

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Value Your Creative Self*

**D**ear Teacher,

When my first book, *Chants*, a poetry collection for adults, was published in 1984, I began speaking and giving readings at colleges and high schools; and when my first children's book, *A Birthday Basket for Tia*, was published in 1992, I added school visits to my travels. Who wouldn't want to spend time with young readers who say with deep feeling, "You are my favorite arthur!" These visits and professional conferences not only allow me to listen to students but also to hear you talk about your current challenges and successes.

Trust your initial, spontaneous responses and jot down your answers to the following questions. Are you creative? Does the word intimidate you? Does it motivate you? What is creativity? Name some creative people and not only the famous ones. Describe their work, occupations, or professions. What interests you about creativity? I was intrigued that my son, Bill, a scientist and writer, defined it as "the ability to discover and communicate multiple, unusual solutions." He applied this to varied activities, from playing basketball to the arts. My daughter Libby, a lawyer and writer, also included the arts and aesthetic abilities but added inventive, practical, and problem-solving talent.

Thinking about the topic of innovation, I realized that I might once have answered as teachers occasionally do, "I'm not creative, but I'm organized." Some people firmly respond yea or nay often based on childhood experiences and family encouragement. People can initially equate the word "creativity" solely with the arts but then

mention that creativity includes the ability to make new connections, and isn't that a major part of the teaching process? So I'm surprised when some teachers question their creativity. How can you constructively balance a room full of easily distracted bodies with different personalities, learning abilities and styles, home languages, cultures *and* teach them critical thinking and new skills? You must be creative! You may not have released all the inventiveness within you, but it's there. Women are particularly prone to doubt their talents. Those prickly doubts probably never vanish.

In a letter that I've saved for years, a California psychologist struggling with her book manuscript wondered how she ever believed she could complete her task. She felt incompetent, foolish, "desolate." She wrote, "I've been so focused on what others might think that I've forgotten about the meaning of my writing to me." In Colorado, I listened to a quiet, wise English professor and writer describe the months of his sabbatical and how he couldn't complete the project he'd proposed to his colleagues. He became reluctant to even see them and felt like a sham since he taught writing and yet couldn't perform this complex act himself. He talked about his self-doubts, his "grief."

You bring special gifts to the planet, gifts uniquely yours, linked to your individual experiences, education, history. So how do we begin Practice 1, to value our creative self? We exercise: We exercise the courage to value our talents. As in much of life, faith is a good place to start, in this case, faith in our capacities to enrich the world. For such important work, we need time, a welcoming place, and, ideally, friends who believe in that imaginative part of ourselves. "Time? Time in *my* busy life?" Yes, time.

"But I'm afraid of trying and failing. Maybe I'm not that clever. I need to grade papers, do a load of wash, change the car oil, make supper. Anyway, people will think it's silly." We all have excuses—children, jealous partners, unsupportive parents, to-do lists, and lethargy. The most persistent challenge: the doubting voice within, the audible frowns of our face in the mirror. All of us around the world who choose or are compelled to write, paint, discover cures for deadly illnesses, or compose a song, take a risk. We leap.

Sometimes, when I teach a writing workshop to adults, I distribute small boxes of Guatemalan worry dolls and ask my students to lay out the dolls and privately name their writing worries, to confront their fears. "What if I hurt someone I write about?" "What if

I discover I'm kidding myself and I can't really write?" "I'm afraid I'm dull and won't have good ideas."

What are your fears? Would it help to name them, write them down, and then push on? Journal writing as you read this book might help. Journals allow us to hear our inside self and years later provide a window back to our younger selves. With friends or colleagues, you could also start a bookjoy club or creativity loop or circle (the book has many circles) and do the suggested exploring and writing together. Sharing, bonding—and munching—we sometimes become braver.

