

No matter what the response, the speaker takes one giant step toward freeing herself from the child/parent communication structure when she completes the three stage process. Then she has to do the whole thing over again. And then again. Many times—until the habit is broken, until the buttons are too rusty to be pushed. Only then will adult communication be an accessible alternative in other authority situations, such as in a romance or marriage, such as in a job, or in the English classroom when a student has to write an essay.

If a student realizes that he is stuck in a rhetorical pattern of communication that is structured on the parent/child pattern, and if his parents are dead, he has a problem. How can he return to the source of the habit to break the pattern? This question serves for others who have outlived their parents and who never profaned the child/parent relationship with statements of self, anyone: a husband or employee, a person who quakes childishly before bankers and judges, or a shopper who buys something without wanting it because the sales clerk has been so patient. Simply, he can find a surrogate on whom to practice or he can practice on his parents in his imagination, perhaps in writing (James 96).

Here I have been talking about students, couching almost everything I say in terms of students and teachers, because I know my audience. These ideas about speaking self in order to overcome emptiness are valid in the student/teacher relationship. However, these ideas apply to us as well as to our students. In our lives, we are often caught in child-like communication; sometimes we compensate by offering parent communication in a few spheres of our lives, perhaps in the classroom, perhaps in the family, perhaps with our colleagues—wherever. Ultimately, to teach writing, in the form of composition or of literature, we have to know ourselves and communicate ourselves as well as we expect others to know and communicate. We have to be adult. That means speaking to an audience instead of for an audience. That means speaking the truth without apology, without manipulation, without survival or demand or anger.

Once we feel the tangible difference between speaking in a safe and appropriate manner and speaking in an adult, authentic manner, we will know the ineffable. Also, we will know more about listening. Then we will lead our students to achieving true communication in which the three corners of Kinneavy's triangle are intact. Every assignment will lead them there, if they are ready to be led. We will teach the essential elements of communicating and the workings of communication patterns. A journal assignment will lead students somewhere important. We will be able to enunciate for our students when they have tapped their own truth and said it badly, and when they have avoided their own truth although they have said it well. Then we will be the authority who does not have to like students for them to feel comfortable about their own survival; nor will they have to like us. We will offer to students, by our example and by our teaching, an opportunity to know an alternative to the parent/child communication system that breeds empty rhetoric.

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ENGAGEMENTS: TEACHING AND LEARNING

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"Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known."

Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*

"Anything processed by the mind is fiction."

Paul Fussell in a lecture at the
University of Rhode Island,
Winter 1979

I. Fall, 1969

On a Monday morning at nine o'clock I stride into my first freshman composition class as a college teacher. To this task I come prepared by three years of graduate study, trained to fathom the depths of Melville's art and to discern Hawthorne's multiple vision of reality. My graduate education has also strongly influenced my attitude of what constitutes a college teacher. One must be formal, one must be rigid, one must, above all, have "standards." But that Monday morning as I stand there facing a sea of black faces, the sons and daughters of sharecroppers from rural Virginia, the best I can do is to call the roll, addressing people as either Miss or Mister. I realize that their needs are much more basic than are my concerns about the intricacies of literary form.

The first assignment, a response to a print of Andrew Wyeth's "Spring Sun," produces the following paragraph by Rosemary Adams.

Expression never showed so wonderful before. Expression never so beautiful. One man may be he has trouble,

maybe he belongs to a world of fantasy. A world where no problems lay. Just his own world of make-believe. Nothing so beautiful as this painting with so much feeling. It brings out a sense of pride where all bad things can always work out. Put your trouble aside for a while make life joyful. A beautiful day sunny and bright, full the room with light—some dark some light—build his world around one light. Four walls to watch a bed to lay his head and rest his soul. On the other hand may be sadness. His problem can only be helped by someone with knowledge, know how to cope with sorryness, unwanted, distressed feeling. A feeble minded mind not knowing which had to hold, not being certain of the judgments of life. Reaching out for help not knowing which way to turn. The unbrisk of his afflicted image of a lonely person, he watches from his bed side the brightness of the day not knowing which road to take.

