don't get so red;
I mean on the clothesline and not in bed.

He shocked my mother and her chastisement baffled me. I thought it was a joke. My dad told my mom she was silly and laughed and laughed. It was a joke, but now that I think of it, it was a weird one. My dad never made any sexual overtures to his daughters. Did he make up this verse or did he hear it somewhere and think it just funny to put in his daughter’s autograph book? Not a wise father-knows-best kind of father, my dad. He was funny though.

These boys in front of me are funny too. But they annoy me, just as I saw my father annoy my mother. Will they not learn? I can’t let them turn out to be the kind of man my father was, reaching out with jokes and put-downs, never taking time to know his own mind, to come to terms with life. And life was not good to him. He suffered. It cut him down with Parkinson’s Disease, early, maybe even before he could grow up. A voice in me says, “Give them
time; it is a passing phase. They will grow out of it." My experience tells me that some men do not. And Neil, he has no mother! And Chuck, he has no father. And Paul? and Sam? These boys are my warriors. We fight. My armour is built with the metal of my mother's words, battling my father's challenges. What is their armour made of? They build it as they go, but it already has a familiar style, already very strong.

If one asks what marks all those male friendships that have been acclaimed "from the days of Homer," the answer is clear: reverberation upon the public sphere. Male friendships were not entirely, or even primarily, private; they resonated in the realms of power...Friendships for men...affect the world of event. Male friends do not always face each other; they stand side by side, facing the world. (Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life, 100)
"Boys will be boys"
(What are little boys made of?
Snakes and snails
and puppy dog tails)

"Boys will be boys"
the old wives say and
tell me about
"what little boys are made of"
and the old mother honks her
invitation for
"little boy blue"
to blow his own horn
(as if he needed to be asked)
never mind those sheep and cows
and other issues of domesticity and civility
that’s okay ’cause

"boys will be boys" they say
playing boy’s games
"the only difference between men and boys
is the [size] of their toys"
those
"boys in blue"
and
"green berets"
and
"brown shirts"

Are they like some airborne regiment
"knights in shining armour"
playing with things
more sinister than snakes?
I write reluctantly about gender because I do not know where it begins and ends. There were other boys in the class who did not come to class in battle dress. The warrior boys were the father that I battled when I was their age. I am sure they are battling their own fathers or mothers on their own personal fronts. In the classroom, they wage a different kind of warfare. I look for their expression, their beliefs, and I challenge them in their writing assignments.

As I read this poem, I remind myself of another poem I wrote during my writing course with Carl Leggo. Carl began the course by telling us that he believed that teachers of writing must be writers themselves in order to understand the nature of writing as they want their students to understand. I remember the excitement I felt at the prospect. I remember the confusion I felt when he added that our exploration of writing theory would also immerse us in feminist theory. Hmm...I had never embraced feminist ideology completely, but I considered myself to be an assertive woman. I think of Karla and her assertions and wonder if the assertions of all women are seen as ineffective as Karla’s in the face of those heckling boys. With Karla in mind I wonder if femaleness is some congenital anomaly that disables us all our lives.

In those earlier years, I thought I had considered my equality, knew I had to fight for it, but I believed I had
achieved it. Did I understand feminist theory? Was I a feminist? I was a strong woman. I worked in a profession that had always admitted women and had given them equal pay for equal work. It did not, however, advance many women to positions of authority. Had I been aware of conflicts around feminism in the workplace? Had I felt conflicts about my status in the home? Oh, most certainly there. I fought my husband's past, his eastern European upbringing, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, every day that he did not do the dishes or make the bed. But I never considered deeply how feminist issues affected me beyond that. I, an adolescent of the sixties, a young woman of the seventies. Beginning to read feminists like Carolyn Heilbrun, Patti Lather, Carol Gilligan, started something stirring, something disturbing. There was my bog moving under me, spongy beneath my feet. I picked up the moss, examined the lichen and wrote.
Feminist Statement

Dish-rags from my past bind me to my present state where my feminism must reside surrounded by the ever-growing metaphors of my life: everything and the kitchen sink tied to the apron strings of my mother’s giving ways

Growing up among sisters I found my voice in female capability and certainty I did not need a man to be fractured father figure of the only maleness that I knew

Mother became provider and protector bringing home the bacon putting the bread on the table making ends meet finding time to lend a helping hand lay down the law wipe the wistfulness from our eyes give us a lesson in reality where the game was ruled by necessary cooperation pulling together becoming all capable

Now, defined by my mother’s metaphors I live in a different reality where men play games, have opponents, take the lead body check, stay in position, shoot and score!

