

The Writer

Changer and the changed

by Donna Rafanello

I write to discover. I write to uncover. I write to begin a dialogue. I write to honor beauty. I write to remember. I write to the music that opens my heart. I write as a form of translation. I write because it allows me to confront that which I do not know. I write as an act of faith. I write to record what I love. I write to listen. I write as a witness to what I have seen. I write by grace and by grit. I write knowing words always fall short. I write past the embarrassment of exposure. I write because it is a risk, to form the words, to say the words, to be touched, to reveal how vulnerable we are. . . .

— Terry Tempest Williams, *A Letter to Deb Clow, in Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2002)

Writing is a change process. In writing, we clarify our thoughts. When we share our writing with others, they take our ideas and contribute their own. And through this exchange of ideas we are



Donna Rafanello is *Exchange's* associate editor and Writing Project director. She is also assistant professor of Child & Adult Development at Long Beach City College in Long Beach, California.

Donna is a survivor of child sexual abuse and the author of a book entitled *Can't Touch My Soul* for and about child sexual abuse survivors. She can be reached at donna@childcareexchange.com.

both changed. It's clear that speaking and writing serve different purposes. Here, with the help of some *Exchange* authors, I describe some of the many functions that writing serves in our lives.

Writing as witness

Ann Pelo says:

"Writing is the practice of witness. Attention that carries with it a willingness to be changed by what I encounter as I listen and look — to be dissolved into the world. From witness, words. Writing is listening made visible, thinking made visible. Choosing words to communicate an experience, an observation, an insight is a meditation, a way of ordering my thinking — or, even before ordering my thinking, a way of noticing with precision what I think. Noticing what new understandings are unfolding. Noticing what too-familiar perspectives have been unsettled, what assumptions have been called into question, what habits of thought have been disrupted. Noticing what is changing in me. The act of writing begins in observation, unfolds

into language, and opens, finally, as an offering. Writing becomes an invitation to witness with me the world's fierce and tender beauty, to see the world anew — and in that fresh seeing to participate with humbleness and joy in the cascade of experiences that make a life."

Rosemary Burton concurs, saying:

"Yogi Berra once said, 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?' He captures the essence of the uniqueness of the written word. Oral language is evanescent. Once it is written it is fixed. Thoughts emerge and are played with in dialogue. Physical symbols embed these thoughts in time so they can be reread as the time machine is set back to the hour and day the thought was first expressed. We can talk about it, analyze it, and compare and contrast it to what we think now. We can then move forward and manipulate it. We can take another step and write again. This is how knowledge grows I think: through the written word."

Editor's Note: The title of the article "Changer and the Changed" is taken from the name of an album by Cris Williamson, originally released in 1975 (available on CD from Wolf Moon Records).

And it is the writer's prerogative to shine a light on the issues that he or she is most passionate about. In my own writing, and in my work with writers, I have found — and then held up for examination the idea — that writing is an ongoing process of discovering the essence of what we want to say and then choosing and arranging the words that will communicate that message best.

Writing as catharsis

We write to understand ourselves and our circumstances better. In educator language, writing is a form of reflection. By putting our thoughts on the page, we express our feelings about what we have experienced. This is a cathartic, cleansing process. Then we look upon what we have written and try to make sense of it. We strive to understand what our words are telling us about what it means to be us in this moment in time, and to discern what this means for our future development.

Much of what we observe with children and families is difficult to process. We hear children crying. We watch parents struggling. We see suffering. We need a place to lay our burden down. Writing can serve as a mechanism for peeling off the layers of our experience and getting some distance from them. This allows us to regain the perspective we need to be effective in our work: to honor the trust that children and families place with us, the enormity of our responsibility to them and to our staff, and to our commitment to make the world a better place for children.

Sometimes, like Peggy Pizzo, we find ourselves writing before we even know we have something we need to process. She describes a day many years ago when she found herself at a park with her infant daughter asleep

in a stroller. She was trying to work out what was needed to train teachers and directors of early childhood programs. She writes:

"I started writing about the disconnects between my experiences. I was just trying to write it out, to clarify my thoughts."

Rosemary Burton likens the writer's reflective process to that of young children engaged in recording and reviewing what they have done:

"Children learn to look back at what they have done and place a permanent visual record of their work on a piece of paper that grounds it and makes it more real for them. It helps them remember and then move forward to add to the work on another day. And so, as adults, we are writing to capture thoughts and put them in time machines."

Barb Tokarz uses the analogy of a rubber band "to illustrate the early childhood educator's ability to stretch their time, resources, energy, and imagination, which, of course, changes us and causes us to grow." When asked why he writes, Francis Wardle says, "I have the audacity to believe some people might enjoy and even benefit from some of my ideas and experiences working with young children."

Laura Ulikowski clarifies, however,

"The purpose of writing is not always for the pleasure of others. It can be for our own gratification and growth. It has been through the process of writing that I've had epiphanies. While reading through observations in preparation to write, something clicks. Like finishing a puzzle, the pieces all finally fit together and the picture becomes clear. I may never be the next Ernest Hemingway or Harper Lee and change the way people view life, but I can use writing for my own enjoyment and growth. And that may be enough."

