

GROWING MY GARDEN OF WORDS

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It was my mother who inspired me to write. When I was nine she gave me my first scrapbook and, with it, a column clipped from our local newspaper. It was dated December 8, 1951—two years before I was born—by my mother’s black-ink fountain pen and titled *10 YEARS AGO from the Evening Citizen*. This part—circled by a red ballpoint pen that has since bled pink onto the now-yellowed paper—mentions my mother’s regular correspondence with a girl from Great Britain girl during World War II:

Jane Gingras of Ashland got
first hand information from her
pen pal, Marie Lynn of Newport,
England on the bombings.

“This is where you got your name from, Lynn,” Mom proudly proclaimed while handing me the news clip.

“Cool! Someday *I’d* like to have a pen pal,” I responded after reading the article. My mother beamed while watching me scotch tape the clipping’s corners onto the first blank page of my scrapbook. Little did I know then that six summers later I would acquire my own pen pal from Great Britain while waiting on a Welsh businessman as a busgirl at the Shangri-La Resort in Weirs Beach, New Hampshire. I’d faithfully write to his son, Nigel, from that day forward throughout my college years. And that’s how the starter seeds in my garden of words got planted.

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“...writing is essentially an act of faith ...that a story will lead in some way, to epiphany or understanding or enlightenment.”

~ Tim O’Brien, *The Magic Show*

Around age 13, I started keeping a diary. “I am going to nickname you ‘Faith’ for Faithful,” I wrote in my leather-bound green book on February 27, 1967—the same night The Beatles appeared on ABC-TV’s *The Hollywood Palace* show. Back then, my diary entries weren’t much longer than a sentence or two and mostly concerned the weather, school happenings, or some physical malady I nobly suffered from like a saint (“My eye was all swollen today but it finally came back to normal.”)

By freshman year of high school, I proudly possessed a red diary with a shiny brass lock that snapped shut and took a tiny key to re-open (although, years later, I learned that my resourceful brother learned how to pick it open with a bobby pin!). Its longer pages warranted full details about my daily pining over boys and angst from family dramas. Again, I personified my diary by giving it a female name:

Conny (short for Confidante). Writing in it each evening, with limited illumination from a nightlight so as not to awaken my sleeping sister, was cathartic. “Conny! I only have 3 more days left to write in you,” I penned on December 28, 1968. “I’ll have to buy a new diary ‘cuz I couldn’t go on too easily without someone to spill out my troubles to.”

Faithful word tilling began to reap sustenance for my soul.

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During my undergraduate years at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), I spent one semester doing an exchange program in Sussex County, England. My favorite class, the History of Ballet, was taught by a British dance critic named Clement Crisp who wrote for the *Financial Times*. Each week, he arranged for us students to travel into London to see professional ballet performances at Covent Garden. Our weekly assignment was to keep journal entries of ballet reviews along with our general impressions of the classical dance form.

I hung on every word Mr. Crisp eloquently spoke in his clipped British accent. “A good dramatic ballet transcends its theme to become concentrated choreography,” he remarked once while pacing across the classroom’s wooden floor. Mr. Crisp ended his sentence by poising his right hand poised up and outward as if ready to execute a grand jeté.

How he inspired my love of art critiquing. On weekends, I gladly spent hours at the Tate Museum researching dance-related works by Degas to write about.

The highlight of my semester abroad was seeing a *Swan Lake* pas de deux performed at the Royal Opera House by the lithe and lilting prima ballerina Natalia Makarova with her muscular partner Anthony Dowell on the opera house proscenium. It was like witnessing poetry in motion. “A blissful sight to behold,” I noted in my dance journal on November 13, 1974. Diligently trying to document the dancers’ side-by-side extensions, I wrote the following:

...their elevated arms and legs are flawlessly aligned; the position is perfectly sustained for what seems a lifetime! This illustrates an incredible amount of concentrated body control and lends aesthetic appeal to this artistic composition.

Flowery phrases broke ground in my growing word garden!

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Why is writing such a chore
when it’s something I adore?
I’d like to do it all day long
but many times,
the words are wrong.

