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the poet, the actor, and the boy

You see, I've never been great at writing.

Well, I guess that depends on what you count as “real” writing. For some, that means journaling their thoughts in a monogrammed notebook that only they will see. For others, it means writing letters, texts, and notes that only one other person will ever read. Still others believe it's anything you submit for a grade in school, like analyzing *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Catcher in the Rye*. But for me, it meant nothing. You see, I always viewed writing as a useless and menial task. Why couldn't I just SAY what you wanted to know, you really want me to use a pencil or type it out so you can read it silently? That didn't seem exciting to my juvenile brain.

I was always told I was a funny kid. Whether this was true, or it was the adults in my life seeking to raise my self-esteem, I guess I'll never know. But when I tried to be funny when writing about what 9-year-old me watched on TV last night, any comedic effect I (supposedly) had fell flat. It never seemed natural, and I would often resort to detail after boring detail to get the 100% or the smiley-face sticker. My writing never carried any passion. It only served to earn me a grade. Glenn Lester, Taylor Lucas, and others detail this experience in their article, “We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity.” They touch on how many students write for the sole purpose of completing an assignment. One student reported they “found it difficult to connect the writing they did for a grade with the writing they did for individual

satisfaction” (Lester et. al 2). It was clear I hadn’t found this satisfaction yet or was unaware that it existed at all. To me, it was grades above everything. Grades WERE everything. If I could write 200 words that would get me a perfect score on an assignment, why should I care if I truly enjoyed the words I was producing? This mindset strangled my creativity at its source. That funny little guy was disappearing, becoming a husk by way of his own obsessive natures. It continued this way all the way through 8th grade, when that long haired, 5’4, 13-year-old boy from Long Island buttoned up his shirt, packed his schoolbag, and got on the train to Manhattan.

High school was, no doubt about it, the best years of my life (the best years an 18-year-old remembers at this point in his life, anyway.) I met boys who were just like me: Catholic young men who were academically proficient. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy anymore. These kids were all the valedictorians of their middle schools. They all knew the quadratic formula and every king of England. I had to try harder (or, as I saw it in the moment, show off.) I was going to show these kids who was BOSS. Writing, and the grade that followed, always seemed like a chance to prove myself. To prove I was a capable student, a student who belonged among New York City’s highest ranked debaters and students who had completed years of research at 14. Lester says taking proper steps in your writing “provides you with tangible proof that you’ve written work worth being shared” (Lester et al. 5). He clearly means work that is genuine, work that showcases the human with passion behind the pen. The way I saw it, the only work worth sharing was work that would get you to the top (wow, this is a freshman in high school thinking like this. Yikes).

Two weeks into school, I sat down to complete my first writing assignment. And I crashed and burned. While I don’t remember the exact assignment, I know the feedback was nothing short of, “Andrew, this is a disaster. See me to discuss.” I brushed it off. I never needed

help in middle school, why start now? It was not until my third assignment that I finally found success. When my teacher presented me with my graded rubric, she was beaming. She then asked, “How long did this take you to do?” Wanting to sound as if I put in a ton of effort, I replied “I spent THREE hours on it!” Her face fell. No freshman in high school should be spending three hours on a 200-word commentary (something I only realized when tutoring freshmen as a senior). And in sophomore year, I didn’t fare much better. This was the year I learned how to close-read, and I learned much too late that success on close-reading assignments, more often than not, required one to actually read the book. However, my teacher seemed to see potential in me, something I couldn’t see myself. After all, a 15-year-old can only take so many “did you even read this?” remarks until he starts to doubt himself. At the end of the year, I closed my book and began to walk out of my English 10 classroom for the last time. My teacher called me back in. “Oh boy, here it comes. I have to repeat the class,” I thought. But that wasn’t the case.

“Andrew, you shouldn’t keep doubting yourself. If you can take this effort and tie it together with something you care about, you’ll find endless success.” Only hearing that I, in fact, did not fail the class was enough for me to “yes” to my teacher and leave for the summer. I had no way of knowing that when I came back to school next year, everything I thought I knew about writing would be flipped on its head.

My junior year saw the same struggles the two years prior threw at me, but this feedback was like no other. The class was titled Close Reading and Analytical Writing. Instead of being focused on the literature itself, this class required you to draw your own conclusions; to form unique claims using quotes from the text as evidence. After miserably failing to connect *Hamlet* with Seamus Heaney’s “Digging,” doubt stormed right in. Recalling Ruth Li’s “Reflecting on

Literacy Identities Through Writing Personal Narratives,” I remembered how I felt in that moment. Li compiled an array of personal narratives, encouraging students to reflect critically on their backgrounds. A student asks “Will I lose myself along the way again? At this point in my life I was acquainted with change, but it wasn’t easy getting there” (qtd. in Li 5). My high school writing experience was obviously different from before, but now I was seriously doubting my ability to succeed. Until we moved on to poetry, that is. Then, I was tackling those assignments like never before, spouting analyses and original thoughts that would give T.S. Eliot a run for his money. My personal essay on acting got full marks, commendations I never dreamed of reading on a paper with my name on it. I didn’t understand it at first. Why was this happening? *Because this is your passion. This is what you care about.* In my senior year writing course focused on writing theater reviews, it could go without saying that I was met with incredible success (but I’ll say it anyway. I think I’ve earned a bit of self-pride).

Of course, I can’t write about poetry and acting forever. Becoming a better writer means having the ability to write about any number of topics, for any audience. And I won’t enjoy it every time. But now, I know where my passion lies. I know my strengths, and just as importantly, my weaknesses. I now know when to ask for help, to take risks, and even when it’s time to completely throw an idea out of the window and start over. If I can say I have improved from where I was a year ago, the process is working. Writing is an endless journey, and I don’t know where it will take me. But I know that I’ll be fine. Now, I write because I care.

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