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PETER ELBOW ON WRITING

A CONVERSATION WITH AMERICA'S TOP WRITING TEACHER

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A Conversation with America's Top Writing Teacher

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FAILURE

What got me interested in writing was that I got in trouble with writing. I couldn't write. I had been a diligent, good student in college. Tried to do everything my teachers wanted and I learned to do that. But when I started graduate school, I just had more and more trouble. I struggled harder and harder. Some papers I got written and they were just no good. I put so much agony into them. I had written sentences and sentences and crossed them out and I wrote paragraphs and paragraphs and crossed them out and I wrote pages and crumpled up the paper and threw it away, and finally produced papers, which I turned in and they were just barely satisfactory. In fact they weren't satisfactory. Finally I did have to quit graduate school after only a semester and a half before they kicked me out.

***[Text on Screen]** Peter Elbow not only returned to the university but went on to become a distinguished Professor of English.*

LEARNING FROM FAILURE

During that whole time I was worried about my writing and I kept a kind of a journal. I kept taking notes. I kept writing myself letters about what was going on my writing, especially when things got tricky, when I got stuck, when I wandered into a swamp in my writing and I couldn't figure out how to get going again. I would take out a separate piece of paper and write myself a note. Not a pep talk but an attempt to be perfectly empirical. What happened? When did I first start getting stuck? What led to that? Can I figure out what train of thought got me down a blind alley? What was going on with my language? What was going on with my thinking? What was going on with my feelings?

And when I got going again I would try to remember to and write myself another note, how did I get out of here? What was the turning point? Was there something I did that helped me get out of this stuck point? Well I wrote myself those notes for three years and kept slipping them in a folder until that folder got to be very fat and full of notes some of them written on the back of envelopes, but I was getting very interested in what was in there. I didn't have much time to explore it, but that folder of notes to myself is what turned into my first book about writing and turned into my first study of the writing process.

[Text on Screen] *Dr. Elbow's first book on writing was entitled Writing without Teachers.*

He is also the author of four other books on writing and the writing process.

MAKING A MESS

Well the main thing I learned, well at least the first thing I learned, is that I had to abandon what seemed like the main premise in writing, which is the theory that you have to get things clear in your mind ahead of time, that you have to know what you are writing about before you get going. And of course, people always said make an outline. And an outline is the perfect way to figure out what you want to say, get your thought clear in mind ahead of time, make an outline.

But, I had enormous difficulties making an outline. Either I didn't have very much in mind and so I couldn't put much into the outline, or as I got more thoughts, I couldn't figure out how to get them well outlined. Or sometimes I actually succeeded in making an outline after a great deal of effort but then trying to write from an outline, was a tangle. I had this lovely outline but when I went through the writing it kept departing from the outline, it kept tying itself in knots. The outline didn't work. Somehow the words of the writing and the words of the outline were in different universes and they didn't fit together.

So what I learned was I needed to skip this principle of getting things clear in mind ahead of time. I need to plunge in on my writing before I know what I'm really trying to say. I needed to make a mess. Making a mess is the quickest way to say it, and it's the – make a mess is the concept that I cling to most fervently. That if I let myself make a mess, it will go somewhere. If I let myself keep writing even when I don't know where I'm going, I end up going somewhere. I had to gradually give myself permission. Because this is what I discovered when I was doing all this empirical observation of my writing, that all my efforts to try and get things clear ahead of time, tied me into knots and whenever I stumbled into the process of giving myself permission to just go rambling on, just go forging ahead into the I don't know what, those almost always led me somewhere. Led to a lot of extra words, but I saved time, even though I wrote down a lot of extra words and made a big mess. I saved time in writing a paper. That forging on into the unknown and doing a lot of free writing eventually led to clarity.

CREATING & CRITICIZING

So what's the essential psychological fact about writing for me? It grows out of this experience of watching myself write and trying to figure out when I get tied in knots and when I don't get tied in knots. And I think it has to do with the fact that there's two essential muscles, two essential processes that get involved in writing. One is the process of opening the doors, that's where making a mess comes in, allowing a mess to occur. Opening the doors, asking for input, inviting the maximum amount of thinking words, just letting words come out. I've tended to call that the creative move, the generative move, the generative muscle, the creative muscle. You can't write anything unless you generate a lot, a lot, a lot. And you just need to take everything that comes and not worry whether it's any good.