As a woman among men I am an unwilling competitor and will not play defense, offense or embrace an exclusive metaphor that makes me play by their rules

My metaphors will teach my sons to do their own laundry make their own bed and lie in it My sons can have my apron strings lend a helping hand, pull together, share the load become all capable

So in a new reality where the metaphors are mixed I can be an equal participant in a game that is played on level ground

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What does my upbringing, my ideas about what men are like, what women are like, what life is like, have to do with me as an English teacher? I question the validity of discussing these issues in my formal writing. But, through this hermeneutic inquiry comprising some twenty years of teaching, I have become more aware of the factors that shape my teaching and learning. When I was in my student-teaching practicum, I remember being very concerned about my "role" as a teacher. How could I assume a role, a personage, which seemed to deny myself? At the time, I had not incorporated "teacher" into my sense of self. I was full of myself. Young woman, daughter, friend, helper, learner—all very naive and unsure. But "teacher?" I was so much a learner that I did not see teacher as anything integral to my sense of self. How could I teach? I had to pretend to be an erudite, authoritative, enabling, directing, persona of knowledge. I must, I thought, deny my daughter/sister/friend/self. They did not have a place in the classroom. The helper, I knew, did. It was that "helper" aspect to teaching that excited me and drew me into the profession. When I met my first students, I presented an image, carefully contrived to cover any personal self. I put on armour and distanced myself. My armour was constructed from a friendly mail, all smiling, accommodating, planning, and hard working. Was there more? I remember squirming when my male colleagues sneaked sexual innuendo into discussions of
classroom management. Jokes about what my students were learning. What kind of teacher did they see?

methodology

my teaching days started early
as I brushed my long hair
down to the tops of my miniskirted legs
clutched ditto masters
prepared at two in the morning
between my polished fingers
and stroked the gaze of five-year younger
almost adult boys
who sat at the front of the room
in those days
&I turned my back
arms reaching to the lesson
writing idea[l]s in green and white
amazingly fresh from my late night labours
only becoming a/ware
of the effect of such a key visual?
Sexist joking in staffroom, classrooms, and hallways, and the derogation of women and of women’s achievements are part of a wider pattern of gender harassment. The inordinate amount of attention focussed on white male students, the differences in the nature of question and in the quality of teacher response directed towards female and male students, and male strategies of interruption and vocality that silence women are . . . examples of ways in which girls and women experience the chilly climate in education. (Briskin, Coulter, 1992, 250)

My journal writing helps me address these gender issues in a way I never spoke of before. I remember, in those days, it being difficult for me to reach mentally across a male response to my physical appearance. It seemed that I had to cross this barrier before I could express my ideas and feelings. That gender barrier, sometimes translucent, sometimes not, was always there. I had to suit up against it. My teacher persona helped if I could make it strong enough. It helped in the staff room. It became even stronger in the classroom. But, still, it was but one battle I fought. Today, I know that gender cannot account for all the challenges I face with these, my grade nine students. There is age, culture, class, race, my values, their values, their becoming, my becoming, all converging in an exciting complex dynamic that cannot be compartmentalized into the lesson of the day.

When I first started teaching, I thought I took off my personal clothes and put on some kind of teacher’s uniform—donned another self.
New Clothes

my teacher suit
protects me
against
my failures

it is my armour
between
them and me

goals and objectives
rationale
knowledge of subject
strategy method plan
power

under this armour
an invisible shield
care
belief
knowledge
patience
nurturing
girds me

with or without
all that
i still fear exposure

it all
falls off
on occasion
A [M]other Look

Somehow, during the ensuing years, that uniform became an armour that I thought must shield my personal self and protect me from my students as their armour would do for them. From this perspective, when my shield of understanding and patience failed, I gave up the battle, avoided the plain.

After I had my first child and returned to the classroom, I saw the students very differently. I was aware that my teaching changed. At that time, I was dealing with very deep challenges about how I viewed life. My child had suffered a brain hemorrhage when he was born. My personal plain was no longer golden. My life view had darkened and I struggled to keep it light. If these children in front of me only knew what my son’s life was like, what my life was like . . . . But I never told them. I felt I could not use the classroom for some kind of soap box about compassion and tolerance of differences. I also did not think they deserved my hard luck story.

