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My Development as a Writer

Even before I could read, I always had a book in my hand. The very first book I can ever remember leafing through over and over again had a picture of a boy on the front cover reading a book with the same cover on it. The cover went on and on, one boy after another reading a book with a boy on the cover reading a book. This is the symbol that has lasted me all of my life as a representation of what creative writing is all about: telling a story within a story.

I started college at a state university where I dabbled in the social sciences. Through world religions, sociology, anthropology, and humanities classes I learned to shift my view of the world around me to accommodate many different cultural and historical lenses. While I enjoyed the thought processes that linked human biology with sociology, as well as the ability to look at one's culture from a critical standpoint offered by sociology, I didn't feel that my treatment of the subjects were quite as scientific. The different religions and different human cultures I was learning about weren't "different" at all to me, but each one was like its own story.

It didn't occur to me until much later, but one of the things that my sociology professor said in class about the relationship between sociology and literature has stuck with me. What she said was something to the effect that sociologists depend on writers to translate their research into pertinent and palpable material for the wider audience outside of the sociological discussion. Embedded in this comment is the idea that literature can make up for the differences that a hierarchical culture imposes on us. It can bridge the gap amongst disciplines, and make up for the differences between the "us" and the "other." It can also patch up the fractures that sociologists are aimed at doctoring. And creative writing can do that because it tells these stories about the fractures in our identities by telling other stories.

The cornerstone of my exploration in the social sciences solidified when I transferred schools. In my time at Loras College, I have taken not only English writing and literature classes, but I also acquired a minor in Spanish. Doing so has only expanded my world view and allowed me to re-conceptualize the world from the lens of a language with a different path of historical development than my own language. In one of my first years of studying Spanish at the college level, I read a short story by Juan Rulfo entitled, “Es Que Somos Muy Pobres,” or “Since We Are Very Poor,” from the collection *El Llano en Llanas* or *The Field in Flames*. The story was very simply about a flood that decimates a town’s wealth by taking away the harvest and the livestock of each individual family in the town. Yet, upon learning about the culture of Chile and the historical period in which the story was set (the Mexican Revolution), everything in the story transformed into a symbol of the larger political setting. The river became the war which washed the nation’s wealth away, and the trees carried downstream became a loss of culture, of national roots, as opposing political factions fought for a new leader. Thus, I learned how these everyday objects such as corn and livestock begin to carry symbolic meaning in language, and the way in which culture impacts the connotations of words. As a result, minoring in Spanish has allowed me to have a better understanding of the fluidity of language, by understanding how and why the meanings of words are opaque. All words are a mere noise paired repeatedly with a certain meaning, and these meanings change according the historical situations the words are used to confront. No word has any one solid, stable definition; all words give way to other meanings.

Due to an understanding of language as fluid, I like to play around with different cultural conceptions of the world in the pieces that I write and expose the ideologies governing my culture in order to raise awareness about questions of identity. For example, I am currently working on an essay that looks at the concept of death as being bound up in the notion of waiting

for a reward. This was inspired by Stanford professor Dr. Robert Sapolsky's lecture on the difference between humans and other primates, in which he suggests that humans may become engaged in doing things that are not entirely worth their while if there is a probability of a reward in the future. He suggests that the notion of heaven, or a reward in the afterlife, is bound up in the systematic manipulation of the human neurological reward pathways. Since the way in which we conceive our own identities and our existence is reflected in the language we utilize, I am writing a story about my own experience with death to negate the idea that death is a destination by showing that life, the journey, is what is truly important and that even death itself is part of the journey.

One of the dispositions of Loras College is to engage in active learning. I take this to mean that I enjoy learning about the world around me from a variety of perspectives, always wondering about the nature of the human experience. I believe that my interest in foreign languages, along with my background in the social sciences, and the way in which I am able to integrate my encounters with these different fields of thought into my writing displays a proactive curiosity for the world around me.

While at Loras, I took a number of courses that allowed me to read and discuss a number of works written by authors who ruminate on such topics as the importance of the natural landscape, and how the environment shapes or interacts with our everyday experiences. Annie Dillard has been a heavy influence in this regard. After reading a number of essays from two of her books, Teaching a Stone to Talk and Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, the way in which she combines notions of spirituality with questions of identity in relation to the way humans behave and think of the natural world has inspired me to allow this aspect of spirituality to enter into my pieces, whether they be creative non-fiction essays or poems. Dillard also utilizes a lot of lyrical

language, using assonance, consonance, and imagery in her pieces, and allows her essays to have a stream-of-consciousness structure, as she often weaves meditative passages into stories about her own experiences. Reading such essays has prompted me to experiment with these same techniques in my own work.

