

Our Mornings with Murray

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Donald Murray's house in Durham was a large white colonial surrounded by Minnie Mae's robust flowerbeds. Entry was through the garage. In the spring of 1985, the ten or so of us who were students in Don's graduate seminar would find him waiting for us in his living room, sitting in his large chair, a pen and his beloved daybook resting on the padded armrest. We were all working on our degrees in composition studies at the University of New Hampshire, and this small group of students, seated every week in a ragged circle in Donald Murray's living room included people who now influence the field—Donna Qualley, Tom Romano, and Ruth Hubbard among them. The course focused on creativity. We were to each choose a creative activity and write every week about the process of learning it. What we did not know was that the real subject of the course was Don himself, and the rare opportunity to witness him work.

Every morning, Don would typically begin the day in his basement office, where a large glass door opened out to woods, a granite wall, and the small creek that fed Mill Pond. It was in that office, often listening to classical music, where he wrote his essays, articles, and books—*A Writer Teaches Writing*, *Write to Learn*, *The Craft of Revision*, *Expecting the Unexpected*, among others. Though Don graciously invited guests to visit him down there, it was usually after the day's writing was done. He preferred to work alone, without interruption. We know some of his secrets, of course, because Murray published many essays on his experiences writing in that basement office, but twenty years ago, as a New England winter grudgingly gave way to spring, his seminar students got a gift we did not expect: We got to write along with him.

Every week we would write raw, undigested essays (if you could call them that) about our experiments with creativity, and every week we read them to each other. One of us was trying to compose music, another take photographs, and another explore how hydrologists understand the movement of water, and as we reported on these efforts we always tried to arc back to writing. What do these meaning-making activities have in common with the writing process? Don dedicated himself to drawing that semester, and he wrote every week, too. His pieces, though certainly more polished than ours, were often fragmentary and digressive, and completely frank. We found out, for example,

what he was reading on the toilet one week. But Don's weekly essays said little about his attempts to draw; he was finding too little time for that. Instead he meditated about teaching, writing, working on a novel, and once about the usefulness of discontent and the necessary loneliness of doing a writer's work. These were often first thoughts—a short step or two from the daybook—and these pieces, numbered one through eleven, allowed the ten of us to enter that basement office and get a glimpse of what Murray's mornings were like.

When Don died in December, 2006, I began working on a piece remembering the man—a pioneer of the writing process movement, a Pulitzer prize-winning editorial writer, textbook author, poet, Boston Globe columnist, friend and mentor—and I rediscovered the folder where I had saved the responses Murray wrote for that seminar more than twenty years ago. I had also reread some of Murray's published work, but those weekly essays, written only for his students and read aloud in his living room, brought me closer to my experience of him. They also moved me to think about Murray's relevance to contemporary composition studies, and particularly his contention that the most important research was looking into "how effective writing is made" ("Our Students" 88). He was particularly concerned that the field's focus on interesting but "peripheral" issues was drawing our gaze away from the act of writing and its many complex realities. Don's weekly responses were one way he did this kind of scholarship, and rereading them was like being given the keys to his lab.

Don Murray was a tireless collector of quotes from writers he admired, and in his fourth response, he transcribed a story that the poet Kim Stafford once told, about a physicist who was also a violin player. One day the physicist took his instrument to his lab, gently placed it into a velvet-covered vice, and trained an electron microscope on its soundboard, just near the f-hole. Then he placed a steel peg near the wood and got it vibrating. What the physicist saw was his violin come alive. The wood rippled like water in a pond after you've thrown a stone, and then gradually, he watched these ripples turned to waves. But the most compelling discovery was this: twenty-four hours after the physicist had removed the vibrating steel peg, the wood was still alive. A day later, the molecules continued to tremble with the memory of sound.

Don was drawn to this story because it celebrated that quiet moment when a writer sits before a daybook or computer screen and with the first few words sends "a tingle" that stirs language to life. For Murray, this moment was sacred. For him, it reflected "the desperate need I

have to write, and the need I have for a time at the beginning of my day which is selfishly mine, a time for quiet, for listening, for receiving" ("Notes on Not Writing"). There is much I might say—much that has been said—about Donald Murray's contributions to how we think about composing, but I think this idea, that language, like the violin, takes on a life of its own from a single note, is central to his work as a writer and teacher. In a sense, Don argued that words have a singular agency, one that behaves much like an unruly character in the first draft of a novel or short story, bossing the writer around, surprising her, and most of all, defying her intentions.

