
HOW I BECAME A WRITER

by

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My convoluted and elongated rationale evolved over the years, but the bottom line remains; it was my first year in a new school at a pivotal point in my life; new faces, new pecking order, new teacher, new rules. I was in the fourth grade at Westgate Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska, and early in the fall semester it surfaced that I was a terrible speller. In fact, I never did pass any of my spelling tests that year; not one. And, because Mrs. Miller always announced the scores on our tests as she handed them back, it became a real point of embarrassment. My already shaky self esteem plummeted, and as a result, my spelling got worse. Of course this was troubling to my teacher, and, through the regular parent/teacher conferences, this profound concern was transmitted to my parents. And, of course, this level of concern always cascades directly upon the head of the wayward student. If I interpreted their tone correctly, I was destined to be a failure and would probably be lucky to get a job digging ditches.

Mrs. Miller, trying to find something positive to relate to my parents, noted that I was, indeed, a good artist (at least by crayon and tempera paint standards). This revelation suggested a possible solution to move me onto the path toward improved spelling. And my parents, eager to advance my future from digging ditches to at least roofing or plumbing, agreed to try it.

I drew and colored to my hearts content. Then, once a week, I dutifully (probably at my mother's prodding) selected one of my creations and wrote a paragraph describing its intent. My mother then reviewed the short penciled text and underlined the misspelled words. It was then my task to look up each of those errors in a nice hardbound dictionary that my parents purchased and gave to me as incentive. I did think that was pretty cool, owning my very own collected words of the English language.

After scanning the pages and finding the correct spelling I wrote it down for my mother to review. Then, as instructed, I reprinted the entire corrected paragraph to help embed the proper alignment of letters. Using the dictionary, at first, seemed like a chore, but it did introduce me to that source of words, and I suspect my vocabulary increased more than my spelling skills.

The unintended result of this exercise was that I began to enjoy writing those little paragraphs. It dawned on me that the words described the images in my head as well or better than my drawings. Why bother with that middle step? I soon stopped drawing and just wrote the stories based upon what I saw in my warped little brain. And, of course, my mother dutifully praised my efforts, which encouraged me to write even more, and, as they say, the rest is history.

I have been writing prose every since.

In college I took narrative and expository writing and eventually gained the courage to try creative writing. In that class one of our assignments was to produce ten short story outlines by the next session. We discussed the process in class, so I set about my task, jotting down various thoughts for story lines and plots, each in a succinct, no nonsense manner, trying to capture the essence of each potential piece.

Sitting in the student center, with my outlines spread before me, I attempted to rework them into a more formal structure. As it would happen, a friend stopped by to talk. He noticed my work and picked up a few of the sheets to see what I'd written.

"Didn't know you wrote poetry," he remarked.

"I don't," I replied.

"Huh. Looks just like poetry. And it's pretty good."

"Naw. Just outlines for stories."

He laid down the sheets and prepared to leave. "Don't know. Think you're a closet poet ... and you don't know it." He smiled and departed.

But he got me thinking. I shared some of my outlines with a few other literary types that I knew. Sure enough, they thought they were reading poetry. Thus encouraged, and liberated from the burden of so many words, I tried my hand at that genre and later took a poetry class and eventually attended the Community Writers Workshop at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. I got a few pieces published and, well, became a "poet."

Over the years I've bounced back and forth, enjoying the writing of both prose and poetry. And, so, you'll have to find some of my work and you'll have to be the judge if I've been more successful using one vehicle over the other. Or, for that matter, whether I've been successful in either. But no matter, I have to thank Mrs. Miller for shoving me onto the right path, and I have to be thankful for modern computer technology, because if it weren't for the spell checker, I'd still be a pretty poor speller.

~ THE END ~

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