The Tuft of Flowers in a Leveled Field

by **Bruce Ballenger**
Boise State University
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The faces

of my students are texts
I constantly read for clues about how I'm doing. I am a bad reader of faces, in the same sense some of our students are bad readers of literature—I look for hidden meanings everywhere and assume they are meant to trip me up. I see boredom in the gaze out the window, disapproval in tightened lips, ridicule in whispers. I know there is a pathology in the desperate need to please my students—something I have learned to forgive myself for—yet what interests me is how it manifests itself differently for my male and female students. I am driven to perform harder for women whose faces I think register disapproval. **The men make me mad.**

Chris was one of these male students. He was a student in my Introduction to Prose Writing course, the elective writing course after freshman composition. I sensed trouble immediately. During in-class writing exercises, Chris would stare out the window. He spent much of the time with his arms tightly folded across his chest. On one occasion after an in-class writing exercise, he said sarcastically, "Why are we doing this? I don't see the point."

It was a reasonable question, really, despite the edge. But when Chris asked it I felt the heat rise to my face. I bristled. With as even a voice as I could muster at the time, I said, "Well, Chris, maybe you can't see the point of this exercise. Not every exercise works for every one." It was a lousy response, but I was furious. Later, I tried to write him off. I'm the wrong writing teacher for the likes of him, I decided.

But Chris wouldn't go away. In conference, he seemed anxious for my reaction to his work. He seemed to want to talk. I sensed in his straight back, his diverted eyes, and his quick, nervous smiles a desire to please, not to challenge. He even seemed shy, a persona that didn't match his presence in class at all.

I did the best I could with him. I could not suppress the dread I felt before every conference, but I didn't express it directly. I praised him for the fluency of his writing and encouraged him to take risks. His essays were mostly narratives, restrained and technically correct little stories about athletic experiences and his struggles in business school. I thought he was always holding back, and I told him so.

Towards the end of the course, as students were compiling their writing portfolios, Chris told me he was including something I'd never seen before. "I think you'll like it," he said. He decided not to show me the draft before submitting it in his portfolio. I now believe he could not face me because the essay profoundly embarrassed him.

The essay described in painful detail how he had to ask his father, a Boston banker, for tuition money. Chris made an appointment with his father through his father's secretary. He described entering his father's office, shaking hands with the man, and discussing the terms of the transaction. "I felt more like a client than a son," Chris wrote. I was moved by the essay, and saddened by it, and was anxious to tell him so, but Chris never returned to pick up his portfolio.

Once, the next semester, we passed each other in the hall, and I told him I liked his essay. I think I said it more for me than for him, but I'm not sure why. Did I want to make up for letting him down somehow? Did I sense that he wanted something from me that I was unable to give? "Thanks," he said, without pausing as we glided by each other in the hall. After that, we never spoke again.

The first thing I do when I receive my class roster before the start of every semester is count the women and the men. I hope for more women. I embarrassed to admit this because I wonder if this preference is not simply male vanity. Yet, I don't think it is that simple. I think I am also less comfortable with the young men in my classes, and sense that they present some kind of vague threat to me. But what could it be?

Michelle, a friend and colleague, is about fifteen years younger than I am. She is an exceptional teacher, and yet her authority is persistently undermined by a trio of young men in her Freshman English class. I have never been to her class, but I can imagine these men, with their baseball caps turned backwards concealing their necks, their legs thrust forward, their arms folded tightly across their chests, and the elastic movement of their lips—from frown to smile to smirk. While I share Michelle's rage at their infuriatingly predictable response to her age and gender, I also know this does not happen to me very often.

In his bibliographic essay, "Reading Men: Men, Masculinity, and Publishing", Michael Kimmel observes that the many books now published on men and masculinity reflect a "deep ambivalence" (12) about male power. Many of these books seem to be asking whether many men speak from a position of power or of pain. It can certainly be both, I think, and even if we often *feel* powerless, men cannot escape confronting their privileged status. As Kimmel writes, "...[I]t is a strange dialect that speaks to the pain of men and not the pain men cause" (16). When I see my male students—and my own struggle to understand my feelings about them—through Michelle's tears after she returns from her Freshman English class, all I can see is the pain they cause. They are the enemy. I hate the baseball caps, the swagger, the Greek letters emblazoned across their chests. I hate their "big game" essays, their essays about high school drinking episodes or car crashes.

I have hated men with relish for quite some time now. It would be easy to say that hatred began when I was a radical feminist graduate student in the mid-seventies, but that wouldn't be quite right. I have hated my father off and on most of my life, hated him for his drinking and his denial about his drinking and finally his death in 1975. But mostly, these days, I resent my father because he died before he had the chance to warn me about a few things. But there is one unmistakable lesson inscribed in Dad's tormented life and his early death, one he was unable to find the words for the last time I saw him, a New Year's day two weeks before he died. That lesson was this: the hardest thing to love is yourself and an easy way to self-loathing is to believe that you don't measure up as a man.