But the trouble is you can't write anything that works very well, unless you emphasize the other muscle which is the clenching, critical, logical, nay saying muscle that says wait a minute, is this any good? This doesn't work. That's wrong. This is wordy. This is no good. Unfortunately you need to be critical. At certain magical moments you can do those two things at the same time, when everything goes magically well. But most of the time, I find, and I see this in my students too, it helps enormously to do those two processes one at a time. To accept garbage to be generative, to make a mess, then after you have a lot of rich material, too much, then turn around and be critical and nasty and then engage in organizing too and trying to figure out what goes where.

SOWING EARLY SEEDS

When I have something to write, what I've learned is that I need to sit down for five and ten and fifteen minute bits early. I need to just get one quick thought down. In fact what really helps me is if I'm walking around or if I'm taking a shower, or if I'm eating a meal, I just have one little thought about that assignment and I just need to take out a piece of paper and jot that down and sometimes it's two sentences and sometimes it's ten sentences but that's enough. If I can do that four or five times for some major piece of writing, or if it's a small piece of writing if I can do that a couple of times, then when I sit down for the genuine draft I've got so much more, I'm so much further ahead. So perhaps the most practically helpful thing I've learned is to get very, very short pieces of writing done early and just make a little pile of those for when I sit down to write a draft.

FREEWRTING

I keep coming back and back to free writing. It's so simple. Let me explain what free writing is. It's the first thing I can teach students. I can teach it in fifteen minutes. To free write is to start writing and keep writing and don't stop writing. But part of my definition of free writing is that it's private. Because I don't think it's fair to ask anybody to start writing and keep writing without stopping unless it's private.

Free writing doesn't have to be perfect stream of consciousness. You can just write the same sentence over and over again. Free writing doesn't have to be interestingly disorganized. Free writing can be perfectly organized. The only rule for free writing is to keep writing and don't stop and whatever you do is fine. In other words it's impossible to be wrong in free writing as long as you keep writing. And if you keep doing that regularly in your life, it has this powerful underground effect on your writing.

A VOYAGE INTO THE UNKNOWN

PETER ELBOW: And that's the point of free writing, is to engage in a process that invites surprise, that invites the unexpected to come off the pen, to come off the keyboard on to the screen. I don't think anybody ever keeps writing by choice unless they have the experience of surprise, of being startled by discovering themselves writing things they didn't know they were thinking. Oh, I didn't know I thought that. Oh, I'd forgotten that event. Oh, I didn't know I had that feeling. Oh, my gosh, do you suppose I really feel that way, I just wrote it, I must. Free writing leads to these experiences and these experiences of discovery, of

discovering that there are things in your head that you didn't know were there. That's what's rewarding about writing. That's what's interesting.

Let it be a voyage into the unknown. You can do a piece of free writing in five minutes but often the best parts come after ten or fifteen or twenty minutes, because what you need to do is run out of what's on your mind in order to get to the place of what's not on your mind, and just keep writing.

AN AUDIENCE: THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT

The most precious gift a writer can have is not a critic or an evaluator but an audience. If someone wants to give me a present as a writer, what I want is an audience. I want my words to go to readers. A critic can be useful, an evaluator can be useful, but what's precious is an audience: someone who will listen to me, someone who will understand what I'm saying. What I've discovered in my own writing and in my teaching, is that if someone listens to me, if someone will understand me, my writing gets better. I guess that's a little mysterious, I don't quite know why that is, but it's true. If someone will listen to me and will understand me, I'll be able to say what I'm trying to say better.

And so, the effort that I'm looking for from readers and the effort that I'm trying to persuade my students to give to each other is the effort to understand each other. So even if a piece of writing is very flawed, even if it's a mess, even if it's a problem, even if it's tangled, I don't think it's so valuable to tell them what the mess is and what the tangle is, what's really valuable is to understand it. To have a reader who says, oh, I see you're saying this. I see you're saying that, that's an interesting idea. Tell it to me again. Then the writing gets better.

