A personal account of how one adult education teacher teaches writing to her college age students. Particular attention is paid to her own emergence as a writer.

Writing and Teaching Writing

I was a college senior before I ever realized that I had the ability to write poetry. In high school, I wrote assignments, but never really wrote anything on my own. My assignments were easy, and I generally breezed through them, but never thought much about writing beyond the classroom. During my senior year of college, my close friend Michael was killed in a motorcycle. I was having a hard time focusing on my schoolwork and my creative writing professor took notice. She pulled me aside and told me that I needed to focus on my writing because I was suddenly all over the place with I was putting on paper; she suggested that I write about Michael to help bring closure to his death.

I sat down that night and tried to write about the accident, but in the end it sounded like a news report and it really wasn't a good piece of writing, but I turned it in anyway. The next class when we got our papers back, mine had no grade. Instead, my professor wrote a note that told me to schedule an appointment with her before the next class session. When I met with her, she asked me one question: Did I cry when I wrote the paper? I told her that I hadn't and she said, "Then you didn't write about your friend." She explained that I needed to just write about whatever I was feeling and then sort through it afterwards.
When I sat down to write later that night, I started out by writing a letter to Michael, but it ended up being a poem- a long, sad poem. I was surprised by the poem and by the number of tears that fell while I wrote it. I was also surprised the difference in my attitude afterwards. I hadn't forgotten anything, but I could focus now that the heaviest part of what I was feeling was gone. I handed my paper in and received an "A".

Since that day, I have found myself with pen in hand when my emotions are running high. Whether I am sad, angry, or extremely excited, I often turn to my notebooks. And, more often than not, the results are poetic. I don't sit down and say, "I will write a poem." It just happens that way. I suppose that is what makes poetry what it is-emotions, feelings, random thoughts. I am more creative at times like those, and I have come to realize that it's a wonderful ability to have. I have seen others who were angry or hurt yell and scream and say things that they regret later. I tend to write when I am angry enough to yell. I scream at my journal, so to speak, and in the end I can calmly deal with issues.

My own experiences with writing have shaped me as a teacher. I realized after several years of reading the same essays over and over, that the students weren't really writing, rather they were regurgitating words and information. I didn't want to read them any longer and knew that I had to do something about it. I started reading every book, journal, and magazine I could find on teaching writing. There were great things, but most of them were on the process of writing and I had that part down. I needed to find a way to give my students worthy topics, to give them stories. Then one day, while reading a copy of *Poets and Writers* magazine, I saw an ad for a book by Heather Sellers, and it all came back to me. Heather Sellers was that professor who had made me write about the
death of Michael until I cried; she was the one who opened that door for me. And suddenly, it all made sense. I just needed to open the door for my own students.

My very next class was spent discussing our lives and the importance of it. Together we discussed how little things make all the difference, and how we really do have a lot to say. We talked of injustices, anger, fear, humor, humility, and the likes. Later, I asked my students to write about something they wanted to talk about from their own lives, and for the first time in five years of teaching, I read new and exciting essays. I read strong pieces with personal investments.

Now, I start every semester discussing how much we really have to say and how important it is to say it out loud, in black and white. And now, every semester, I find myself buried beneath a sea of great writing and great stories. It just took me realizing that the way I connected myself to writing was the same way my students needed to. We all needed an outlet, and writing became the tool we could use to strive for the things we wanted from life.

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Author Note

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