

WRITING ABOUT WRITING

For most of us, our first attempts at creative writing were in elementary school. By third or fourth grade, our teachers would have us write compositions for homework. We would be given a topic—a favorite, after returning to school from summer vacation, was what I did this summer. This exercise brought together a number of skills: handwriting (we had spent a couple of years on the Palmer method); grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, vocabulary, and finally creativity, imagination, telling a story.

We would turn in our compositions, and our teacher would mark them, correcting our grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and spelling. And we would be given a grade, usually ranging from A to F. Sometimes, the teacher would add a comment. It always made me happy if something nice was said about my composition. I liked writing compositions. I believe some of us may have even been called up to the front of the room to read our compositions to the class.

By junior high school, we had different teachers for different subjects. My favorite subjects were English and Social Studies, and my favorite teachers became the English and Social Studies teachers. It may have been around this time that my mother made the observation that “writers are immortal.” I was reading a lot, visiting the library at least once a week, and working my way through my favorite authors like Dickens and Dumas. My mother was right. They had been dead for a century, but to me, they were still alive. I never conceived of myself as anyone who could write a book, but I always enjoyed any written assignments we were given, and it continued to make me happy if my teacher said something nice about my effort.

Our junior high school had a literary magazine, “The Knowlton Herald,” and I submitted a few pieces. I did not presume to be a writer, but as Irving Weinstein inquired 10 years later, did I write because I had something to say, or did I just want to see my name in print? There were several students, including a few younger than me, who really were writers. To my mind, they were both more talented and more ambitious. And a few of my friends (Bob Epstein and Sol Rauch) also submitted pieces. Mel Schulman was designated to write the story of our class when we graduated. By 14, almost all of us in 9BR were writers.

What did I write for the Knowlton Herald? A couple poems, and a story about “The Richest Man in the World” which I “adapted” from Richard Haliburton. I felt uncomfortable about that story. I rationalized that what I had done was “research.” I took the information that Haliburton provided, and put it in my own words. Still, it felt like stealing.

Three years later, in my last year at Stuyvesant High School, I wanted to write something for our high school literary magazine, “The Caliper.” I would not meet Irv Weinstein for another five years, but I was coming face to face with the question he put to me: do I have something to say, or do I want to see my name in print. I knew the editor; he encouraged me to submit something, anything. I would have my name in print. I came up with the idea of writing about graphology—how one’s handwriting reveals one’s personality. I went to the library, did some research, put the information in my own words, got a handwriting sample from a friend (Irving Plotnick), analyzed it, and had an article. I should note that my mother was very proud to see my articles and poems in my junior high and high school magazines.

While in high school, I met someone in the neighborhood who really wanted to be a writer. His name was David Futornick. He was not in my class, I don’t know how we met, nor how he knew I was interested in writing, but here was a 16-17 year old who had the fire in his belly. He was sure we could write a play together. I did not know how to tell him that I had no idea how to write a play, but for a few months I would go to his apartment, and we would kick around ideas, and he would write. For a while, it was a Western. Then, it was a mystery. I had the feeling I was humoring him. We would invent characters, try to come up with a plot. I could not figure out what we were doing. Somehow I extricated myself, and that was the end of that.

Both Stuyvesant and CCNY had school newspapers. If I really thought of myself as a writer, I would have joined the staff. Instead, I rationalized that I had to earn money, and could not be on the staff of the school newspaper and work. I confined my writing to the required reports and term papers, though I did serve as economics editor of the CCNY Journal of Social Studies, which carried a term paper that I wrote.

And I kept a journal. Girls kept diaries; some boys kept journals. I told no one. I would buy small note pads, and in the evening, summarize the events of the day. Rereading them, I was astounded how boring and repetitious the

entries were. Sometimes, days and even weeks would pass without an entry. The note pads accumulated; some were lost. I would quit for a while, but then pick it up again.

College, the ILGWU Training Institute, and graduate school all required writing skill, and I rose to the occasion. My mother died, and in her will she wrote, that if I became a writer, I should take as a pen name, either Goldstein or Tsirelson. (My mother keeps popping up in almost everything I write.)

My first assignments as an organizer required writing leaflets. (I not only wrote them, I laid them out, typed them, did the art work, and ran them off on the mimeograph machine.) When I went to work for The Jewish Labor Committee, I edited a news service for the labor press called Labor Reports. In that role, I would give assignments to two “real” writers, Alton Levy and Harry Gersh, who did monthly columns. I wrote a monthly editorial and culled and rewrote stories about labor and civil rights. My mother would have been proud, but she died in 1951, and this was 1956.

All my jobs since, had writing components: editing newspapers and newsletters, writing reports and speeches, memos and news releases. At the US Commission on Civil Rights, I wrote or edited over 50 State Advisory Committee reports. They all carried my name. The writing assignment I liked best were drafting the decisions (and dissents) as a member of the Board of Review of the Department of Employment and Training. For many years, I was the resident poet at whichever agency I worked, writing poems for special occasions. I had been doing that for years for my family and friends. Another way to say something and get your name in print is to write a letter to the editor. I have done that from time to time. It is easy to get printed in the local weeklies, The Brookline Tab, and The Jewish Advocate. Much harder in the New York Times.

After retiring, I started to write my memoirs, found a class called “Telling Your Story” and have been grinding out hundreds of pieces. Philip Roth has quit, but I keep on going. Now, I have to figure out how to pull them all together. The writing is easy, the organizing and editing are not. I am sure there is a way to research how to organize and edit one’s writings. I believe it is now called “Google.” Each year I promise I will have it done by the end of the year. Instead, I sit at the computer and write another piece.

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