Bored by my whining, I now have an idea journal, a place to paste images, quotations, and thoughts that appeal to me rather than dwelling on my woes. Writer and educator Donald Murray suggests a "daybook." Devise a system that appeals to you and prompts ideas that lure you to the page, canvass, clay, yarn.

Although, like my mom, I'd always enjoyed making a nest for my family and me, a place with some visual delights, I didn't realize then the value of designing a space to nurture my creative impulses. My home revealed what mattered to me—family photos, books, a cheerful kitchen, houseplants, light. Our surroundings, our reminders, help shape us, reveal much about us if we step back and study what we've chosen, says Professor Clare Cooper Marcus, author of *House as a Mirror of Self*. Unconsciously, we may be re-creating what comforted us or rejecting what was painful.

Look around. What messages have you left for yourself in the places where you do your most inventive work? Is it at your office, desk, kitchen, garden? How are you nudging yourself in the directions you want to be moving?

How I spend my time tells me what matters in my life. Examining my daily habits, I see the choices I'm making. Then I can ask, "What are the practices I want to develop?"

I typed my first collection of rhyming poems on the gray, portable typewriter my parents gave me when I graduated from eighth grade. Years later, my writing life as an adult began on a dining-room table. I have a tidy side, but I tend to write in clutter with dictionaries—English and Spanish—books, articles scattered around, working my way through the mess of ideas and notes. I need space. When I began making time for writing, I'd sit at the table and feel awkward, foolish. What made me think I had anything to say and that anyone would want to read my thoughts and creations? I love the

mystery of writing, and part of the mystery will always be how and why I stayed faithful to the work. Expect that awkward feeling, and firmly, kindly, and with a touch of humor, pull (drag) yourself along as you did the first day of college or of a new job. Be affirming. Pat yourself on the back. If we want to develop our full selves, this isn't really optional work. It's essential.

Writers write where they can, unwilling to wait for the perfect spot or for a sizzling bolt of inspiration. Although I've written at airports, in hotel rooms, and in restaurants, when possible, I now try to find a space that lures me to want to write, that sustains me a bit. I agree with Virginia Woolf on the value of "a room of one's own," but it's a luxury we don't always have, even those of us with many luxuries. Ours is often a noisy, violent world. Advertising and films can trivialize us, portray us, particularly women, as mere consumers or manikins. It takes work to remember the challenge of being human and extra work to believe we're unique. Retreating to a space that nurtures our good spirit assists our imagination to surface. I keep a few bears around—not the breathing, furry ones but figurines to remind me of the importance of hibernation. I'm often too busy, or believe I'm too busy, completing my endless list of tasks to retreat enough to hear my deeper self, to burrow in. I have to practice, intrigued by possibilities, by what I learn from writing

Design a special place, dear teacher, a welcoming place, even just a comfortable corner in a room or a desk or a table to foster your creative self, a tiny haven. Leave symbols that matter to you: rocks, pinecones, bird feathers, dried flowers, shells, whatever invites you to pause and ponder. Make regular appointments to savor time there. See your space as a work in progress (as we all are). Add to this private place—a photo, a saying, a book of photography. By shaping our space, in a small way, we nurture our creativity, our inner voice. Georgia O'Keeffe, who painted the objects she collected and studied—shells, rocks, bones—said, "I have used these things to say what is to me the wideness and wonder of the world as I live in it." How do we keep that sense of wonder as fresh as it is for a child?

The habit or discipline of regular time for exploring this imaginative part of ourselves, of persistently connecting and reconnecting with our inside self, yields rewards. When I began making time for writing in my life, I was working full-time as a university administrator and was "Mom" to my three children. Because helping them with homework and enjoying our dinners together were important to me, I began by setting

aside the time I could, two to three hours on the weekend, for sitting still with books, paper, and a typewriter—my precomputer life—making time to develop my skills. The custom of valuing our inner selves begins to shape our week and our self-perception.