My first response to this is bewilderment. But then I realize two things: Rosemary's writing, although suffering from severe syntactical, grammatical, and mechanical difficulties, expresses in a special way what the print is about; secondly, I do not know where to start to help her become a better writer. Of course I can make correct reference to the proper sections of the *Harper Handbook* and the corresponding exercises in the *Workbook*, but I know that I am pathetically unprepared to correct the other problems.

II. Fall, 1976

Seven years later one September night the phone rings at home, and my wife answers it.

"John," she calls. "It's for you. I think it's long distance." I pick up the phone. "Hello."

"Hello, is this Dr. Roche, the new director of the Writing Center at Rhode Island College?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, this is Jay Hughes from the *New York Times*."

My God, I think, I've finally made it. Fame and Fortune. Or if not one of those rewards, at least a write up in the *Times* fall Survey of Education. I have been coordinating the writing program for less than two weeks, yet somehow I am not surprised to think that the *New York Times* would call for information about the "Writing Problem."

Unfortunately, such is not to be. Mr. Hughes sells books for the *Times*.

The writing crisis has myriad causes, but certainly one of its effects is that English teachers have become aware that they usually are not prepared either by experience or by training to correct the problems of students with severe writing deficiencies. When the phone rings that night, I, in my vanity, assume that part of the world wants to recognize and celebrate my gradually acquired knowledge about the teaching of composition.

III. Summer, 1963

During the summers while I am in college I work as a life-guard at Third Beach in Middletown, R.I. One of my duties there is to teach swimming, primarily to children ranging in age from 4 to 12. I have always been a good swimmer; in fact, I've spent most of my life around the ocean. But when I have to teach someone else how to swim, I know that I need to do more than say, "Get in the water, and swim." This directive accurately describes what I do in the water, but it is not enough for the beginner.

In order to prepare myself for my first teaching experience I do what any teacher does. I go to the library, read books on how to teach swimming, and take notes. After this exercise I begin to feel like X. J. Kennedy's golden goose who in trying to analyze how it lays an egg "died looking up its crotch to see how its sphincter worked." When you break down any skill you begin to see what you should have known: multiple activities must be engaged in, sometimes these activities occur simultaneously, sometimes consecutively. But people have to be taught "how" and "when" to do "what" so they can glide effortlessly through the water.

Before they move this way, they have to learn how to move their arms, head, and legs, how to kick and stroke and breathe properly, how to glide, how to float. People's fears of going in the water and of putting their heads into the water have to be dispelled. I look at myself as a swimmer and recall, first, how I learned to swim, and second, how I do swim.

I have to isolate these skills, put them in a developmental order, then teach them by clearly defining each task. Indeed, I have to actually demonstrate each skill by getting into the water myself.

I put together all these bits of information and start the lessons. Over the summer I demonstrate each skill I want them to learn. I work individually with them. I am generous in my praise because I know that if they do not feel confident about their abilities and therefore comfortable in the water, they will never learn how to float. In order to float these kids have to find a balance between their internal and external worlds, they need integrity, they have to be composed. I get so I can tell merely by the feel of their shoulders as I hold them in the water if they are ready to float.

Then I have to say as Walt Whitman does in "Song of Myself,"

Long have you timidly waded holding a plank
by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to
me,
Shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

IV. Summer, 1974

Not with dashing hair but desperate to find a continuing position teaching English, I am asked to come to Manhattan, Kansas, for an interview. When I get off the plane the temperature is 108°, my luggage has been lost, and as I get into Don Stewart's car my shirt collar catches on the window and rips.

With this as a start I wonder about the success of my interview at Kansas State University. But it goes well. After returning to Rhode Island I realize, however, that the plains of Kansas are not for me. I write to have my name dropped from the list of candidates.

