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# A Letter from the Editors— Towards a Conversation:

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**I**t's cold, gray, and angry morning. A stiff breeze from the northwest has whipped the Big Lake into a turbid white-capped frenzy that's blowing the surf over the twenty-foot brownstone cliff I'm standing on and threatening to blow my hat off my head and into town. Go Red Sox. Maybe next year.

It's close to noon now. Just three hours away from leaving again to struggle for space on I-35 against huge pick-ups wagging trailers laden with boats and four-wheelers. Its always difficult to leave this place.

Besides racing through a set of papers, I've spent the morning closing down the cabin. I've finished stuffing the walls upstairs in the carriage house with R-38 batts; the ceiling will have to wait for my solitary trip in mid-November. And there'll be no running water when I come back. I've drained the system, said good-bye to the mice in the crawl space, winterized, dismantled my tomato garden on the balcony of the carriage house, and put my toys away. Linda has coached me into remembering what I've done so many times before but cannot trust my memory to accurately recall. Old people. It's starting to smell like team spirit.

I've taken another walk-about to make sure that I haven't forgotten something that might cost me some serious money. And, as I ascend the steep stairs to lock the sliding doors of the

carriage house, a couple of things occur to me. First, I built the thing. That realization always takes more than a moment to sink in. Secondly, I wrote a 250-page manuscript that includes at the tail-end of it some narrative, mostly humorous, about how I built it.

Before Linda and I had left the house in Bloomington for the cabin on Friday, I'd gotten a piece of unpleasant news. A rejection slip from a publisher. It's not the first one. And, I'm fairly certain now, those rejection slips will be followed by others. A blizzard of rejections. Guaranteed. Just in time for winter.

And I fully understand the reason for them. Before I began the manuscript, I knew what I was getting into. I knew going into it that the focus of my work—the fairly anonymous life and work of a carpenter driven by more than one addiction, how that work drew him from Texas to Lake Superior, how our chance meeting and development of an association drew me to understand the teaching enterprise from an entirely new perspective (the working title of the manuscript is *Teaching Fools*)—was slender, and that my potential audience might be too tiny to convince a publisher to take it on. We're talking about the "bottom line" here.

But I'm ok with all of that. And here's why. I had to write that piece. I had absolutely no choice in the matter. I was driven to it. I had suddenly found myself engaged in a complex and absorbing (yes, addictive) process of not only learning about a set of crafting skills that I knew so little about but also tentatively implementing. What's more, I was doing what I'd been carping at my students to do over these many years—"Write about what moves you, engages you"; "Write about what you have a passion for, or need to know or learn, or are curious about"; "Write about you and those things that enter your field of experience that excite you." I'm a visual learner. But, more than that, I learn by seeing and doing and then writing down what I've learned.

Most likely, no one beyond a small circle of family and friends will ever see what I've written in that manuscript. But,

because of what I've written, I've moved what I've learned and written into usable skills. I'll never forget them, despite all the brain cells I've fried. And those skills—the “invention” stage of a building project; the “planning” and “research” stage of discovering what's needed to do it, and whether it's a realistic venture; the “materials list” in preparation for getting started; the actual “composing” and “re-visioning” process; and the “editing” process of actually doing the “finish” work on the inside of the building—are so uncannily similar to the ones used in the process of writing any piece of writing one cares about.

This failure to find a publisher for my manuscript has paid unexpected dividends, though. Regularized writing always does. Over the past several years, I've been involved in a faculty development organization at Minnesota State University, Mankato, called the Valley Writing Project (VWP). This organization began in 1979 to promote writing across the curriculum, and it's succeeded handsomely at that. But recently those of us who plan and stage the annual workshops for VWP have found another important focus for our energies: the promotion of faculty writing. You know—the writing that all of us need to do as a consequence of reflecting on what we do in our classrooms and of collecting the research associated with projects we're pursuing? The writing that most of us have little or no time to do?

Our “Faculty Writing” workshops involve twenty faculty each winter in the task of helping them identify a prioritized list of writing projects they want and need to pursue (creative writers have always told me that it's better to have two or three of these going simultaneously). Once having located the most important one, they'll need to dedicate themselves—with the help of writing groups of faculty from a variety of disciplines who agree on the rules for meeting regularly, reading their members' drafts carefully, and commenting specifically on the strengths and weaknesses of those drafts—to developing that one project into something that can be submitted for presentation at a conference or for publication. We and our participants will meet as we always do in April to share our reports on our progress and on our perceptions of how those writing groups have contributed

to that progress.