In one sense, no one will care much if we don't write or paint. Our internal yearning or curiosity is the medium in which we plant our hopes and our desire to develop our full, complex selves. You and I are seeking to let our voices and talents unfold. Tending required. Develop the daily and weekly habits that are quiet reminders. If it's writing you wish to explore, read, yes, for pleasure, but also read to experience fine writing. Thinking of you, I'm reading about creativity, gardens, teaching, diversity, and rereading *Gifts from the Sea*.

Unleash your curiosity and enthusiasm. We all need guides, teachers, master craft artists. When I choose my reading wisely, the possibilities excite me and bring me back to the page just as supportive readers of all ages do. Find the artists in your chosen medium, be it dance, sculpture, science, or education, who dazzle you. Float on that excitement into your own work.

I still remember the El Paso summer afternoon in 1981, when I opened an envelope and read that someone in Ohio wanted to publish one of my poems—my first publication. Such moments counter the rejections, the waiting. And there's the zing of excitement that writing can bring. When I'm working on a book, my day feels different. I notice details—sounds, faces, stories. Everything matters more—or maybe, the trivial, the petty, matters less—because I'm looking and listening for threads I can lace through the book. I'm more alert, more awake. Writing daily to you is having the same effect.

"When do you feel most alive?" asked Polly, an anthropologist. She had a small studio built behind her house to return to painting, work that brought her energy and joy. Young students often ask if I ever feel lonely when I write. Quite the contrary. Perhaps because I didn't spend time writing for many years, I feel as if I'm playing hooky when I've managed to make the quiet and space, internal and external, to explore with a pen or a keyboard.

When do *you* feel most alive?

Spend time with people who value your dream. As the wise Sufi poet Rumi wrote, "Be with those who help your being." Through the years, friends' faith has helped me more than they'll ever know. In a journal entry from my late thirties, when I was feeling discouraged about choosing to write, I jotted that my dear North Carolina friend

Elizabeth in one of our infrequent but long conversations asked, “But don’t you see this is part of you? You’ve let your organized side dominate. Now you must let the other side catch up.” I continued writing but months later wrote, “The writing has improved though I still feel very funny about doing it.” Find good guides and friends who cheer on your risks and dreams.

I treasure a greeting card from a librarian in Neenah, Wisconsin, in which a green seed sends down a root, then opens—and a bird flies out. Above the drawing is a Hebrew proverb, “As is the gardener, such is the garden.” How do we assist the surprise of emerging? When we value our inventive side, we release the self too often burdened by duty and thus ignored. By developing our inventive talents, we hear ourselves—explore, stretch, live more fully, and teach more effectively.

*Cada cabeza es un mundo* a Spanish *dicho*, says. A world exists in every head, a one-of-a-kind world. You can write, paint, dance, or compose a collage in a unique way. Your way.

In his evocative memoir, *The Names*, N. Scott Momaday, describing his mother wrote one of my favorite sentences in contemporary America literature: “She imagined who she was.” Momaday goes on to say that this same imaginative act was important in his own life. Are you and I imagining who we could be and letting that *act of the imagination* expand and deepen our sense of self?

One spring, my Cincinnati gardening friend Jane, who had lived in her home for years, decided to whack back a huge honeysuckle. To her surprise, in the undergrowth, she discovered a lilac bush stunted in the shade of the huge vine. Thanks to her pruning, the lilac now had space and sun. With her attention, it began to grow—and grow. The lilac thrived, climbed, bloomed. Eventually, the bush stretched to fifteen feet.

Think of that lilac perfuming the world. What a loss if it had it not flourished. Makes me think of some of our students. In my next letter, I’ll send some thoughts on the pupils we care so much about, but today I want to focus on you. Rich with meaning, powerful reminders, symbols—flowers, hearts, flags, menorahs, apples—evoke and motivate. I send you the first of my imaginary gifts: seeds. I’ll put some by me, too, as symbols for the inventive hopes and dreams locked within us, waiting for us to allow a space for them, to nurture our possibilities. With the right environment, earth’s magic: slowly, seeds sprout. Plenty of life energy in that small, one-syllable word: *sprout*.