You want to say what's on your mind,
but how?
(The method's yours to find!)

Flowery phrases
or
rhyming schemes,
freestyle verse
or
central themes;

Do whatever you think's best
but reading it's the final test.
(I think I'll give this pen a rest!)

~ September 24, 1974
New England College, Arundel, England

I'd taken to reading poetry regularly by my early 20s. Ferlinghetti's prose made me see how much fun writing it could be ("Have you ever stopped to consider underwear in the abstract..."), and Ginsberg also howled for my attention. Suddenly, I was seeing the world through a poet's eyes.

Romantic metaphor started to seep into my senses. My ears heard it clearly when listening to vibrant verses sung by Joni Mitchell on her *Blue* album ("I could drink a case of you / and I would still be on my feet"). And my eyes saw it first-hand while hitchhiking in Europe with a girlfriend. Our early morning arrival in Brussels on November 5, 1974 inspired this notebook entry:

We are strangers,
arriving in a
strange land,
before the sun's yet risen;
tired and hungry
we seek our refuge...
(are trams and trains our
ultimate prison?)

Most of the prose I penned back then reeked of self-doubt and insecurity. Oh, how I could portray the persecuted poet ("Anticipation is a doer's downfall / too busy thinking about tomorrow today / with no way to get things done")! Luckily, I stumbled upon a book of Walt Whitman poetry along my bohemian way and found reassurance from the writings of a seeming soul mate. His "Song of Myself" secured a permanent place on my reference shelf from that time forward. This verse, in particular, still buoys me whenever the tide of my self-confidence ebbs:

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.

Like blooming bulbs in springtime, the poetry cropping up in my garden of words colored my world with hope.

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Journal writing is like a cloud. Both can assume different forms: dark at times and forecasting a cleansing outburst to come, or light and seemingly “in the pink.” They can also proceed at a good clip—eventually revealing something clear and brilliant.

My college mentor, Andrew Merton, a UNH journalism faculty member and contributing columnist for the *Boston Herald Traveler*, always stressed that the way to become a better writer is to write something every day. To that end, I adopted journal writing as a bedtime ritual my mid-20s. I became as regimented about doing it as I was about brushing my teeth. (The tattered Hammermill® paper box now in my attic can attest to that pursuit; its packed assortment of hand-written journals—from clothbound to composition book style—are filled with stream-of-conscious thoughts, passionate prose and slice-of-life descriptions.)

Armed with my undergrad degree in English and a deep desire to emulate my mentor’s newspaper work, I migrated out to southern California in the late ‘70s. I told myself I was out to discover ‘how the other half’ of America lived after a lifetime on the East coast. But catching up with my high school sweetheart, who had already relocated there, was probably my ulterior motive—if truth be told.

After a few years, destiny found me married to my past love and writing feature news at *The Daily Breeze*, a former Copley Press publication that served 70,000 households in 14 communities of Southwest Los Angeles County. An illuminated computer screen had replaced my portable Smith Corona. And I was living my dream as a full-fledged newspaper reporter writing articles that ranged from KISS concert reviews to gay ministry profiles. My garden of words gained fresh, fertile groundcover!

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“Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated....”

~ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*

After five years as a Copley Press employee, the last one spent as Religion Editor, my train wreck of a marriage finally derailed. Clearly, I’d wed for all the wrong reasons—fear of abandonment after my father’s fatal stroke chief among them. But that realization would take years of therapy—best saved for another story.

My journal writing petered down to a near non-existent state during my painful pre-divorce period. One recorded bit of prose written during that dark summer of 1982 seems to sum up the scenario:

The two
were
no longer
one –

It had been
undone.

The remaining
thing to be
shared:
a son.

Once a marital split was imminent, it became crystal clear that I held no desire to solo-parent a two-year-old in L.A., where it takes an hour to drive a mere 10 miles on a five-lane freeway and you have to breathe shallowly on “smog alert” days. So I split up the Faberware from Filene’s with my soon-to-be ex, had a huge garage sale (to get rid of stuff I’d bought at *other* garage sales), and then set out to disprove author Thomas Wolfe’s claim that you can’t go home again by doing just that.