Don often imagined this as if the word or the pen or word processor had a life and will of its own, an almost separate existence. For instance, Murray wrote in one response that he allows "the pen to discover its line" ("Untitled")—note the subject of that sentence—and celebrated more than anything else the power of fluency to help writers develop a "faith that the writing will tell the writer how to write if the pen is allowed to move fast enough, lightly enough, above the page... Accidents of meaning will happen, connections will be made, new channels cut if the flow is strong enough" ("What Stimulates Creativity?"). That spring of our seminar, Don was working on a novel that he tentatively titled *My Military History of the Twentieth Century*, and he often mentioned his struggles with the book. (In fact, by the end of the semester, he had temporarily abandoned the project.) In his fifth response, Don seems to give the unfinished book the same kind of agency he gave the word or the line. They are collaborators—the unfinished novel and the man—waiting on each other to make something happen. "All week long," he wrote, "I have stood apart from the novel, and it has been trying to reach me—a good sign. At the most unexpected moments I see the novel entire, at a different length, at a different distance, I tell it, not show it. It picks up clues from what I am reading or reading about" ("What Simulates Creativity").

It is a powerful and enormously appealing idea that writing might take on a will of its own, that the pen or the fingers on a keyboard—if they move fast enough—might lead to "accidents of meaning." But I also know that from a theoretical standpoint, there are all sorts of problems with the idea that language can somehow exist independently from its maker. We know that, as Bakhtin famously reminded us, our words are only half ours and "half someone else's," and that language—even the private language of Murray's daybook—are "overpopulated with the intentions of others" (293-294). Don's novel, the book that seems to be paying attention to what he is reading one week and then telling him how this might yank the narrative in new directions was more like a

dog leashed in Don's backyard, straining against the conventions of what might be said in a novel and what has already been said.

I suspect that Don might have conceded all of this, though I doubt such theories would have impressed him, because they do so little to account for the *experience* he often had writing in his basement office on those quiet mornings in Durham. After all, what makes a theory compelling is its power to explain things, and the recognition that we are not really alone when we use language seems true and even interesting, but it does little to diminish the *feeling* that the work is indeed solitary, and that when it goes well, there is magic. Here's what Don wrote about that in his fifth response: "The writer is drawn to the empty page because the surprise is always there. Remember the first time you found out you could place a sheet of paper over a rough surface and rub a crayon back and forth as the pattern appeared in the page? The writer never loses that. The magic continues forever. The writer cannot escape the paper [the screen] because language is forever alive, constantly denying intent" ("What Stimulates Creativity?").

I hesitate to bring up the word "magic" in composition studies circles these days. We analyze, theorize, intellectualize, and contextualize composing—all appropriate moves for a scholarly discipline—but when we do I'm afraid that we stop seeing the realities of the *experience* of writing. How it *feels*. These are the things that the writer-teachers and teacher-writers like Don, Wendy Bishop, Lad Tobin, Peter Elbow, Lynn Bloom and others constantly reminded us of. So here's what I worry about: *I worry that with the loss of voices like Murray's and Bishop's and the professionalization of our discipline we are moving further away from our—and more importantly, our students'—actual experience of writing.* I sit in some sessions at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, for example, and hear composing described in ways that seem to bear little relation to any of my experiences as a writer, or any of the experiences of my students, to the extent that I really know them.

One of those experiences, of course, is pleasure. Don believed that if his students experience these pleasures their relationship to writing will be changed forever. In his seventh response, Don wrote that he was "blindsided" by another writer in the English office who reported that one of Don's students had said that writing was "fun." The writer was chagrined. Apparently, Don noted, this writer believed that writing "should be a matter of high seriousness like, 'We're working on having a baby'" ("Notes on Creative Teaching"). Murray wrote that though writing isn't always fun, it should never be thankless labor, and if it was, writers should find their way back to play, which he felt was at the heart of any creative activity. "If it is not fun," Don wrote, "if there

is not play, little of importance will be produced" ("Notes on Creative Teaching").