Celebrating beginnings together, let's practice valuing our unique selves. Gie, a wise Swedish neighbor and friend who spoke five languages, regularly reminded me that within us we carry inner wisdom. She certainly did. The spaces we shape externally and internally, the habits we develop to put ourselves in the company of what inspires us, help us envision what we might otherwise ignore. To help you think about your personal and professional artistic work, I send optional explorations and invitations to write. You, of course, may choose to respond by painting or writing a song or revising your garden.

*Joy, dear teacher! Joy!*



## **Exploration**

First, relax. Take some deep breaths. Let go of the thinking process, and let the images come. You know how we stretch (or are supposed to) before we exercise? These explorations can help you limber up too. Draw or design a collage of your ideal space for creating. I certainly can't draw well, but I find that doodling can loosen my imagination. Just play and avoid being judgmental. This exploration is just for you. Let your curiosity carry you along.

When you're ready to switch to another opportunity to see yourself on the page, sketch your sprouting self. You can do this with pencil, pen, colors, clay. You're in charge. Play!

Years ago, I spoke at a session of a program called SEED that promoted faculty book groups. Training was provided to a school

leader as I remember. The books were to be written by authors of varying ethnicities, particularly those represented at the school. Might that be an idea at your campus? An interested group could select all kinds of books—children’s, young adult (YA), adult fiction, and nonfiction. Perhaps using the model of One City, One Book, you would enjoy creating a One School or One Library or One Department/One Book. I remember a city version that chose a theme and then an adult, YA, and children’s book connected to the theme.

### **Invitation to Write**

Educators are fine writers. I know from the workshops I’ve led. Using first person, write a paragraph or more describing yourself as the lilac bush. What tangles, what doubts, and what fears have kept you from the work you’d like to do as a person, writer/artist, teacher?

Write about a path or street that you walked often as a child, giving special attention to sensory detail. Where are you? What do you see and hear? Do you smell anything appealing? How did you feel back then? Gather the details and use them to create the mood of your piece.



## Value Each Student's Creative Talents

Dear Teacher,

Though we're adults (much of the time) with the psychological protection that degrees, a middle-class life, and adulthood provide, it can often be hard to value our creative selves. How much harder is it then for our students who may not have such protections and who may not see positive depictions of people like them in the world around them? Educators are incredibly important people; you change lives. How do we make the necessary time, space, and support to guide a student to value her creativity? How do we see his inventive capacities and assist him to develop them? A key strategy is through establishing a personal connection.

Committed librarians and teachers who work with young people are optimists: You invest a good part of your life, your talents, and your enthusiasm in the next generation. What energy is required! I'm reminded what hard work teaching is when I visit a campus, reality therapy. My time as a teacher from working with little ones to teaching graduate students and now my author visits and campus presentations remind me of what many don't understand, those who think teachers have it easy because they have summers off. We have principal-for-a-day programs; how about having a teacher-for-a-day? You'd need to be standing by with oxygen and vitamins to provide emergency assistance to those struggling to be inspiring, patient, knowledgeable educators—hour after hour. Why is such important work often undervalued?

A father from Mexico brings his child to the first day of school. "I give you my son," he says respectfully to the teacher. What trust. What does that child who may not understand the conversation feel surrounded by a strange language? What would you feel? What did that teacher feel I wonder?

Purposely, I ask what would you *feel* rather than what would you think because our linear, pragmatic, production-focused society often ignores the rich emotional capacities that we share. Our feelings can be resources not only for our creative endeavors but also for assisting us to understand a fellow human of whatever age, ethnicity, or gender, for assisting us in the art of teaching.