So that what we need, what writers need is a range of audiences. So let me talk a minute about that because this has gone into, to become I think my kind of grounding theory, my foundational way of looking at the writing process and the teaching of writing.

Authority Readers

Very, very often everything people have written has gone to a teacher. So that means most of what you write, sometimes all of what you write has gone to a teacher which is a reader who has authority over you, and that teacher has given an evaluative response of some sort or another. Sometimes just to circle the misspellings or something, but think about that. Teachers are a difficulty, not that there is anything with teachers but that there's something wrong with the exclusivity of teachers, that we write only to teachers, that's the problem. It's rare that anybody can engage in much writing without sometimes writing for a reader who has authority over you. Readers with authority. They are here to stay.

Peer Readers

When I wrote during my teaching years before I went back to graduate school, I was doing some writing and it wasn't for teachers, it was for peers, it was for fellow teachers. All of a sudden I found I could write. It was such a pleasure writing for regular human beings not for teachers. Teachers are human beings but when you are a student sometimes you don't feel them as human beings.

Writing for peers, we need peers. In a classroom it is so important to me to get students to write not just for me as the teacher, but to write for each other, to share their pieces in pairs, in small groups, to bring in copies of what they've written to give to each other. Things are different when you write for peers.

Ally Readers

A third kind of reader I want to talk about is what I call an ally reader. An ally reader is someone who cares about me or cares about the writer. Cares about me as much as they care about my writing, so that if I write something and give it to an ally reader, even if it's dumb, they don't think I'm dumb. Even if it's kind of unlikable in some way, they still like me as a person. And so in my classes I try and invite students to share their writing with their friends, not just the person who happens to be sitting next to them. I want allies, I need allies, I think everybody needs an ally.

So three audiences: authority readers, peer readers, and ally readers. If we can get all three audiences our writing goes better. That's my premise. That's what I think I've discovered. Nothing wrong with teachers for readers, but there's something wrong when teachers are the only readers. So I need to find occasions and I need to find occasions for my students to write for allies, write for peers and write for me.

FOUR KINDS OF AUDIENCE RESPONSE

I've been talking about audiences, I want to talk about the ways in which these audiences respond. What kind of response. What kind of feedback an audience gives. So let me just take a moment and say what's valuable about all four audience responses: private writing which is no audience. Shared writing where it goes to an audience but there's no response. Feedback: a response but no evaluation, and then full evaluation.

Private Writing

Let me first talk about private writing. I'm kind of a champion, I'm kind of a cheerleader for private writing. It gets neglected enormously in school. It's very common and traditional for people to keep diaries but in schools there's not enough private writing. Writing is a beautiful medium because I can write privately. I can write page after page after page after page and now show anybody. I can explore my thinking. I can my feeling.

I think one of the main skills, one of the main features of a wise person would be a person who is able to talk to him or herself, who is able to carry on a conversation in his or her own head to explore a topic, even if no one else is interested in that topic.

It's very hard. We wander around in the world and often what we're interested in we can't find anyone else around us who is interested in it. And, I think this is sometimes hard for people in adolescence, I know when I was an adolescent I often felt odd or no one was interested in what I was interested in or I couldn't find people to talk to about what was on my mind. But writing permits me to pursue a topic even if no one else is interested in it.

So, I ask students in my classes to do a lot of private writing. I take time in class for it. I even ask students to keep a journal and I don't read it, but I ask them to show it to me and try and demonstrate to me that they are keeping it up, because it's a skill, to learn to talk to yourself on paper is hard. It's hard at first any way. You can learn to be two people, you can learn to be three people. We are two and three people inside our own heads, and writing is the place where we can let those people have a conversation with each other and so we can learn to pursue a topic even when no one else is around that want to pursue that topic and learn to take on that feature that I think does characterize wise people.