Loras College provided my first experience with peer workshops for creative writing at the undergraduate level. I enrolled in both poetry writing and creative non-fiction writing classes during my first semester. Oftentimes I would find myself writing about something without a clear idea of what my topic was exactly, or what I was trying to say about it. In my poetry writing class, I was given an assignment to construct a poem that focused heavily on the sounds of the words being employed. My response to the prompt was “Sunday Sunny Drum Circle 10/21/2012,” a piece about a drum circle that takes place in a jungle. I wrote:

“The crash / Splashes the foliage and trees / Rage like kings at war. // Barefoot in the bungalow, / We pound our two-headed / Snakes.”

While the poem is heavy in consonance and assonance, it lacks any graspable meaning. While the description of trees as “kings at war,” and drums as, “two-headed snakes,” creating interesting images that appear to point at some sort of meaning. However, the meaning is not clearly defined, and the images get lost in the emphasis on the sounds of the words. Finding a balance between the techniques I employ in my writing and a clear communication of the meaning I am trying to get across has been something I have always struggled with as a writer.

I had a similar problem with a non-fiction essay that I wrote during my first year at Loras College. It was a memoir that wove together a story about my uncle’s suicide with the story of my grandmother’s descent into Parkinson’s. I struggled most with finding better ways to show how these two stories fit together. When I took the essay to the workshop session, my classmates

suggested I find a symbol, or a number of symbols, to develop as a way to show my readers the connections. In the final product, the essay's narrative is sprinkled with symbols, from trees stretching upwards, eagles flying in a circle, and a city fox that visits my grandparents and disappears into a neighborhood walking "on and on and on." I titled the essay "What Goes On" to reflect the theme of memories of the past continuing on into the present, and it was by taking the advice of my peers that I was able to develop this notion in my story.

As I began to write more essays and poems, I began to get a better grasp on the revising process, which caused my ability to make connections between varieties of subtopics to improve. While the revision process was still the place where the theme of my paper began to take shape most clearly, I began to produce end results that were thought out more clearly. It was as if the more practice I had with using the revision process as way to develop my ideas, the more I was able to take on a greater complexity of thought. Here is an excerpt from a meditative essay I wrote titled, "On Flow," that juggles a variety of subtopics:

My parents have abandoned the art of tenting. My grandpa used to take his family camping on the sandbars of the Mississippi River. Come home from work and say, "Kids, we're going camping!" load up the station wagon, and take off. Once, my mom had a dream about a turtle. Safe inside the tent with her family, she was in a canoe wrestling with a snapping turtle that had a hold of her life jacket. Struggling to keep her jacket and her place in the canoe, she pulled back, all the time really yanking her brother, Craig, out of his sleeping bag.

"Shari, go back to sleep!" her mother scolded.

"But do I have to sleep in the canoe?"

Perhaps she knew it was time to hold on tight. Time is a river and what are we, if not caught in the current? Apache artist Philip Cassadore describes modernization, the precise process that oriented my parents towards and electronically-sufficient camping experience as a, “flash flood. All of a sudden you’re down the stream with the other things. You can’t stop it,” (Van Ness Seymour 32).

In this essay, I was able to mix elements of the past with the present, the dreamlike with the physical reality, and the political with the personal by relating all of these elements back to the natural phenomenon of “flow.” The result is a theme that explores the depth behind something as rudimentary as the notion of flow.

Another one of Loras College’s dispositions is to engage in reflective thinking. I believe that the way in which my writing has become as much of a pathway for the development of the complexity of my thought process as it has been an adventure in learning how to communicate my ideas concretely displays my own initiative in becoming a reflective thinker. It is by allowing my own sense of voice to develop on the page that I am shaping my leadership abilities, for by establishing my own voice I am better able to notice the causes of moral and ethical issues, such as that of environmental destruction, that are inherent in the culture I am bound up in.