We're moved by the directness and simplicity of the father's statement. Consciously or unconsciously, parents of young ones do give us their child for much of the year. Many of us remember how

that felt in our parenting years. Would this year's teacher or teachers value our child and realize just how special he was? We can be so intensely interested in a school our child attends.

Students arrive the first day of class whether in kindergarten or in a graduate course submitting, some more willingly than others, to our rules and judgments. Many dedicated educators tend to look back on all the missed opportunities for connecting with students. I do. We can apply Thornton Wilder's words from *Our Town* to our teaching life as well as to all aspects of our past: "So *all* that was going on and we never noticed!"

Master gardeners and master teachers know: possibilities—if the spark within hasn't been crushed, if the right growing conditions can be cultivated. Because we know students need to develop their inventive selves, we can connect with them, listen to and honor their stories, create time and a welcoming place as we encourage them to value and release their imaginations, as we affirm their specific talents and offer our helpful support.

You can't change school architecture reflecting societal values at a particular time in history nor change the locations of walls, windows, or doors; but you can design spaces for learning in which students see information, ideas, their interests, books, and people like them succeeding in the posters or video clips we share, the speakers we invite, the texts we assign. You can give each student a precious gift, your faith. I think of Patricia, a fine Texas teacher who referred to her third graders, many from low-income homes, as "scholars" and treated them as such. They prepared for my author visit with such thoroughness that I think they knew more about me than I did.

Year by year, we learn—from our students, their families, our colleagues, and books. And we learn by observing our responses critically, the Buddhist notion of "right seeing." What prejudices, some learned at home and some reinforced by the media, are barriers to our treating every student with dignity?

What do I see in the mirror? My many selves? Can I ever see myself without the filters I've been taught to value like youth and slimness? As I struggle to know myself, I also strive to see, really see, each student, her potential. Unfortunately, no cardboard disposable glasses exist that let us see our students without filters to remove attitudes we've absorbed as the earth absorbs toxins.

In a psychological sense, societies project their "shadows" on groups viewed as peripheral or inferior. Traits we repress, though harbor in varying degrees, we attribute to "those people," ones not

like us who, in our opinion, may be too close to their families or display their emotions too openly. Jung's notion of the shadow fascinates me. He proposed that the shadow could be a place of great energy and creativity if acknowledged and incorporated wisely. As a national community, do we in overt and subtle ways seek to repress certain groups, to keep them from the spotlight of positive attention?

Overcoming stereotypes is a lifelong struggle. Sometimes we soothe our egos by deeming some folks second-class and, thus, elevating ourselves. Our egos beam. We can be so smug, so prideful. Looking down on others because of their accent, weight, wardrobe, or poverty, we comfort our fragile selves, but oh the price to a student or a fellow teacher or staff member. With a look, remark, or comment on a paper, a teacher can describe specific strengths or wound through insults. I think of the rigid art teacher who snuffed my son's interest in drawing; of the bright, young Vietnamese woman reluctant to return to college because a professor haughtily suggested she didn't belong in the pharmacy program. She's haunted by his voice, the possibility of failure.

So what do bright students—and leaders—look like? Sound like? How do we overcome the images that seep into us and shape us more than we realize? In countless media presentations, we see certain groups as articulate citizens and other groups as problems. Our country is now referred to as the “world nation” because we're home to complex cultures, languages, and religions. Some schools offer opportunities to interact and learn from a wide variety of families, ticketless travel if we see diversity as an opportunity. Negative attitudes can be so deeply entrenched, though, that, sadly, some teachers aren't excited at the opportunities to teach and learn from those not like them.

Such teachers are a minority, I trust, and because of strong teacher and librarian preparation programs, new educators care about all their students rather than only about upper- and middle-class students who might fit a past image of an ideal student. Dick and Jane never did represent all of America's children. In fact, if we look at our national history, phrases such as “typical American experience” may refer to the immigrant experience. Our legacies are complex, and our families have varying stories to add.