Shared Writing but No Response

What about writing that you just give to someone and they read it and they don't give you any response at all? That also seems like a kind of a stupid thing to do

in school. In school if you had a piece of writing to somebody, especially if you hand it to a teacher, it feels as though they are supposed to say something. Is this okay? Did I do all right? Is this right or wrong? Is this good or bad? To hand a piece of writing to someone and say, here's a gift read it. Or, I want you to read this, or I want to read this out loud to you. I want to see what it sounds like. Please don't give me any feedback. That sounds very peculiar, very odd. It makes people awkward. I've had to learn how to do this in my classes. There's a ritual I use that's very nice. I read something out loud, and your job as a reader is to say thank you. People get in pairs, people get in small groups, everybody reads and the job of the listeners is to say thank you. Now let's hear someone else's piece. It's a great pleasure once you learn that ritual, but it feels very odd.

Well, I want to call attention to how – what looks odd isn't very odd. Even though it feels odd in school to give writing to someone and get no response, in fact most writing in the world functions that way. When people write newspaper stories, when people write memos, when people write novels or any books, the words go on paper, the words go out, they go to readers and that's it. Almost never feedback. Sometimes people write a letter to the author but mostly words go out, readers read them, goodbye, that's the end of it. That's the normal fate of writing in the world to be done. And I've discovered that for my writing and for my students writing, when I build time into a classroom for private writing and for writing that we just share, writing gets better, even though there is no feedback. People's writing gets better when they write privately and when they share their writing.

Response but no Evaluation

Another kind of feedback I often want is non-evaluative feedback or you could call it believing feedback, someone who believes in what I've written. . This is especially important to me if I'm writing something that's difficult and something that's close to my heart, something I really care about and I'm struggling with it.

If I write something and I walk down the street and I find a friend, I've written a story or an essay and I want them to read it. I can interrupt their awkwardness because in their awkwardness they are going to want to feel as though they've got to say, 'well this is lovely', or 'well I think you could get it a little bit better here'. I can interrupt their awkwardness and say, "tell me what do you hear this story about? What's the story about when you read it? What's this essay about? What is my main point? What do you hear me saying?" There's no evaluation there, but I want to know what do they hear? Because I don't know whether what I'm trying to get across in this story or this essay is getting across or not. And I can ask them, what's important to you about what I wrote? Or, what other thoughts do you have about this topic that I'm writing about? Tell me your thoughts. Have you got any thoughts I can use?

This feedback that doesn't involve any evaluation, turns out to be very useful. It's such a pleasure to understand how the reader understood my words. And I can make my writing a lot better when I see what's going on in their head.

Evaluative Feedback

Finally there's evaluative feedback. There's feedback that involves someone telling me, you know, what are the strong points, what are the weak points, what advice do they have. And evaluation is a problem. Evaluation, I think, is what stopped me from writing when I was in graduate school I was only writing for teachers and only writing for evaluation and it stopped me cold. But evaluation is no problem if I'm doing lots of other writing. Evaluation from teachers is no problem if I'm writing for other people in addition to teachers. And evaluation from teachers is no problem if I'm getting other responses besides evaluation. If I'm doing private writing and sharing my writing for fun and getting other responses besides evaluation. So, at a certain point, of course, I want evaluation. I want someone to tell me, what worked, what didn't work, what's strong here, what's weak here, have you got any thoughts about how I can make this better, that's terrific. But only if that's one ingredient among many.

FROM SAFETY TO RISK

These four audience relationships that I talked about, private writing, shared writing but no response, response but not criticism, and then evaluation, that's a progression from safety to risk. And so I want a foundation of safety, I'm trying in my classroom to build up an enormous atmosphere of safety. I want my students to take risks, I don't think you can write well unless you take risks, I don't think people learn well unless they take risks.

