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Writing New Lives, Writing New Worlds

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Abstract

Creative nonfiction. Children are learning to write their letters. Adults are learning to write their feelings. All of us are learning to write our stories, and thereby release some of the trauma circling through our world.

Keywords

writing, activism, parenting, development, trauma

When not studying public health, **A. Zed** is parenting, volunteering to strengthen democracy, and of course, writing. Look for the novella by A. Zed on the e-shelves of Multnomah County Library under the title *Chicken 'n Dumplings 'n Death*.

She'd been learning to write the wrong way.

It was one of those parental ignorances with no harmful intent. A learning about learning, one of many in the series of raising a child. But we were being schooled.

Children usually begin writing letters by starting at the bottom, the teacher informed us. She'd be teaching them how to write letters starting at the top of the line. Top-down, not ground-up. So goes the instruction in kindergarten.

Thus far, the teacher has shown skill in her trade. Most impressive is her teaching of drawing: whales that look like whales, complete with spout; Frankenstein down to the patch of cloth on the arm. Sure, they all have blocky, square heads, but building blocks are how it all starts.

My child is learning the writing of letters, and, with it, what the letters can do. The students are encouraged to label elements of their drawings, with single letters if that's all they can manage, or else to sound out the letters they hear. A mountain is drawn and labeled "MAT." A cloud is labeled "CLAWD." A house gets a simple "H." These attempts at words are legible, interpretable. They convey and connect to the reader, which is what any writing ever hopes to do.

To learn to read is liberating. Literacy opens worlds beyond your borders. It is a gift I am eager for my child to develop. But learning to write is revolutionary and empowering on another level, one worth reaching for.

There is something beyond being a storyteller narrating an event, something about putting pen to page and moving the story outside oneself. Where the author can look at the story outside herself, even hear it embodied by another voice.

As a facilitator for writing workshops with adults on the margins of society – on the margins by income level, by ability, by orientation, by diagnosis – I witnessed the power of becoming a story writer.

A recurring challenge was one of the workshop's principal guidelines: treating all our writing as if it were fiction. Responding to each other's writing and speaking about our own as if it were fiction, whether or not it was. It required effort to shift our thinking in this way. The concern was that many of our workshop participants did in fact write narrative from their own lived experience. Was it not minimizing to treat someone's real life story as if it were made up?

In a strange and wonderful way, it was not. Besides the fact that treating our writing as fiction allowed us to focus on the writing instead of the wrenching realities (which we volunteers were hardly qualified to examine), there was a freedom offered by authoring even real-life accounts. A freedom and a control.

Something happens when we hold our writing about our lives at a distance, physically separated from our heart, out there almost beyond our reach. Where we can take a look at it from the outside. Where we can be the one who is viewing that story, not just the one living it. A life story can become an object, the subject can rest on the page, and as authors we can gain a newfound agency in shaping that story. There is a world outside the story, and we can occupy that world or our story's world – but we get to choose. We're in control on another level. Because even being a protagonist is limiting. It's the author who decides when a new chapter begins.

In a world increasingly saturated by text – in social media scrolls, in misinforming chyrons, in messages gone in an instant – words seem cheap. But in this moment, there is perhaps even more the need to honor the act of carefully writing a story, honoring sincere storytellers, honoring those who write truth in their fiction.

Putting pen to paper can change our own worlds. How would it change the whole world if more people wrote out their stories? Stress and trauma inhabit our bodies until we release them, through talking or writing or moving. If we don't, the pain bottles up inside us, or else we act our feelings out.

Kindergarteners could probably teach us something here. They too are still trying to figure out how to use their words when they're upset or overwhelmed.

My child is still learning letters, not yet skilled enough to write sentences, let alone stories, but she's building on her building blocks. She still writes some of her letters from the bottom up. Her story is one I can't wait to watch unfold before my eyes – and when the time comes, I can't wait to hear her tell her story, in her own words.