In this nation of immigrants, schools and communities respond differently to the increase in students from Asia and Latin America who experience the discrimination and resentment once felt by the Irish and Germans who came here, also bringing their hopes and dreams. Years ago, anthropologist Edward Hall wrote astutely about

how unaware we are of the profound way we're all shaped by culture, how we in the U.S. often view foreigners as "underdeveloped Americans." Sadly, this perspective isn't only applied to foreigners. Does your local school district view its significant educational challenges as a nuisance, or does it believe that every student and family matters equally?

Immigrant students enter at all levels often lacking the English skills and, at times, the study skills to succeed. What does it feel like to be a Spanish- or Mandarin-speaking student in a school in which no staff member speaks your home language? A parent wrote me, "In this country, my language cannot protect my children." Can we feel that mother's sorrow and worry? Many of us can think of the generation in our own family that went to bed with those sighs, heartaches, and fears. How do we help our students to understand the wise Spanish *dicho*, *El que habla dos lenguas, vale por dos*. If you speak two languages, you count twice.

Parents like the speaker in my poem "Elena," who feel isolated, who secretly practice English so they can be of use to their children attending our high schools, display great courage. I wrote the sad, found poem "Learning English: Chorus in Many Languages," inspired by the letters from teens and adults struggling to learn English who write me after reading "Elena." I incorporated their words and grief.

I am embarrassed  
 almost every day  
 why people so mean. . . .  
  
 people still laugh at me  
 when words stumble out  
 I want to disappear. . . .

*My Own True Name*

Educators often regret that they can't communicate with all their students and families in their native language. Such educators long to know more about other cultures too. Although such knowledge is a great asset, it's our attitude that's most important. I watched in admiration as Anne, a school librarian, greeted each student as she would a guest in her home. I admired her determination to begin the

relationship building by striving to pronounce each student's name correctly knowing the power of her own name in her life. Eva Hoffman, in her illuminating memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, remembers the pain of hearing her name changed to suit her school. Hoffman writes of the "names that make us strangers to ourselves."

In some schools, Eduardo and his family the Garcias will have their culture and home language valued. He'll be assessed to make teaching him more effective, but no judgment will be passed that connects his worth with his family's bank account or ability to speak English. Effective teachers resist teaching to a test but have always engaged in relevant assessment. Talented educators who hone the gift of making connections, respectful of every student, have transformative powers. Sadly, at some schools and in some classrooms, Eduardo and his family will be viewed as burdens.

What a challenge to create learning communities that counter, alter existing prejudices that students early grasp and internalize. I met with a group of Oklahoma high school students in their library to discuss poetry. Some were Latino students, and though not all may have spoken Spanish, some did. I read my poem, "Elena," that has the line *Vamos a pedirle dulces a mamá. Vamos.*

"What do the words mean in Spanish?" I asked. Silence. Some students avoided eye contact though they knew the answer. "Let's go ask Mom for candy. Let's." In middle and high schools and even in colleges, students are often reluctant to say what they know. A sad irony. In an institution founded to educate and inspire, students had knowledge to share, linguistic knowledge, but they felt unsafe speaking up. What they know is stigmatized. As a Colorado university student said, "We just care too much about what other people think."

Objectively, we know that each language is a rich, complex system, but if we're candid, we know that we're influenced by language hierarchies. A British accent can signal "proper" manners, French accent—sophistication, Italian accent—strong emotions *and* good cooking, Spanish accent—for some, mental laziness. And how do people from other countries view our U.S. English and view us? Stereotypes are taught. In subtle ways, is your school continuing to teach them or countering them? It's a myth that we can be neutral in this work.

People who struggle to learn another language and people interested in languages and communication know that no language is inferior. It holds and reveals human ingenuity. And yet a fellow

speaker at a Virginia children's literature conference said that Spanish was a "simpler language," that while English offered many synonyms for *red*, for example, Spanish offered limited choices. Did she believe such misinformation?

