

Doing the Write Thing

Several years ago, Savitri, permanently brain-damaged and physically injured from an auto accident, limped into the classroom, dropped her backpack on the floor, and sat in the empty chair at a table with three other girls. One by one, each of those girls stood up and moved to other tables. I shot those girls horrified looks. Each gave me an excuse: the sun was too hot there—I couldn't see the board—my back was to you . . . Savitri, at the end of class on her way out the door, leaned in to me and said, "It's okay, Mrs. Rief. But I know, it wasn't from the sun."

Several days later, I handed the book *This Same Sky* (1992), a collection of poetry compiled by Naomi Shihab Nye to Savitri, hoping she would find a poem she liked, one that would speak to her. What this eighth grader found was far more than a poem. "Home" by Nasima Aziz, an Indian poet, spoke so personally to her that when she chose to read the poem aloud, a bridge was not only built between the writer and his reader, but also built between this young woman and her classmates. Two bridges that told her—and them—she was not alone in her longing.

Savitri longed to be normal, as she was before the auto accident in India a year earlier that left her unconscious for four months, and finally with double vision, an uncontrollable tremor in her right hand, a right foot that dragged heavily behind her as she walked, and limited short term memory. When she read aloud the lines, "Grief

grips my throat. I must go on/ Over the vanished years, into the empty room, /Come back, come back, come back . . ." (p. 146) every 14-year-old in that room knew it wasn't only India that Savi was longing for; it was her whole being—who she used to be and who she knew she would never be again. In the silence, Rachael asked, "Would you read that again?"

With the voice, the timing, and the confidence of a poet, Savitri breathed life into Aziz's words. In the spontaneous burst of applause that followed her reading, she smiled. In their lives, those students will never hear a more beautiful, passionate, or powerful reading of a poem. The breathtaking words of a poet from India, translated scrupulously in Nye's collection, published by a perceptive editor in a skyscraper in New York, touched a child's life. An entire classroom of peers understood in that moment what her life was like, and how painful her longing was.

And that poem and her reading led her to writing her own poetry: observations, beliefs, thoughts and feelings that helped her see the richness in life. She began to share the small moments of India—the little things that mattered deeply to her—with us. Through Savitri's writing, we began to see the world—and her—so much more clearly.

Now I have Matthew, with a limited IQ, an unlimited heart, and, at fourteen, already 6'5" tall, strong, and autistic. He entered our school in fifth grade, knees pulled to his chest as he rocked in the corner of the classroom. I want him in my classroom every day, where he sits at a table with three other students and reads and writes—perhaps more slowly—perhaps less prolifically—but always thoughtfully.

All of my students wrote in response to my reading from Cynthia Rylant's *But I'll Be Back Again*. After three minutes of writing, I asked if anyone wanted to read what he or she had written. Matthew raised his hand, prefaced his reading with, "Please don't anyone laugh—this is the truth," and he read:

I was beaten by my mom's boyfriend and she could not stop it. I was sent to a orphanage by my mom. A woman came to bring me home with her. I have a good life at her house. When I was 13 she told me where I came from.

No one laughed. I thanked Matthew. Other kids shared their writing. Matthew raised his hand again, looked around the room, and said, "Doesn't anybody want to ask me any questions?" They did.

Matthew writes and reads with his head and his heart—with a vision of who he is and what he wants to say, and a voice that is compelling. His is the reading and writing of truths—beliefs, feelings, opinions. What matters most in our classrooms is helping our students find the reading and writing that matters most to them, so that they will *want* to read and write, and therefore *will* read and *will* write. Our work is to build bridges, bringing literacy to our students *for life* and *to and from* their lives.

My classes are heterogeneously grouped. I have students who think a sentence ends at the end of a line, barely decoding words. I have other students who choose Maslow's *A Psychology of Being*, or Carl Sagan's *Contact*. And a full range of students in between.

At the beginning of the year, as we were *looking for the writing* that really mattered to us to write, I said I had found mine. A week earlier, my sister was hit by a drunk driver—head on. After a seven-hour operation, she now has 5 steel rods in one leg. This is ironic to us as a family; we grew up with an alcoholic father. I remember coming home from school, never knowing if he would be sober or passed out on the living room floor. My mother, or one of the three of us, spent many hours holding the car keys tightly in our fist, so he wouldn't get in the car and kill himself or anyone else. We

never gave him those keys, no matter how awful the obscenities he hurled at us.

I explained this all to my classes, saying I wanted to write a letter to the editor of the paper where that accident happened, because the woman who hit my sister had numerous drunk driving charges against her. No one ever held her car keys. I wanted to say that we all need to do things, no matter how difficult those things are, because they are the right things to do. Small in his seat and in voice, Peter raised his hand. "I know what that feels like. My father is an alcoholic, too." My heart skipped. Perhaps Peter, too, had found his topic.

Writing. It is one way for students to show us their knowledge, their questions, their opinions, their fears, their dreams, their imaginations. Their diversity. We should be encouraging and nurturing those diverse voices through writing, even though their topics may be uncomfortable and controversial.

If we encouraged and *taught* our students to know each other *differently*, to see another's perspective, then perhaps no child would ever have to ask again, as Anne Frank asked her father, "But why are *we* the only ones who have to register? It's just that they don't like us, isn't it, daddy?"

Paolo Freire reminds us that a person who reads is a person who can make the world hold still long enough to look at it critically. I believe the person who writes can do the same thing—look at the world more deeply and more widely. See that it is our diversity that makes us unique and gives us our strengths.

A hundred years ago, a child's world was his or her classroom. Today, the world is our classroom. We are asked to educate the world's children, who come to us with tremendous differences, both in strengths and needs—physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, economically, culturally, linguistically. It is through writing about meaningful, compelling topics that students come to know themselves and each other. It is the *write* thing to do.