But the more I think about my interview and the more I discuss it with people, I discover that many of the questions I was asked and many of the points I discussed, particularly about the teaching of writing, go around and around in my head.

I am familiar with the ways different textbooks teach students how to write, but at Kansas I come upon a method that intrigues me. In their writing program they use William Kerrigan's *Writing to the Point: Six Basic Steps*, a book which teaches writing as a highly formal structure. But Kerrigan himself comes across like the barker at a circus. He entices, cajoles, and encourages the students. He speaks directly to them. He tells them, "If you follow my six steps, I guarantee, yes, guarantee, that you can write

a unified, developed, organized, coherent three paragraph theme."

Class time, I am told, consists of actually using these steps. The students write in class, and the teacher works with problems as they arise.

At first glance this program seems highly paradoxical. Do they teach writing as a structure, as the use of Kerrigan implies or do they teach it as a process, as the classroom work implies? Is writing, in fact, a structure or is it a process? Is one method more applicable to certain kinds of students? I have always known the way I teach writing—and the way virtually all textbooks teach it—is not the way I write. How did I learn to write?

My trip to Kansas, in addition to producing a ripped shirt and the most spectacular sunset I have ever seen, gives me much to think about. The second day there I am taken out to Tuttle Creek Dam and stand on a small rise of land. The prairie surrounds me, limitlessly.

V. Fall, 1975

I read scores of books on composition theory.
I look at most of the next textbooks for students.
I read articles on the teaching of composition.
I think about myself as a writer.

VI. Fall, 1964

As a nineteen-year old junior, minoring in history at Marquette University, I take a two semester course from Father F. Paul Prucha, a tall thin scholarly Jesuit, whose inherent gracefulness is complimented by his flowing cassock. The course, "The Western Movement," begins with Frederick Jackson Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and for thirty weeks traces three centuries of movement across the North American continent.

When we get to Ohio, or rather the Northwest Territory, the assignment is to read one of the volumes in C. E. Carter's *The Territorial Papers of the United States* and write a twenty page historical essay.

I do, and the result is less than successful. Up until now I have not given much thought to writing. In general, it is something I just do, like swimming.

For a series of Friday afternoons I sit in the office of Fr. Prucha, the friend and student of Frederick Merk, Oscar Handlin, and Arthur M. Schlesinger. He teaches me the processes that I must be conscious of if I am to be a better writer. Each Friday there is a clearly defined task to be accomplished. As he works at his desk in an office on whose walls hang prints of various Indian chiefs, I work on my assignment and as questions or problems develop I ask for help. "Should I include all of this information?" "I think this would be a good way of organizing the essay. What do you think?" "How can I connect the ideas in this sentence with the preceding one?" He has me asking the right questions. In this tutorial arrangement, he is generous with his time and with his praise.

I never ask him, but I know he could teach people how to float, too.

VII. Fall, 1973

Nine years later I have a one-year contract in the English Department at the University of Rhode Island. Diagonally across from my office is Don Kunz's. He, like Fr. Prucha, has an inherent grace which I deeply admire. Whether cooking, canoe-

ing, or teaching, he seems to be "in grace," carrying his tasks before him lightly, as if borne along on a great tide.

We talk a great deal about teaching—how to do it, what it does for you, what it does to you. I go to a class of his and from the back I watch him teach. He moves around as he asks questions, but the movement is connected with the questions; this, I think, is the dancer and the dance. The students are at ease and answer . . . and ask other questions. I, too, want to answer.

I remember Whitehead's definition of a teacher—an ignorant man thinking—and I realize that is what all of us, whether students or teachers, can hope to be.

By word and action Don shows me that having a "good" class need not occur only occasionally, but it can be controlled by careful preparation, by use of questions that generate questions, and by orchestrating the class hour.