Native language is intimately tied to our identity. It's our inside voice. In 1996, Estafanita Martinez, at that time in her eighties, was honored as a "Living Treasure" in New Mexico. Spanked as a child for speaking Tewa, one of the few remaining Tewa speakers, she worked with professors to preserve her language and utilized it in storytelling. She remembered the power of her native language when she was little. "That was the only language in which you could really put your thoughts across to your little friends," she said.

We and our students bring unquestioned presumptions about one another into the classroom. "Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves," writes poet Adrienne Rich. Some students arrive full of self-confidence and others lug heavy doubts. Many students have trouble relating to literature in their textbooks when it doesn't reflect their lives, when it fails to reflect our rich diversity. Students can reach erroneous conclusions. "Those people who write those poems," said a Latino student, "must have bigger brains. People like me couldn't write that." He probably doesn't know the *dicho*, the saying, in Spanish: *Nadie nace enseñado*. No one is born educated. If we believe our national rhetoric, and if we believe in the power of education, how can we settle for anything less than truly equal educational opportunity for all, which includes affirming each student's creative potential?

As we practice nourishing our imagination, we can more critically assess our strategies to nurture student work. High expectations honor students, say that we believe they can achieve. We become discouraged and even angry with peers who judge capacities based on skin color, ethnicity, accent, gender, religion. Poverty is a way to categorize people too, of course. As my friend Patricia wisely observes, "In this country being poor is a crime."

As we guide our students to value their inventive talents, an internal habit, we can shape places that externally support their creative and educational journey. What we call American literature is becoming far more interesting for all age groups as we savor and explore our national and hemispheric cultural wealth. It offers students a wide assortment of voices and images. When students see their teacher excited about books that include families and homes

like theirs, they connect more deeply with themselves, with us, and with text.

Some are blessed with families who can work with them on their reading and writing, but in our diverse democracy, we have students whose parents may not read text themselves or who may not read or speak English though they may read the world wisely and have survival stories and oral linguistic wealth to share. We can foster a literacy legacy that doesn't exist in some families by our example, by asking a student in first grade or graduate school questions about her life and dreams, listening to her stories and ideas, and assisting her to draw and write her unique tales. From personal experience, we know that bringing the inside voice or image out into the world requires effort and some faith in ourselves and in the process. Because of previous educational experiences, poor skills, or weak self-image, many students need us to nurture their courage, to *encourage* them to bring themselves to the canvass or page.

Although teaching can include lecturing, isn't it really about establishing connections: between ideas, theories, thinkers, texts, teacher and student? We won't always succeed, of course, but not to try is to cheat both our students and ourselves. We will learn less and, in some ways, be less. Knowing that younger students are constructing their identity, how do we create a welcoming and psychologically safe place for linguistic exploration? Laurie, a visual artist from Kentucky, recently told me, "I remember two teachers. One was a high school English teacher, and I didn't give a hoot about English. The other was a college history teacher, and I didn't care that much about it either. They were both so passionate though. They made me want to learn, and I didn't feel so dumb. I felt I *could* learn."

What wonderful teachers do you remember? And what not-so-wonderful ones?

I cringe remembering the writing professor in Wisconsin who reminded her students of the first grade she received on a writing paper in college. "*W* for worthless," her professor said. She told the students that the remark silenced her for years and that even though she had published a poetry collection, "In the back of my mind, I can sometimes still hear that voice." Our quiet teacher voices can echo for years.

Deep inside, educators want to be remembered. Daily, you're investing in the future, preparing the next generation to make the world a better, more just place. Good teaching is an art. Braiding your own inventive talents with your art of teaching enriches both.

By affirming each student through a personal connection, opportunities for unique possibilities surface, and we can guide him to value himself and his inventiveness. Large classes, emphasis on standardized tests for nonstandardized students, time constraints, and stereotypes pose challenges as do national skepticism about teacher preparation, educational politics, and budget crises.