Two things here. First, I can vouch for the effectiveness of the writing groups. I've become a more productive writer from having worked in one. I've found I need the pressure of the deadlines imposed by the meetings of my group. And I've learned a lot about my writing by allowing others to see and react to it. Let's face it: so much of our writing is all about audience. The writing group provides one, and, based on the instructions of the writer who's asking the group to read her piece, we as a group can assume the role of any audience we're prompted to take.

Secondly, a writing group proceeds without an artificial end-point for disbanding. So long as we all get along, we're in it until we retire. That's because our professional writing never stops. We write to teach, and teach to write. We constantly use our writing to reflect upon and re-assess what we're doing. No claims here from me about being a confident or excellent writer. Yet, it seems true that, the more we do write, the more natural it may seem for us to be doing it.

Our little five-person VWP presentation team—a couple of English and Humanities instructors; a chemist; a sociologist; and a social worker—are gathering our materials for this December's workshop. Part of that process requires that we put our money where our mouth is. We are our own five-person writing group. And, as of the beginning of this fall, we've settled upon a research and writing project that we'll be modeling in the workshop. Come this Wednesday, we'll be sharing portions of drafts on a research problem that, when it came to me, nearly caused me to careen off 169 on the way to work. A little voice asked me, "How, if at all, does our own professional writing affect the quality of our students' writing?" That is, how does what the writing projects we're involved in relate to what we do in the classroom? How does/can the process we use to write what we're writing impact upon our students' own writing process? How might our sharing of parts of our work with our students influence the way they look at writing, at us? The question assumes that we are all writing teachers. But it also assumes that

we are all active writers struggling to craft our work into shape the way we're hoping our students will. And we've engineered a session into this December's workshop to get our participants actively thinking about and testing a possible relationship between their writing and the writing they ask their students to do for them.

Investigating these questions will not be easy. Pursuing the investigation requires that we get other instructors to allow us to interview them, follow them around, visit their classes, do surveys of instructors and students. And, of course, we'll need to look at our own practices while at the same time looking back over the archives of previous workshops for a group that we might loosely identify as a "culture of writers" at MSU. But we're excited about the prospect of doing this research and detective work. And doing the writing.

So what? What might any of this have to do with all of us? Well...for my current purposes as editor of MEJ, it means keeping the lines of interactive communication going between me and you. This particular issue of MEJ has been a difficult one to find a sufficient number of submissions to fill. Who knows why? We're all busy. And that's not to say at all that the pieces represented in this issue are not excellent. They, indeed are, and I hope you love them all and find them immediately useful in your teaching. I'm particularly excited about the two essays—one by Scott Hall and the other by Melissa Brandt—on Tim O'Brien's intriguing novel *In the Lake of the Woods* and the conversation that these two essays invite about how to teach a novel that has become a very popular choice among high school and college instructors. I'm even more excited about the research Elizabeth Kirchoff shares about how we present ourselves as teachers in the classroom, the personae we assume, and the details we bring in about our selves and our "others" beyond that classroom that affect the way we teach and what our students learn. We've decided to award Elizabeth with the \$350 prize for this issue's best submission. Several other essays provided Elizabeth with stiff competition for the award.

But MEJ isn't about competition. It's about sharing the

work you're doing in your classrooms and the research you're immersed in. Short as well as long pieces, as you can see by scanning this issue. We're all writing teachers. And we're all writers.

That's why it's so important that you consider sending brief pieces to MEJ about your "teaching tips." We've all got them. And that's why I'm hoping that you can also respond editorially to one or more of the subjects we've listed on the invitation for "Letters to the Editor." Your time, like mine, is disappearing as we speak. So many bites being taken out of that "writing time" by meetings, class prep, grading, report writing, training sessions, administrative work—not to mention the good stuff, such as ferrying the kids to hockey practice at 4am and clog dancing practice at 7:30pm, balancing check books, and managing, actually, to speak to the ones we really care about.

We've included in our "Faculty Writing" workshop a session about "Time Management" that asks faculty to experiment with placing a yellow placard we furnish them on their doors with their names and an inscription that says: "WRITER AT WORK—COME BACK IN A HALF HOUR." That assumes that, with a little planning and a limited focus, one can actually do some constructive and intentional writing in 30 minutes. It's what I do.

I'm asking for 30 minutes of your time to help fill out the next issue of MEJ and to make that issue serve the greatest possible number of us. I'd really appreciate it, and I'll be looking forward to hearing from you.

Enjoy this issue.

Bill Dyer  
Co-Editor

*P.S. I want you to know that this is the second version of this little essay. The first was so much better (same subject, so much more polished and efficient). But last week someone stole the laptop I used to write and store it from my office. I've had to re-construct it. We've all had to do this sort of thing. But remember this—there's no ONE way to write an essay. And the loss of a piece of writing should not deter us from doing the writing. Period.*