He teaches me, too, that when one endeavors to change his methods of teaching he encounters emotional as well as intellectual problems. Readiness for change is every bit as important as awareness of new materials and resources.

From Kansas, Don knows the limitless prairie.

VIII. Spring, 1964

In my sophomore year I decide to change my major from history to English. Right away, I assume I am behind and feel the need to catch up. So I visit an English professor, Dr. Richard Cunningham, I have never had in class and never met. But I know he teaches courses in American literature, and I want to find out what I have missed.

I ask for a reading list, he gives it to me, and asks why I want a syllabus if I am not taking his class.

I explain my feelings of being behind, and he laughs and says he feels that way all the time.

I return in a few weeks and ask him some questions about *The House of the Seven Gables*, one of the books on his syllabus. Later he asks me where I am from. We talk about New England, historic preservation, and colonial houses in Newport; I realize I have not done this before; I have not chatted with any of my professors.

The talk comes back to Hawthorne, and he suggests I look at *The American Renaissance* by F. O. Matthiessen. He taps on a fat blue copy of the book which rests on his desk.

These discussions and chats continue, and I begin to learn that my education is not limited to credits and class hours. I am also learning that my education is my responsibility. I have to take the initiative.

I take a class from him and find that his manner with me is also the way he teaches. He doesn't lecture—which is the method I am used to—but he walks in with his copy of *Moby-Dick* stuffed with sheets of dittoes and slips of paper. He reads passages and asks us to respond—to images or style or tone or whatever. He reads from critical works and gets us to think. He questions us, pushes us, stimulates us. He has a good time; he likes what he does. As the hour progresses, I can feel that ideas are being developed that are heading somewhere. I have to pay attention, or I will miss out. I seem to have a different kind of job in class now.

Mr. Cunningham offers me a model of what a teacher can do and be, and I tuck it away some place in my mind. He is a superb guide who makes me want to learn.

IX. Spring, 1957

One April morning I sit on a wooden bench in a hall at Berkeley Peckham School in Middletown waiting for my monthly

meeting with a guidance counselor. Since the fall I am continually being questioned about where I am going to college and what I am going to do with my life. While waiting there that day I know I have to tell the poor man something, and a word—an occupation—briefly flickers in my mind: teacher. I could be a teacher. Little did I know that that decision would produce an irrevocable chain of events. For once you made a choice like that and uttered it publicly, you couldn't back off. At least not in 1957.

The guidance counselor tells my parents. They, in turn, tell other relatives. At the next family gathering I hear, "So, you want to be a teacher. Good choice. Your Uncle Frank was a teacher." I respond by smiling and nodding. Somehow it seems I'd made an important decision, but I don't exactly know how it happened and wonder if other important choices in my life will be made like this.

X. Summers, 1978-81

For four summers I teach college English courses at the Adult Corrections Institution in Cranston, R.I. A question I am asked both by people in and outside of prison is, why teach there? I realize that teaching at the ACI offers me a chance to apply my skills in a new area. Partly I want to see if I can do it—if I can teach and if we can learn in this situation. I do it for the students, but I also do it for me. More and more I've come to realize the selfishness involved in teaching.

What is it like? At the beginning of each course I am overwhelmingly depressed and wonder why I am doing this again. Prisons oppress and depress. On a typical July day as I check in at 4:15 half a dozen guards armed with rifles are on their way to towers to watch over the inmates who go out into the yard after dinner. I leave the summer behind and walk up to a glassed in booth which houses the guard who controls the gate. Through a half inch slit he shoves me a visitor's form which asks my name, address, and whether or not I am a felon. I complete the form; he opens the first gate. I need to take off my belt and wristwatch and empty my pockets before I go through the metal detector. Most times for some reason I have to repeat passing through the eye because the machine buzzes out that metal is present. Finally a button clicks, a heavy metal door opens, and I am now two doors inside Medium Security. I go through another gate and climb up a metal circular staircase—two floors—to the education area. After I identify myself another guard unlocks a door and I see my students—all dressed in tan with ACI stamped in black on their shirts and trousers. They taunt the guard with "we have to go to college now." The classroom looks like one, with desks and blackboards. It is, however, an interior room with no windows. As the guard leaves, he locks the door to the room, from the outside.