I remain pro-feminist, but I also recognize now that for years I used those beliefs to avoid coming to terms with the simple fact that I am a man, and that my own manhood—whatever that may mean—is something worth looking at. It has occurred to me that my discomfort—and in some cases, hatred—towards young men might be self-hatred; I see in them that part of myself that it is difficult to love.

But then again, I wonder if I don't see some young male students as a threat to this new project of mine. The ones I love to hate make masculinity *seem* so easy. They wear it well. They never appear to feel lonely in each other's company, as I often did (and do). They never appear to be paralyzed by self-doubt. Their fathers are their best friends. They never appear to have been cut by the coach of any athletic team. Yet now, when I remember students like Chris, I am reminded that there may be another face sweating under the mask.

Sometimes I wonder what these young men make of me. It is a relevant question, especially in a writing class, where as Lad Tobin suggests, "the written product and the writing process always exist within—and are always shaped by—a particular network of interpersonal relationships" (14), and primary among these is the complicated relationship between students and their teacher. Though mine emphasizes peer writing groups, students all know which reader ultimately matters most. How do they construct me as a reader?

A few years back, I remember reading a course evaluation in which one of my male students wrote, "He's a great teacher, though a little feminine in his teaching style." At the time I pretended this was a great joke, or a great compliment, but I think I was really troubled by his comment. I have never forgotten it. What does it mean for a male teacher to have a "feminine teaching style"? Is it my emphasis on personal writing, which Linda Peterson argued may be resented by some men? Is it my willingness to share autobiographical details, to reveal pieces of my personal life and writing? Do I go too far with this?

Last semester, in my advanced essay writing class I shared a draft of an essay on my experience of sexual abuse at a summer camp thirty-three years ago. Before the students read the piece, I asked them to examine the lead paragraph. "Can you predict, based on the lead, what this essay is about?" I asked. No one said a word. Later, in conference, a female student told me, "You know, I think a lot of people knew what your essay was about but they were too uncomfortable to say anything." Several students in the class, all female, privately told me that sharing my essay gave them permission to explore subjects that were important to them. None of the men in class mentioned it to me directly, though several said kind things in their written responses to my piece.

When I share such work, I know I risk silencing young men who are unprepared for the kind of emotional honesty they think I expect as a reader of their essays. But perhaps that is exactly what I'm after. Is this my way of beating my chest? Do I assert my dominance over my male students by implicitly suggesting that they could never be as open about their feelings as me, that they will always be, by comparison, emotionally handicapped? Do I use their discomfort with my disclosures in a self-serving way?

In "Pedagogy of the Distressed," Jane Tompkins suggests that the "performance model" of teaching—the desire to win student approval by demonstrating how smart we are—is driven by the instructor's fear. We are afraid, she writes, "of being shown up for what [we] are: a fraud, stupid, ignorant, a clod, a dolt, a sap, a weakling, someone who can't cut the mustard" (654). In a ironic twist, perhaps I use public revelations of my own pain—my admissions of weakness—to separate myself from my male students so I won't have to take them seriously. What do I risk in doing so? What am I afraid of?

It is possible that I am afraid of students like Chris, who want something from me I am unable to give. And what does it say about me that I seem unable to give it?

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I had lunch with Donald Murray the other day, and he handed me the draft of a talk about writing he was going to give to a local civic group. I read it nervously, knowing that he was going to ask me what I thought about it. "Does it make sense?" he said. I stammered out a series of empty platitudes, feeling totally inept and vacant, and then quickly filled my mouth with a bagel and cream cheese so that there was no more room for words. I have only recently discovered what a powerfully confusing thing it is for me to have a male mentor like Don Murray. Though he has encouraged me to call him on the phone, I find myself unable to do so very often. When we do talk, I am both delighted and vaguely dissatisfied. I am fiercely protective of his work, excessively so, and sometimes get embarrassingly defensive when I respond to his critics. Don is a frequent source of inspiration, and I often see his friendly shadow flutter across the pages of my work. He is a presence here. Yet, do I really know him? Does he really know me? Do we really understand each other?

It is always hard when two men reach across a generation to try to find each other, even under the best of circumstances. The young men who return to visit me—and I am glad to see—after they leave my writing classes are usually the ones in whom I can see myself twenty years ago. They are hikers and nonconformists, or in the current term "granolas," usually English or environmental conser-

vation majors who may write a little poetry or do some activist work. But these students are extremely rare these days, especially in Freshman English. The vast majority of my male students don't remind me of myself at all.

Though I tried, I was never a particularly good athlete in high school, so when I receive a student essay about the friendships forged on a playing field, or a winning goal in the last few minutes of a hockey game, I withhold the belief that these could be profoundly significant moments in a young man's life. When these students write essays about how their heroes are coaches, rock stars, or no one in particular, I have difficulty understanding, growing up as I did admiring President Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Eugene McCarthy.

Because these students seem so different than I was at their age, I think I resist their experience. I become the "mock reader" Wayne Booth talks about in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, someone who cannot willingly suspend disbelief because the writer creates a reader I refuse to become (138).

Yet what these young men want from me *is* understanding, the same thing I seek from Don Murray or any other male mentor. They are not sure whether they are entitled to understanding, nor whether it is reasonable to expect. After all, I am a male authority figure, just a few steps removed from their fathers, a man who has the power to pass judgment over them. Can they trust me?