REVISING

Everybody always asks about revising. Revising is probably the hardest part of the writing process. I certainly have to admit that I spend more time revising a piece of writing than I do generating new material because at least when I've learned to generate material, which I have finally done, I finally learned to generate material and it doesn't take very long, I can turn out a lot of stuff. I can fill up a lot of pages and even in the midst of revising I get a new idea and I can jump into two or three pages of exploring it. The secret is that you have to have a lot of good material and once you have a lot of good material then the only secret is to throw away everything but the best. I guess that's the central fact about revising. Have so much good material that you throw away everything but the best and then decide what order to put it in. And of course when you have the best bits then sometimes that will generate some new thinking. It's not as though generating is finished once and for all, and then you spend the rest of the time revising. As you revise, as you put something into a different place, that will lead to a new thought. That's how revising goes for me. Having enough stuff. Throwing away a lot and then wrestling with what's left over.

VOICE & POWER

I've talked about writing as struggle and the particular kind of struggle that's often involved in writing is the feeling of powerlessness, feeling of helplessness, feeling of 'oh, I can't do this.' A loss of power. Many people can speak with quite a lot of power and they feel helpless when they write. Can I put down words on paper and feel like they are my words? Feel like it's me speaking. When I can do that, I feel as though I have some power, I feel as though I can connect myself to my words.

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM – FORGETTING FORMALITY

So what does voice have to do with writing a history paper? Writing a biology paper? I want to celebrate using one owns' voice, using your own language, finding your own words. That when we can use our own words we feel more power, we feel more control, it feels like us writing. And the word voice is a good word for pointing to this quality of language, because we all know what it's like when someone uses their own voice. We often have more than one voice, but any way a voice that's very much their voice versus when they are using kind of a fake voice, or just pretend voice, or fooling around and it's useful to take on other voices and to mimic and it's fun to parody. But nevertheless, we know what it's like when we're speaking in our own voice, we feel it click. Often that happens when we are talking about, when we're saying something that really matters to us and we finally talk turkey.

So I'm celebrating the ability, although it boils down in a way to courage to use your own voice on paper. But then how do we, what good does that do when I have to write a biology paper that has a very strict format? Or I'm writing a history paper for a teacher that wants it to be very, very formal, never use the first person. Never say I, footnote everything, use lots of sources, so what good is my own voice when I'm stuck in that situation. Well, actually, it's still very important to use your own voice. There's a very simple process here. It took me a long time to figure it out but it works almost always.

If I have to write a paper for some audience, a teacher or a job situation and it has to be very formal or it has to be very artificial, in other words something enormously different from my voice, let's suppose, I like somewhat informal writing and let's supposing I have to write something that's very formal that never uses the first person, I like to use the first person. Well if I try to take on that voice, the voice of a timeless authority who knows everything about the subject, maybe that's the voice that's improper for this type of writing, impersonal, God talking or nobody talking, just information not supposed to be polluted by a sense of a subjective personality. Supposing I have to write a piece like that. Well it turns out if I try and write that way, I either go crazy or I turn out a crummy piece of writing. Either I just get tied in knots, I can't write that way, that's not me, it just feels dumb or I else I do write that way only it's very simple minded, I can't think of anything interesting to say, all I can say are kind of obvious thoughts. Well, it turns out what I need to do is to forget about these constraints, forget about the fact that its supposed to sound like God talking and no I and impersonal, and write about this topic exactly the way I want to write about it.

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM – REVISING FOR FORMALITY

And once I get my thinking down on paper and work out some new thinking probably and work out thinking that I'm proud of in my voice, then it turns out to be not very hard to take that piece of writing and radically change it, I mean it will look extremely different but in fact it's pretty easy to get rid of all the first persons, to recast a whole bunch of sentences, maybe to change the organization, to do all kinds of things. Sometimes when I talk to students about this they say, you mean you want me to write it twice instead of once? Why write it twice? But in fact it's quicker and easier twice. And what happens is even when I do the recasting that's necessary, even if I take my informal voice that's somewhat subjective and a train of thought from my point of view, and I change it and I change the texture of those sentences and I even change the thinking a little bit and make it impersonal, try and make it timeless facts instead of a subjective point of view. I can make those changes. It's not so hard. But when I do that, a lot of the language can be kept. A lot of the, what I like to call, the plasma, I mean I've gotten, I've changed the red blood corpuscles or the white corpuscles or whatever it is, but a lot of the plasma is still my voice there and I've been able to engage in interesting thinking and even though the product is a very impersonal non voiced piece, it has a kind of voiced under quality to it. And I've been able to write it without going crazy.