Here is an oversimplified but relatively accurate profile of the people in that room: they make consistent use of the victim stance; they have a sense of their own self-importance; they usually show a lack of empathy; they resent authority—even among themselves; they are afraid—afraid of being afraid; they are impulsive; they feel they are unique; they believe they are decent people; they won't accept responsibility; they define power in terms of manipulating people; they assume that all other people think the way they do.

That's the class in general. Specifically, it sounds like this:

At the beginning of the first meeting I pass out a syllabus and refer to that word, syllabus, in my explanation of what I expect from them.

Wah-dah-fugs a syllabus?

I beg your pardon.

I said, wah-dah-fugs a syllabus?

I explain and remember to watch my language.

In the story I asked you to read for today "Indian Camp" by Hemingway how would you characterize the relationship between the father and the son at the beginning of the story? Charlie?

Another voice, before Charlie opens his mouth: You can't pay no attention to him. He just a fuggin punk.

I'm not sure I know the expression "fuggin punk." What do you mean?

Come on. You know what I mean.

No. I'm not sure. Charlie, what about the father and the son?

It seems weird to take the son along to the camp. I guess they don't get along very well.

See, I told you. Charlie don't know wah-dah-fug he's talking about.

What do you see that Charlie doesn't? Give me specific examples from the story.

We read and discuss "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" whom they characterize as "J. Al." I ask them for the next class to write an essay in which they discuss their own Prufrockian or non-Prufrockian tendencies. Most still agree that Prufrock is a "punk," but a few students in their essays, although they start out viewing him negatively, come to look at Prufrock more sympathetically, especially if they see him in terms of their own inadequacies.

I return the essays with grades and there are a number of D's and F's. I steel myself for their response.

Why you give me a D-?

Because at the first class I explained to you my grading standards. A "D" demonstrates to me that there are some important things you need to work on in your writing. These are the standards I ordinarily use. Do you think I should make adjustments—really make the class easier—because it's taught in prison?

But.

Do you want a watered down course?

No, but I still don't like the fuggin D-.

Good. Let's look at the paper and see what you can do to improve it.

OK.

The teacher and inmates must work to change a prison room into a class room; the inmates must change into students. Change is frightening, but it is particularly so for people with fragile inner worlds.

We have known for a long time that many people's sense of worth—the value they place on the image of self—is directly related to the number of situations they control. Prison eats upon self-image; education helps restore it.

XI. June, 1966

The summer of my twenty-first year I graduate from college; physically I am immortal; intellectually I am independent; I can do anything. I will go to graduate school to get a master's degree, but I am not sure if it will be in city planning, in American folk culture, or in English.

I credit this feeling primarily to the fact that I was required to engage in a liberal arts curriculum. In addition to my major in English and minor in history, I take courses in art history, French and German, comparative religion, but especially in philosophy—histories of ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy, logic,

ethics, metaphysics, epistemology. I cannot articulate the theory of the liberal arts—that will come later—but I know the concrete side; I know how it feels in the bones to have a liberal arts degree. Later on I will nod in agreement when I learn that the liberal arts are supposed to free us, that they are the arts considered worthy of a free man, that they help us grow.

Before I am accused of being dangerously innocent in my liberal arts-Jesuit heaven, this is also the summer reality grabs me by the neck. Two events occur. Three weeks after I graduate, my father dies unexpectedly; he is fifty years old. Two days after that, I receive a letter from the United States Army requiring my presence at a pre-induction physical at Fields Point in Providence, R.I. In 1966 this means an itinerary which runs Providence—Fort Dix, N.J.—Fort Polk, Louisiana—Vietnam.