In 1995, Peter Elbow wondered whether the roles of academic and writer were in conflict, and suggested they might not be if as scholars we could be "more like writers--wrote more, turned to writing more, enjoyed writing more" (82). I'm not sure that most academics dislike writing but very few seem to talk about its pleasures, and therefore their students may never have the chance to enjoy those surprises that brought Don to the desk day after day. I think this is a shame. I think it's a shame especially because I've witnessed, again and again, how the promise of this small pleasure inspires students to do intellectually difficult things.

Murray suspected, quite rightly, I think, that his critics believed that his theories lacked intellectual vigor. In his seminar responses, Don came to the defense of both narrative and especially description as worthy modes of inquiry. Here's what he wrote in one of those responses:

Description is the sane center to which I must return. I have colleagues who think description should not be tolerated in Freshman English because it is too simple, a lower order of reasoning, but description may be the whole ball game: to describe what we see, what we feel, what we think...to describe in such a way that the reader sees, feels, thinks. There is always surprise in description. I surprise myself by seeing in words what I did not see before words, and my readers are surprised at what they see which, when I am successful in communicating, is *not* what I expected them to see. It would be Nazism to see for my readers. I want to do my own seeing so they may do their own seeing. ("Creative Teaching")

Murray is extending the usual conventions of description by abandoning the premise that good description means that writers throw open the curtain and reveal how they see the world. Don sees a much more complicated relationship between reader and writer, writer and word, one in which seeing is a negotiation which is mediated in often unexpected ways by language. But I think the more relevant point here is that narration and description were forms Don preferred because they are best suited to his attempts to capture the experience of writing. One of James Moffett's more memorable observations was that "to abstract is to trade a loss of reality for a gain in control" (23). Narration and description provide the appropriate languages for the kind of research Murray was most interested in: minimizing the "loss of reality" in how we understand the writing process in a field he felt was favoring abstraction over studying actual writers at work.

There are problems with Don's methodology. One is the understandable suspicion that he attempted to generalize from the peculiari-

ties of his writing experiences and offered prescriptive insights that should apply to everyone. Compositionists are particularly sensitive to this, as Flower and Hayes once learned, because there is a natural desire to capture a model of the writing process that can be uniformly taught. Don was acutely aware that he could easily be misunderstood as holding himself up as just such a model. In every textbook, he was very careful to say that there are “processes” of writing not *a* process, and in one of his last seminar responses, Don wrote this:

I am less and less confident that I can persuade my colleagues to do what I do, to think as I think. I am less and less interested in doing that. In fact, it would be a positively bad thing to do, since I want diversity in my colleagues and in my students. I do not believe there is truth, but truths. My job as a teacher and a writer is to witness, to be open about my own process and discoveries—and to encourage my students and my colleagues to participate in a community in which diversity is respected....The test is not when you support someone who believes what you believe, but when you support someone who believes the opposite of what you believe. (“Talking to Myself”)

Don is talking here about the value of diversity and dialogue in a community of scholars but he could just as easily be talking about the conversations he had with himself. Don often reported that the selves he brought to his own work were often in disagreement about the value and the truth of what he was saying. In his worst moments, Murray admitted that self-doubt even seemed to compromise the daily discipline of sitting at his writing desk on those quiet mornings in Durham. But his muse was one tough bird. In his eighth response, Don imagined that she had grown old along with him.

I think intellectually and aesthetically about what I might write, debating what I may say and how I may say it—shopping this genre, that voice, this structure, that point of view, and do not write. I tell myself that I have no need to be compulsive, that I should let the field lay fallow for a season and do not write. Then my muse, who was a Greek dish with come on eyes when I was young, a gal who wore a filmy robe and had cute fluttery wings, has grown as thick in the waist as I have, wears a moustache, an off-the-rack denim gown, and her wings droop beyond her buttocks. No come on looks anymore, she tells me to write with a cramping kick in the bowels, often delivered while I sleep. As if I need her to tell me to write. (“Importance of Making Snow”)

My writing students need many things from me—guidance in analyzing rhetorical situations and understanding academic discourse, insights about methods of invention and revision, help with developing a more sophisticated understanding of the social aspects of language

use. But Don reminds me, again and again, that there is still room, that there will always be room, for a little of the muse's magic.



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