GRAMMAR & SPELLING: MOST IMPORTANT

If I hand you a piece of my writing and it's full of mistakes in spelling and grammar, if you see those mistakes they are going to preoccupy you and you're going to notice those mistakes and so many readers tend to think when a piece of writing is full of mistakes that this writer is dumb, is uneducated, is a hayseed, can't be trusted, and no matter how interesting the thinking is and no matter how lively and clever and interesting the writing is, when people see mistakes in spelling and grammar they tune out.

GRAMMAR & SPELLING: LEAST IMPORTANT

On the other hand spelling and grammar from the psychological point of view in the process of getting something written is the least important factor. Spelling and grammar are the least important things. Because if you think about spelling and grammar while you're trying to write it will drive you crazy, it certainly drives me crazy. It's a very crucial skill in learning to be a better writer to learn how to tune out any awareness of spelling and grammar as you write. If you tried to think about how you are forming words in your mouth as you talk, you'd go crazy. If you tried to think about how you spell words as you spoke you'd have a hard time speaking. Speaking is easy because we don't worry about that. So writing gets easier, writing gets better when we tune out all questions of spelling and grammar and just get on with it, just put the words down, the heck with it and if can't think of how to spell it, draw a line.

When we're writing, when we're getting our thoughts down, even on into the revising process we can simply forget about grammar and spelling. And if this is only a draft for friends, it's an informal piece, a letter to a pal, often you never have to think about spelling and grammar, it doesn't matter. But if this is a piece of any importance that's going to any reader who might make a judgment about you, of course this is often true with teachers, writing on the job, then there's just no way around it, it's got to be cleaned up. It doesn't mean that everyone who writes well has to know how to fix all their mistakes in spelling and grammar, many, many good writers are not very good spellers and not very good with grammar, but they know how to get the help they need. If they are a good enough writer that help is laid on, if they are not such a good writer, if they are not so recognized as a writer, they need to get the help from friends, through a typist, paying somebody, but you need to clean things up. So, what this boils down to in a school setting is that you need to learn these two skills, get early drafts of writing and forget about grammar and spelling but then when things go to an important reader, learn how to get the help you need to clean up and get rid of mistakes in spelling and grammar.

MEDIUMS OF WRITING

People often wonder a lot now especially since computers are so common, about the different mediums for getting things written, writing by hand, using a computer, some people now feel that they can't write unless they have a computer. A few people hold out against computers. I actually don't think it matters much. I love the use of a computer. I think a computer certainly helps but I also enjoy writing by hand sometimes. I feel my voice more when I write by hand. I feel more connected to my work. Computers actually have a problem, it's so easy to fix things on computers that I sometimes find myself going back and correcting sentences and fixing the spelling and reshaping a paragraph that I've written on a computer. And when I wrote on a typewriter I never did that, I just kept writing and I wasted my time fixing up that paragraph because I ended up throwing that paragraph away. Why fix up a paragraph when you are going to throw it away. And computers do seduce people into doing elaborate copyediting. Some people spend a lot of time on a computer playing with typefaces instead of getting things written. So whatever technique will work best for you. The crucial thing is what's going to help you get down the most words quickest.

WRITING FOR LIFE

Well we've been talking a lot about writing in a school setting and that's where most writing takes place. But I want to end by saying that that's part of the problem. When writing only takes place in school, that's what makes writing hard. And what's made a difference for me is to try and think about writing not so much just a school activity but writing as part of one's life. That writing is what I turn to when I'm confused, when I'm not sure what to do next, when some piece of perplexity is happening. Perplexity comes to us in all different parts of our life. Perplexity I think, is the frame of mind that I'm most proud of. I like the fact that writing leads to perplexity and writing is a way to deal with perplexity. Perplexity is what I want to keep having. Perplexity is what I want to keep encouraging my students to have. And when we welcome perplexity and welcome it through writing and use writing to deal with perplexity, then I find and I think other people find that writing becomes not just a school exercise, but something that's part of one's life.