

Reinventing Teachers & Students BY SUSAN LAWSON



Whether a cat learns to use the scratching post instead of climbing the curtains depends as much on the patience and love of its owner as on the cat. And if the truth be known, the owner also learns a lot in the process—about cat nature and about herself.

Writing groups and workshops are no different. In spite of who the designated teachers and students are, everyone serves in both roles.

As someone who often occupies the designated teacher role, I can tell you that *learning* is why I teach. It's

what makes teaching fun. I learn way more from my students through the process of interacting with them than I can measure. I learn about writing—things they do well that I need work on, topics they choose that I could also write about in my own way. I learn courage and perseverance. And I learn about living—what makes people tick and all the ways to solve a problem.

In fact, if I couldn't learn from my students, I wouldn't continue to teach. Learning is my fuel. It's what makes it possible for me to give. That puts a responsibility on those of you who attend my workshops. For you're not just my teacher, but a teacher to everyone else attending.

It's a natural part of the process of living for others to learn from us, whether we intend it or not. But if we care, we make sure what

they see in us is helpful rather than harmful. I'm not talking about always being pleasant or following some sort of moral code. It goes much deeper than that.

The word *pupil* is a common synonym for student. Another definition of *pupil* refers to the opening in the eye that expands and contracts to let in more or less light so we can still see the world around us as available light shifts. *Pupil* came to be used for *student* because when we look into another person's eyes closely, we see a tiny image of ourselves reflected. So the teacher-pupil relationship is an intimate one that calls for great care in handling.

Relationship itself is the task of sorting out what is us, what is the part of us projected onto another person, and then, who the other person *really* is. This gets tricky because we're often attracted to people because of some part of ourselves—perhaps an un-lived part—we think we see in them. But no one else is all "us," so getting to know someone is a process of making lots of little discoveries that add up to a clearer understanding all-around.

Psychologically healthy people do this without giving it a second thought. But some people don't

Good Teachers...

- ✓ Help you sound more and more like your own self and less and less like the teacher (or society's idea of what's acceptable).
- ✓ Always tell you the strengths of your writing, as well as the weaknesses. If a teacher cannot identify the strength in your writing voice, then he has no right to address what works against that strength. Do not subject yourself to any teacher who gives only—or even *mostly*—negative feedback.
- ✓ Know more than you do (at least about *some* things), are willing to give to you what they know, and rejoice when you find your own way of using it.
- ✓ Believe in you and let you know it.
- ✓ Give you an honest (perhaps sometimes hard to hear) response, but always acknowledge that all responses are subjective.
- ✓ Encourage you to listen to other opinions and take only those critical suggestions that strengthen and encourage your voice.
- ✓ Do not inhabit pedestals.
- ✓ Admit they have sometimes been mistaken, wrongheaded or unhelpful.
- ✓ Engage you with affection and keep appropriate boundaries.
- ✓ Let you go when the time to go has come.

SOURCE: Pat Schneider, *Writing Alone and With Others*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.



understand where they leave off and others begin because they weren't mirrored properly as young children. The important adults in their life projected their own expectations and ideas onto the child, with the understanding that satisfying the adult was the child's duty. The image the child saw in these adults' eyes, figuratively, was the adult and not their own self.

When such children grow into adulthood, they may try to convince others that satisfying *them* or some standard they adhere to is everyone else's duty. They simply don't experience others as psychologically real.

This reminds me of a segment in the movie *Beaches* where the Bette Midler character sees the Barbara Hershey character after many years. "Enough about me," Bette says. "Tell me about you; what do you think of *me*?"

People who are convinced "it's all about me" are everywhere, and they're seldom as appealing as a character in a movie. Some of them write, some attend writing workshops, and some are teachers, even writing teachers. And they may be extremely good teachers at many levels. They may be highly skilled and successful writers. But they undermine creativity (and so, life itself) if they allow their students to fall into the groove of pleasing the teacher rather than themselves.

You may ask: Does it really matter? Isn't the writer improving his skills regardless? If a writer would let another writers discourage her that easily, isn't the writing world better off without her? Isn't it better for writers to know the truth sooner rather than later?

I would answer: Whose truth? What might the world miss without their contributions down the line, which may now never develop? And how would we ever know or measure what we'd really lost?

A biologist will tell you the earth benefits from the richest possible gene pool.

Jane Roberts, a prolific writer and reluctant psychic in her short lifetime put it this way in *Adventures in Consciousness*: "People have been taught to structure their unique revelatory experiences through definite prepackaged ideas. Thus they are neatly *robbed* of their own vision, and the world is poorer for it."

She continued, "By 'original vision,' I mean that which is felt by an individual in his or her own way; it can belong to no one else because it can't be experienced in the same way by another. It can be recorded and translated. But only by being true to our private visions can we really learn anything at all, *much less hope to teach others.*" (italics mine)

I'm not saying there's no place for reasoned critique of another's work. I am saying its place is not everywhere, and, as creative people, we should be careful about what we give away and to whom. We are all fallible human beings, no matter the level of our success according to cultural standards. Anything *anyone* thinks or says is only one person's opinion, regardless of who that person is, and there's room in this world for many, many different views.

So look deep into the eyes of all the writers who share the group experience with you, including the one who is the *designated* teacher. She is *your* student, just as you and all the other students are teachers to her and to each other.

When each person talks, listen and take into your yourself who they are. Reflect this understanding back to them instead of your own self.

Likewise, when it's your turn to speak, clearly represent and hold your personal boundaries as you articulate your vision.

I'll be listening and learning.

To a Writing Workshop Leader, Teaching as He Was Taught

I'm tired of your cleverness,
your flaunting wit—
the way your terms hammer
tender aspirations—meter,
allusion, metaphor, spondee.
The way we all reach
out of our lives to please you,
try to catch the odd image, the one floating
far beyond the reach
of sense. Please

do not speak to me anymore
of famous poets
you have met. I don't care
about your curling hair and
brooding hand passing over your chin.
I won't take any more
assignments from you
until first you listen
to this voice I am giving you.
Listen to it ring. I am a bell—
clapper, dome, all silver—
complete, and my heart chimes
genius onto the page in words
my mother gave me, and my
grandmother, and we sing
the halt heart language of what is true and
we don't give a rat's ass
for anything you have to say to us at
this first moment. Except—

tell me, tell me which word of mine
crackled up your spine. Tell me
when you saw the boy
standing in the circle I have painted
for him—tell me the music that still
fills your ear. Tell me that—
so I can hear it too.
Tell me so I can go on,
tell me that—
or shut up.

—Laurie Baron

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