Robert Bly writes about "ritual space," a place both men and women may pass through as they develop as human beings that is safe, a place for display that leads away from aggression and competitiveness and towards community (194-195). As I understand it, ritual space is a place where young adults can stop for a moment and examine who they are and where they've been without judgment and without the need to do anything about it.

My writing courses, for some male students, seem to create this ritual space, and when I understand it this way I can see their essays not as boastful proclamations but as modest displays of knowledge and experience. They are introducing themselves to themselves. And to me. I am also witness to this ceremony. To borrow Bly's metaphor, I am the King in the stands watching the knights parade past. I want to be honored by this, but I do not always understand or like what I see.

I rarely have male students who return to take another writing class from me, but this semester Nick is in my advanced essay writing class. I had Nick in freshman English, and he got a "C" that he politely contested, so I was surprised to see him show up at my door for permission to take my class. He is still not doing very well. I find, though, that I like him much better than I did in freshman English; I look forward to our conferences. His last essay was about building a dock

with his father, and after we discussed the piece in conference we talked about photography. I suddenly saw Chris again in the way Nick fidgeted with his cap, and the way he stayed put even when we had run out of things to say.

I ask myself now how will all of this change my teaching. In my conversations with Nick, I can see that, in small ways, it already has. I am more tolerant and more patient with my male students, less likely to read threatening messages in their faces. I am more willing to suspend disbelief when I read their papers, especially those I always dismissed as the typical male genre: essays about athletic experiences, about facing danger, and about boyhood friends. I have also begun to notice how often these young men write outside that genre, how they may write with deep feeling about their fathers and mothers, the death of a friend, their connection to the natural world.

Sam Keen writes, "You may be certain that if you want to be a pilgrim, you are going to get lost" (133). Few of the young men in my classes know they are on a pilgrimage, much less that they are lost. But because my writing classes are more about life than most courses, I am able to witness my students'journeys, and alert them to the movement. Instead of dismissing their sports essays as formulaic or superficial, I'm learning, as Robert Connors suggests, to ask the questions which move my males students tentatively towards a fresh understanding of *why* they are drawn to these narratives (151). Last fall, Andre, a football player who had been released by the team for a reason he did not disclose to me, wrote a draft on his most successful high school game, the contest that earned him a write-up on the local sports page and may very well have helped him win a scholarship to the university. How odd it must feel, I said in conference, to be suddenly without football after all these years, especially after such success. The next draft was an insightful meditation on the sometimes painful shift in identity from student-athlete to "merely" a student, changes that for Andre, who is African-American, are complicated by race as well as gender.

While I am learning to alert students like Andre how their stories sometimes reflect—or conceal—their own awkward journey towards manhood, I still feel unprepared to be their guide. Perhaps there is no preparation for this, except to listen with understanding, and to tell my own stories.

A few weeks ago, I shared another essay with my class about my father, a weekend in the Berkshires with a male friend, and my nervousness over a gun. It suggests that the measures of manhood can be an uncomfortable inheritance, from grandfather to father to son. I was interested in the responses of the men in the class to my essay, and among them I found this note: "The story, 'The Measures of a Man,' is important, maybe so because I am a man as well. I would be

curious to explore it deeper." Another student wrote me, "I understand the feelings."

In *The White Album,* Joan Didion writes that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live" (11). Nancy Mairs, another personal essayist I greatly admire, writes, "I have to tell myself the story of myself in order to sense a self at all" (114). And the poet Adrienne Rich says that "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" is for women "an act of survival." She writes that "until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (35).

In my writing class, young men have the opportunity both to tell stories—and revise them—and to examine the assumptions in which they are drenched. Is this an act of survival? I don't think my male students see it that way. But there is an earnestness to the telling, and in some cases an urgency, that I have now begun to notice.

In Robert Frost's familiar poem "The Tuft of Flowers," the narrator comes to turn the hay in a freshly cut field, and looks longingly for the man who mowed it earlier, "in the dew before the sun."

> But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
> And I must be, as he had been—alone. (22)

It is the narrator's discovery that the missing man spared a tuft of flowers from his scythe's blade, for no other reason than "sheer morning gladness," that brings him back in spirit, "so that henceforth I worked no more alone."

> "Men work together," I told him from the heart,
> "Whether they work together or apart." (23)

I am now more alert to those sometimes coded gestures in the writing of the men in my classes, those solitary tufts of flowers at the edge of the leveled field that signal a love or longing that I share with them—grief over a lost father, the struggle to forge a satisfactory friendship with another man, the joy that such a friendship yields. There is still much more I must learn to do to be a better writing teacher for the young men in my classes. While I acknowledge their pain I must learn to remind them of their power. I must find new ways to help them examine their masculinity so that the stories they tell move them towards a sense of themselves as men that may be uncomfortable, dissonant. But I think I can learn to do these things, because it is my work, too. And I find now, like Frost's hay-turner, that I am happy to discover that the field isn't empty after all.

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Victor J. Vitanza

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