Three months of temping at a health insurance company back in New Hampshire finally got me hired as a full-time communications coordinator. The pay was pretty good for a single female in New England, and the medical benefits were even better—a real concern for a young mother.

Although grateful for the permanent work, I soon found myself writing articles on subjects that could put an insomniac to sleep. *Certificates of Coverage* and *Member Handbooks* on insurance benefits obviously weren’t topping the *New York Times* bestseller list. And while the HMO, PPO and TPA insurance plans being sold surely benefited from creative writing to describe them, I eventually felt like an uninspired chef whose words had grown too stale for seasoning the company’s alphabet soup of collateral.

What I quickly learned about effective corporate communications was that relying on a network of content experts throughout the company was crucial to getting copy produced for timely publications. The trade-off was that most of my sources wrote poorly. (Apparently not everybody grew up dying to diagram sentences and anxious to acquire the latest edition of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* for their reference desk set.)

Employees started seeking me out to edit everything they drafted—from claim rejection letters to personal resumes. I started taking professional development classes in advanced editing to enhance my expertise and eventually ascended to the rank of Corporate Editor.

It felt good to have my editing skills in demand despite hearing co-workers gasp whenever I returned their marked-up copy. “Oh, no! Not the dreaded red pen,” they’d exclaim, seeming to barely recognize

their original writing. Suddenly, I felt like my third grade teacher, Sister Xavier, when she handed back my weekly essays. Eventually I switched to lavender ink when editing, hoping to soften the blow of my suggested revisions.

Editing, like weeding, is painstaking but fundamental to productive cultivation.

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“The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself.”

~ Charlotte Bronte

Sadly, I do more editing than writing on my job these days. After working in the field of corporate communications for more than two decades, I realized several years ago that something was missing in my career: the stimulating spark of researching articles and finessing words to tell a tantalizing tale—like I did back in my news reporting days.

I made a personal pledge to pursue a master’s degree in writing after my son graduated from college. Then he earned his sheepskin and four more years passed. What was I waiting for? It always seemed like something: for a period of grieving to end after my mother died; for an *eHarmony* match with the man of my dreams to culminate in marriage; and for a college to be found that offered to waive its entrance exam requirement in lieu of career experience. All those milestones were finally met in 2006 and squashed my stall tactics.

I am now enthusiastically entrenched in a graduate school program that is—thankfully—returning me to my writing roots. And while this experience may never result in my writing the great American novel, it’s definitely stirred my creative juices and prepping me for my planned life of freelance writing after retiring from corporate arena. I hope to write about aging baby boomers—something I know a thing or two about. And maybe I’ll team up with my photographer-husband to create a coffee table book filled with his luscious landscapes and my inspired verse from our cross-country travels.

Joy from writing infiltrates my soul often these days. This is especially true whenever I read output from my son—a screenwriter, movie channel copywriter, and music reviewer who has returned to his southern California birthplace. “I remember when I would write reports in elementary school and you’d be my editor-in-chief by showing me the proper use of punctuation and grammar,” Ryan recently recalled in an e-mail to me. “There’s no doubt in my mind that I would not be the strong writer I am today without your careful guidance and tutelage.”

Seedlings have proudly sprouted in my garden of words.

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Looking back on my lifelong love of the written word returns me to thoughts of my now departed mother. Growing up, I treasured the gifts she presented me each Christmas that encouraged my creative expression. Like the Brownie camera. And my spinning wheel.

The Christmas of my ninth year I received an autograph book which let me capture the creativity of others—including my mother's. On December 26, 1962, she wrote this limerick—a favorite form of hers—on one of my autograph book's glossy green pages:

I have a young daughter named Lynn
She is starting to get quite thin
Her eyes are soooo blue
Her friends none too few
I'll sure always pick her to win!!
Love,
"Mom"

What wonderful re-plantings my garden of words gains each time I read her gift of words.

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