In my work with writers, I take every opportunity to communicate the message that I am there to support them throughout the process — from the initial idea for an article on to the first draft and to eventual publication. I cannot presume to know the message that is inside them struggling to get out. I can only support them in their efforts to give birth to those ideas.

Writing as provocation

In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher (2007) writes, "Don't we all want to change the world? We want to help people who have a message they're passionate about to convey it clearly through writing."

Ruth Wilson, who often writes about the natural world and efforts to engage children in the great outdoors, uses a gardening analogy to connect writing with change:

"The process of writing might be compared to the planting of seeds. Just as healthy seeds have great potential, so do ideas expressed in written form. Planted in an environment that supports their growth, seeds burst open and change the world around them. This change may be subtle and affect only a small part of the universe; yet the results can be incredible. Written words — when planted in fertile soil — can support the migration of great ideas."

Ruth offers a challenge to us all:

"As individuals and as a society, we can go only as far as our ideas will take us. Let's go with big ideas — ideas that are brave and bold, ideas that grab our minds and hearts, ideas that have the power to transform our world into a place that is kind, beautiful, and healthy — giving everyone the opportunity to grow and flourish in mind, body, and spirit."

Francis takes up the challenge, “I believe I have a moral obligation to express my concerns. I feel obligated to put my ideas into the mixer.” Craig Gibson echoes this sentiment, “I have a lot of great ideas that I think would really benefit readers and I am excited to share them!”

Writing as historical record

In reflecting on his career in early childhood education, Francis Wardle reflects on the many changes — good and bad — that he has seen over the years. “Recently,” he observes, “we have developed some strange Orwellian terms to describe what we are doing, such as intentional teaching, mature and purposeful play, and accountability!” Similarly, Janet Gonzalez-Mena realizes that the same issues keep coming up. She writes,

“Sometimes I think we are just going around in circles. But when I go back and read things I was writing earlier in my career, I realize that though the same issues keep coming up, we aren’t just going around in circles — it’s more like spirals. And though we may pass the same spot we were before, spirals represent movement, movement toward a center. When I use spirals as a metaphor for the field and for my own growth, I also realize that spirals can take us both higher and deeper, and indeed that’s what is happening to me and the field.”

Janet describes school readiness as one such issue. She writes,

“When I was a young mother, in the ‘70s, elementary teachers warned us not to teach our children to read before they entered school. That was the job of the elementary school and we were likely to mess our children up! Wow, how that has changed. Now parents are told to read to their children from the day they are born and start working on the alphabet soon after that.”

Francis believes that the role of writing as historical record is an important one. He writes, “Writers should demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of our profession’s rich past.”

Writing as herald

Marie Hendrix believes it is the writer who plays a vital role around issues affecting children. She writes:

“Who will alert our society of the changes in the world of our children? Writers. What signal will be heard and recognized by all who need to receive the message? The printed word. Writers historically bear the social responsibility of recognizing trends, gathering, researching, comparing past records, connecting the dots, and sounding the alarm that cannot be ignored. Their creatively crafted words have the capacity to expose the unknown, demand attention, equip readers, and empower a response. The role of writers cannot be underestimated. The pen of skillful writers is a weapon that fights ignorance and complacency while challenging minds and hearts. Let us heed their warning as they stand in the darkness and wave a signal light that the bridge ahead is out.”

In his efforts to successfully include children with special needs with their non-disabled peers, Craig Gibson has been challenged to work with others who don’t share his training or passion. He writes,

“When I first entered the teaching profession, I was ready to take on the world. I was determined to provide every child the opportunity for inclusion. I was under the naïve impression that every teacher shared my philosophy. How wrong I was!”

Barb Tokarz writes what many of us are feeling when she says:

“It is an uncertain time and I feel that I need to do my part to see the work that our profession has done over the years comes to fruition. Young children can’t lobby and I must do that for them to avoid our youngest citizens bearing the burden unfairly.”

Craig Gibson reflects on a career in early childhood special education where he has witnessed great change in programs’ willingness to include children with special needs. Early in his career, he writes, “This was still a hot topic of debate, but was slowly becoming the norm.”

Whether you call them heralds, as I have here, or advocates, activists, or simply voices for children, writers play an important role in helping us process what is happening in the world around us. Their words bear witness, offer reflections, provoke, provide a historical record, and sound the alarm. And our lives are enriched and our understanding is deepened through their words.

Building a writing community

In 2003 I imagined that *Exchange* could serve as a kind of writing forum for early childhood educators around the world. I was convinced that people would be interested in writing for the magazine if they had ongoing support and mentoring. In the seven years since I began the Writing Project, I have learned that many people want an opportunity to share their experiences, ideas, and concerns. Hundreds of people from around the globe have contacted me to express an interest in writing for the magazine. And so our work together began.

The community of writers we have created at *Exchange* is exactly what Peggy Pizzo recognized through her work in 1980 on the Federal Day Care standards and mentoring from Gwen Morgan, Ed Zigler, and others: “Writing need not be a solitary activity. Help is there just waiting to be asked for.”

The Writing Project continues to grow. Everyday early childhood educators just like you take the next step in their professional careers by submitting articles for publication in *Exchange*. That's precisely why we started the Project. Won't you join us?

References

Pipher, M. (2007). *Writing to change the world*. New York: Riverhead Books.

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