These two events temporarily bind me, but my four college years, enmeshed in the reality of ideas, free me.

XII. Winter, 1980

Our youngest child Meaghan is in kindergarten and goes to school half day. One day she and I have lunch together. When it comes time for dessert, she gets the tin with cookies in it. She carries it to the table, puts it down, takes the cover off, and looks inside. She counts the contents and announces that there are fifteen cookies.

I wonder where this is heading. Meaghan asks how much is half of fifteen, and I think I see the ending: dessert for two.

But I am wrong.

I answer that half of fifteen is kind of complicated.

She asks, "Seven and seven is fourteen, right?"

"Yes."

"And eight and eight is sixteen, right?"

"Yes."

"Does that mean that eight and seven is fifteen?"

I answer yes and wonder how I can duplicate this scene.

XIII. Spring, 1967

My first year in graduate school is my wife's last year in college. She takes a course in philosophy of education and reads Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, and Dewey. But she also reads more contemporary writers. One is Jerome Bruner's *The Process of Education*. He points out that any subject can be taught on any level with intellectual integrity. I guess I have just assumed much about education—how it works and whom it is for. Since I've been four years old, I have been in school—on either one side of the desk or the other. I am too close to education to see it clearly. But these books give me a fuller perspective. My reading, however, is eclectic and idiosyncratic, but it will influence my teaching.

In addition to Bruner three other writers are important. One is Gilbert Highet and his book *The Art of Teaching*. Old fashioned and traditional, the book provides a textured basis to both start from and return to. Highet offers specific and concrete observation on what being a teacher requires. He boils it down to three items:

- one must know one's subject;
- one must like one's subject;
- and one must be interested in the concerns and problems of the particular age group one teaches.

These three points would appear self evident, but often they are not.

Another writer is John Holt who is very much a product of the 1960's. His books, *How Children Learn* and *How Children Fail*,

offer a humanistic approach to learning which I find appealing and reminiscent of my experience teaching swimming.

The other writer is more problematic. He is J. D. Salinger and the book is *The Catcher in the Rye*. The section where the title comes from is what I am talking about, the section where Phoebe and Holden discuss the future: Holden asks, "You know what I'd like to be?"

Then he announces: "Anyway I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to *catch* everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy."

Old Phoebe didn't say anything for a long time. Then, when she said something, all she said was, "Daddy's going to kill you."

Teachers sometimes catch—or meet—a body. Sometimes they miss completely and their charge goes over the edge of the cliff. I need to rethink this paradigm, this Catcher Syndrome, or I, too, will go over the edge. How does a person shift from being a protector to being a teacher who, in fact, teaches people to save themselves?

What a teacher should do is teach himself or herself out of a job. By the end of the course the teacher should be superfluous. The teacher disappears; the student is left alone and independent in the romantic field of rye.

XIV. Spring, 1983

I stand before a class of twenty-one kindergartners at the Jamestown School, Jamestown, R.I.

Class, this is Dr. Roche. He is a guest today and will have us write stories.

Thank you, Mrs. Hellewell. Let me see how many of you have brothers and sisters I know. What's your name?

Ryan.

Ryan what?

Ryan Baker.

Is your father Tim Baker?

Yes.

I think I've seen you at your father's pharmacy.

(I go around the class and ask similar questions).

Folks, I'd like you to think of three things you really like or really like to do.

Mrs. Hellewell, what have you thought about?

This is embarrassing, but I can't think of anything.

That's OK, Mrs. Hellewell. Think about it some more, and I'll be back to you.

Ryan, what'd you think about?

My dog, my bike, and my basement.

(I go around the room and ask all of them the same question—even Mrs. Hellewell).

Now pick one of those three ideas—the best one.

Ryan.

I like my dog.

What about your dog do you like?

He does funny things.

What are some of those?

When he's hungry, he pushes the screen door with his nose and comes into the house.

Does he shut the door after him?