In another essay written later during my time at Loras, I was also able to reflect on the issue of environmental destruction by noticing its effects on my personal life. In the essay, titled “The Golden Days,” I utilize lyrical language to convey my connection with the natural environment, such as in the following passage:

Focused on the autumn etches of a bare tree against a pink-and-orange sherbet sky, I felt a sense of heavy stillness seeping down from the swelled clouds. Suddenly, “Cuckaws”

filled the sky black, as if a giant swath of fabric rippled across the wind. The once-bare tree grew a full head of black petals right before my eyes.

After dark, in the middle of summer when the Mulberry tree was full of succulent indigo berries, we could hear Rascal, the raccoon we raised as a baby, call to us, “Brr, brr,” from the branches of the tree, and we would call back, lulling our “rrr’s” from a warmth deep in our throats...The mulberries each contained a bunch of infinitesimal smaller berries that exploded dark, sweet juice on the tongues of Rascal and her cubs. Looking back, I am reminded of the Zen-like notion that the universe aware of itself works in tandem...

The lyrical language and the highly personal, reflective quality of the essay were developed not just through one student workshop, but through three separate student workshops, when I had the advantage of taking a “Revising, Editing, and Publishing,” class. Offered over a three-week period during Christmas break, the course provoked me to extensively revise two separate essays that I had formerly written and work-shopped in a separate class, after receiving critical feedback from my peers through two separate rounds of workshops for each essay. For “The Golden Days,” this process allowed me to look very closely at the content of my piece and make radical revisions to the way in which the essay was structured. I went from a draft that included a far-fetched illusion to the Buddha, to one that was completely ground in my own experience. I was able to fine tweak every sentence, and every word of every sentence, right down to the punctuation marks guiding the words, in order to make sure that every single thing that appeared on the page was creating the meaning that I intended for it to have. The culmination of these workshops was not only getting my essay published in the English department’s annual student-

contributed literary magazine, but receiving the *Alpha Award*, a distinction awarded to one creative or scholarly work in each of four genres. I view this award as proof the control I have gained over the process of revising my essays, and of my beginning to acquire the ability to edit my essays with the critical eye of a magazine editor.

As my writing career progressed into my final writing classes at Loras and my revising process had already started to produce a greater complexity of thought, I then began to develop my ability to employ the use of lyrical language and imagery in a way that effectively contributes to the overall theme, as opposed to making the language lyrical for the sake of flow, or producing imagery to make the scene more lifelike. I have found myself utilizing assonance, consonance, and other forms of repetition, as well as paying attention to the rhythm of the words I put together so that even the way the words sound together help establish the theme. One of the stanzas from poem I wrote and work-shopped during an Advanced Poetry Writing class exemplifies my development in the ability to establish rhythm and create repetition and imagery cohesively:

Because if you endure it, / your tattoo can be something so outrageous / they'll be talking
about it thirty-three hundred / years from now when they pull your body / out of the ice
and see that your / tattoo went all the way to the bone, because / that is how much you
meant it, / like a rotting tree whose leaves still turn pink / every fall, like the Black-Eyed
Susan who / comes back no matter how many times the summer / breaks up with her, like
the Ring-tailed Lemur / tricking gravity from tree to tree, that's how much / you meant
your tattoo. *Thoud'st shivered like an egg; / but thou dost breathe; your tattoo has heavy
substance; / bleed'st not; speak'st; art sound.* Art wind, / art rain, art fire, art thunder, art

dirt, art rivers, art mountains, / art glaciers, pebbles, mulberries, cannonballs, wedding rings...

The language is fluid, the images are precise, and the attention to opposing pitches of vowel sounds like “ice” and “bone” along with attention to assonance, consonance, and stressed and unstressed syllables in passages such as, “tricking gravity from tree to tree” keeps the rhythm lively and energetic. In this way, the form in which the language is delivered conveys my connection with the natural environment, especially as the rhythm quickens in pace at the end of the passage with the catalogue, “Art wind / art rain, art fire, art thunder...”

I still have much to improve on in my writing. Many writers might say there is a ratio of success to failures; one piece that is of the standard they hold themselves to for every five pieces that turn out only OK, or worse. While I am still learning to harness my use of writing techniques, and continue to struggle with the development of my thoughts on the page, I believe that I have begun to acquire the attributes I need to allow me to continue to progress successfully. The way in which I play around with language, and let myself mull over connections between different topics in my pieces throughout the writing process leaves my body of work open to experimentation along with an eagerness to improve. Grounded by these characteristics, I foresee my writing will continue to mature as my curiosity and exploration into other fields of knowledge continues to blossom.