Let's think of the seeds I sent. Nature can't be totally standardized, thank heavens. As we practice valuing our creative selves, dear teacher, we connect with a complex part of ourselves and better understand the fears and doubts students bring to the blank page. We see and feel differently if we're diving deeply enough into our work, into our humanity.

Theoretically, at schools and universities, students and faculty participate in exciting and respectful intellectual inquiry, the practice of mutual learning. But writing is a private act that, in our school years, we perform in public places for a grade. We ask students to reveal themselves to us, to share their dreams and opinions and fears while proving their mastery of writing conventions. Some of the finest teachers I know are willing to make themselves vulnerable, to reveal their doubts and histories so that students can follow their lead.

In *The Botany of Desire*, biologist Michael Pollan has a section on the domesticated apple: *Malus domestica*. The ancestor of our cherished apple is a wild apple from Kazakhstan in West Asia. Apples, then, as in "American as apple pie" and those shiny globes often given to teachers, like many of us, are of migrant stock. Like apples, our ancestors learned to flourish here and to nourish and sweeten the place.

Seeds of promise. When we respect our students and the good that they bring and when we share literature that reflects their realities and many other realities, students find a place for their creative selves in language and in languages. They are liberated to bring all of themselves to the classroom. With your guidance, they can then connect to the world's literary heritage. What a gift, a place in which each is welcome and in which each voice adds to the chorus.

One Sunday morning, walking on Boylston Street in Boston, I went inside beautiful Old South Church "gathered in 1669." I like to slip unnoticed into places defined as holy. I was in luck. Since the choir was practicing, I sat and watched an amazingly energetic choir director with his group of various shapes, colors, and ages. He asked



them to go to the back of the church and practice their entrance. In they filed solemnly, and then suddenly they did a little dance step. They kept entering, singing, and interspersing the dance step, and eventually, they started resoundingly clapping their rhythm. The room was transformed by a traditional Cameroon melody and by the singers' spirits. "Here I am in traditional Boston," I thought, "at a famous historical church, watching a director whose excitement energizes everyone involved and alters the very air." The music I enjoyed that Sunday was made by a diverse group's required practice and a director listening to every voice, realizing the power of each individual and the power of the whole.

### **Tips**

To encourage your students to talk about their questions and work, share some challenges or details in your creative process.

Invite your students to design a creativity corner or space.

### **Exploration for You**

Focusing on positive memories, think of a memorable teacher. What made her or him so effective? In what ways are you like or unlike her or him? In your journal, answer the following question: How do I wish to be remembered by my students, their families, the staff, and my peers?

### **Invitation to Write**

Gather memories of a favorite teacher. Make a list of details, either the sounds, gestures, or objects that defined that person. What did she wear? How did he walk? What do you think she ate for breakfast? What did he read at night? Write at least one poem about a memorable teacher in your present voice or in the voice of your younger self. Express the emotion through the concrete.

The following poem was inspired by a graduate student and literacy advocate Paulina Moreno, who was born in Mexico and educated in California. I wrote the poem for the first Elementary Education Graduating Class at North Carolina State University.

### **My Turn**

My first-grade teacher's frowns taught me  
I was welcome as a fly and dull as dirt.  
For one long year, timidly, I'd raise my hand  
and feel the sting of her brown eyes.

Welcome as a fly and dull as dirt.  
Why didn't she see the smart me?  
I'd feel the sting of my tall teacher's eyes.  
I frowned at my face in the mirror.

The next year, Mrs. Hassan saw the real me.  
Her laugh floated, like bubbles, and we floated too.  
I'd look at the changing face in my mirror.  
We read, sang songs I still sing. I sparkled.

I still float on Mrs. Hassan's bubbly laugh.  
She wrote me a poem, taught me I was special.  
Now it's my turn, in each child, to see their spark.  
Like all the Mrs. Hassans, I'll help the glow grow.