Now I look long and hard at how I have changed since I have become a mother. My mothering instincts reach through the teacher persona and allow me freedom in my dress. I am not so concerned with my teacher suit. Instead, I look longer and harder at the children in front of me and find some communion in our vulnerability. I have learned from the teachings of my own son.
Golden Boy

oh g/old/en boy
how you guide
me a/cross
my per/son/al p[l]ain

vulner/ably strong
you di/splay
[d]reams of hope
am/id the struggle

in y/our need
we strive
for the idea/l
inside it all
and ex/pose
star[e]s that gl/are
at the imp/er[f]ect
Over the years of my mothering/teaching, the roles have been fused. One composite of beings and roles, I now stand imperfect in my classroom with my students. I do not pretend to be, I am and I allow them to be. Now that I have explored the hermeneutic, I cannot fight my boys at the back. I try not to set up a me versus them structure. Encouraged I position them about the room not to divide and conquer, but to help them take off their armour. If I break up the power structures and power struggles, I feel I can embrace the circle of the classroom and allow the classroom to embrace me. Still I must be on my guard. I must calculate, articulate, contrive, balance. Focus all those parts of me on the common goal of the classroom. And my students, too, must learn to balance, turn one side out at a time—as I had wanted Chuck to do.

They can come out from behind their armour, but with a careful attention to the purpose. Without the structure, without a goal, without the tension, these students do not have anything to balance. The weight is all on them and it proves too much a burden. If my writing has illuminated anything for me about my teaching methods, it is the absolute need for my own power. I have always abrogated it. Instead, I embraced the students in the hope that they would give up their power without a struggle. Some students do not need to struggle, do not need to test the hegemony. Others have too much struggle already, know nothing else.
They need a different armour. I must tend to that.

Language Learning

After twenty years of teaching, I needed my writing to let me understand the vicissitudes of the battle. Writing brought it all out in the open: gender, role, power, desire. It happened in the ebb of a tide with the water rolled back for me to see. Momentarily, as if I wrote in sand, I played with different slants, and saw the individual grains in different shades. But writing has not carried me out to sea; instead, it has grounded me to the root of my becoming an English teacher. My writing has allowed me to glory in the wonder of language. My hermeneutic exploration only exists by and because of my work and play with language.

Language . . . is by itself the game of interpretation that we all are engaged in every day. In this game nobody is above and before all the others; everybody is at the center, [everybody] is "it" in this game. This process of interpretation takes place whenever we "understand." (Jardine, 1992, 10-11)

Language, the interweaving of the symbolic and semiotic, creates and ex/presses the text/ure of my life. Deconstruction, the unweaving, does not unravel it all, but examines the fibre with all strengths and weaknesses, sees other meanings embedded in the interstices of the weave, there and not there. My writing creates the metaphors and becomes the reality that I live.

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Obsolete Thought
(the pen as metaphorical penis)

Writing
without
a
pen is
no
problem
when

the composing is done
with my user-friendly
responsive acceptance
of a light touch that
dares disturb a dream
coaxes, shapes, plans
new visions processed
into inspiration as a

blossom
on a
screen.

powerful new metaphor
my box full of tricks
replaces the genitalia of
old expectations with
a feeling for newborn
harkening of head and
heart from the heated
hand of woman writing
The metaphors in my poetry reveal connections I would not make in the practice of my daily lessons. A reflective moment creates them and they direct me to a deconstructive mode. I push past old meanings and find new ones that I cannot deny. Have they always been there, hidden behind dull routines and worn out expressions? The power of this inquiry has provided an enduring energy that is embracing and creative. It is not an impulsive surging energy, but a patient one, a trusting one. In seeking reasons, understandings, guidance, I know it is there; it will be there.

Now, having said good-bye to this class, I continue to question the successes and failures, and evaluate the events. They are not etched in stone, but are momentary marks in the sand, part of a process for all of us. Now, some six months later, I smile when Neil approaches me and asks if I will be teaching grade eleven next year. I feel excitement when the counsellor rings my classroom to tell me that Chuck, who transferred out to an alternative program, was back at the school asking for me. And Paul, who passed me in the hall the other day, looked right into my face with a smile and said, "Hi, Mrs. Wittman!" I know I would always have enjoyed such contact, but through my writing I have learned to appreciate much more.

Across my teaching land, from bog to battlefield and plain and then seashore, I met warriors in armour,
discovered shining, faceted gems, picked up the threads amid the weaving. All connected in metaphor, all predicated here in the language. Subject Action Object Place.
subject  action  place

time

objectified
modified
metaphorized
configurated
bifurcated
then  now
\===/  \\
\=/  \\
\=/  \\
\==/  \\
\=/

intertwined
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bric-a-brac
of
being
a bra ca da bra
fabric
of
lives
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