Risk and Revelation: Creative Writing in Theory and Play

Lisa Lusero
Denver, Colorado

Abstract

You are given a random pile of paper scraps and a blank piece of white paper. Make something having to do with “natural disasters” using only the paper you have been given. You can alter the scraps; you do not have to use all of them.

This is the task that my co-teacher and I asked of a group of 9-13 year old students.
olds to do at a small, independent school for gifted kids, during an elective class called “Manifestos, Art Bombs, and the Avant Garde.” We all loved it. Everyone could manipulate the medium in creative, pleasurable ways and explore the concept of “natural disasters” in the process.

But when I later gave them a sentence, and suggested that everyone manipulate the words like scraps of paper, the experience was like walking through glue. I asked the students why the activity felt less fun, more difficult, some students suggested that they had spent years of schooling learning the “right” way to use words so it was harder to break out of that constraint.

As T.S. Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*, “Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still.” This is the trade-off of literacy. We speak its paradox. Fixed and living; so much more limited than scraps of colour, yet so much more alive. To taste literacy you have to imbibe the rules of language and in so doing, the process of tasting is changed.

When I was six, I staged my first educational protest: I refused to read. I remember my parents’ concern and my teacher’s frustration, but I don’t remember feeling particularly moved by either one. I knew how to read. And I started it up again when I was motivated by the Muscular Dystrophy Read-a-thon and the promise of a red, electronic talking game if I could read one-hundred books in time. I did. But I never intended to fall in love.

*I am just reeling. I am so excited it's like being in love. Which reminds me of a time I was falling in love and I actually saw the green in the trees differently. It's like that. The way love changes your seeing, but not just in your eyes but your whole body. I learned so much yesterday I can almost feel the physiological changes that are taking place as a result. The sensation of love and the sensation of learning... deeply akin? It feels like it. For me, at least. Is love
learning? Or is learning love?

There is probably some undiscovered neuro-chemical implicated in language; like pheromones or oxytocin, chemicals that change the way we think and act. Exposure to the flesh of words changes everything. At the age of nine I had a friend who wanted to be a writer. “How boring,” I thought, but that was before language changed me.

I often think of my six-year-old self when exploring the gooey consistency of language with my creative young students. What could we do with language today if we had stayed in that emergent zone, code barely broken, each letter rich in sound and shape, day dream and language occupying the same space?

Watching the birds fly from limb to limb outside her office window left her with the familiar feeling that her perception was not aligned with the rest of the community. She was aware that many people, if they perceived them at all, saw the birds as “birds” and their flying as “what birds do.” But for the fact that she had learned certain coping mechanisms, she generally perceived the birds (and everything else) as energy; energy directly linked to her own energy, directly linked to, what some would call, God. And the limbs too were energy linked to her, linked to beyond. And in perceiving this simple, daily occurrence she could see the textures and general outline of the universe. Or if not see, exactly, feel.

It could be breathtaking. It could be agonizing. It could make her smile, or laugh. It could come across as a blow to the musculature of her breathing. It could lift her up until she felt the outlines of her own being slipping. Slipping...

At that stage there’s less mastery, less fluency, less meaning attached to words. But there’s something else a six-year old can do, something that becomes sticky and slow with the process of language mastery, fluency and meaning and that’s play.

Which, was not okay.

If there was one thing she learned early on, slipping away into the universe, was not allowed. In first grade she did it. She’d been doing it all along, as far as she knew, but it wasn’t until first grade that anyone cared, or noticed. It was school that made it a problem. There were certain rules in school and first grade was the point where school became something other than learning. There was no curiosity or apparent appreciation for her engaged participation in the learning that the universe was obviously giving her. Instead there was that stern glare. That echoing voice that came from far off and
got closer and annoyingly closer until she was forced to respond. Did I read Dick and Jane today?

No. No. It seemed such an unbelievably stupid question that soon, she didn’t have a shred of respect for this hovering gremlin of a woman. Reading? If only I could tell her what I was reading, If only I had the words. If only I could snap my fingers and shift her own seeing for an instant... Reading was a fun game at first, an interesting trick of symbols that, under the watchful eye of Mrs. Thompson quickly devolved into the mind numbing phonetic torture of Dick and Jane. It was hard, no, ridiculous to prioritize that languishing puzzle over her meditation on the nature of the universe.

Sadly, her situation was not much different today. Indeed she was glad to have broken the code of reading, and indeed she was glad to be reading far beyond the confines of Dick and Jane. Still, her perception of life was more of a burden than a blessing. Something she had to concentrate on ignoring to succeed. And in fact, she had done quite well in terms of how others viewed her success. And she was happy with much of it. The only thing that was heartbreaking on a regular basis was this feeling that her greatest source of insight had no place in the world where her success (not to mention her family) resided.

When I work with younger readers and writers, especially the ones who are struggling with the code, language is more like those colored scraps of paper. My four year old likes to write the letters of his name, and he’ll be going along in the tidy row we’ve taught him until he runs out of space and the final “N” ends up sideways and across the page from the beginning! This is the dilemma: I don’t really want to read and write as laboriously as we do when first breaking the code, nor do I wish that on my students. So I rely on the fact that there are other people out there teaching the rules I like to break which allows me to focus on one of my favorite approaches to creative writing and life, rule breaking.

I take children outside and we write in the snow, or the dirt. We find flowers and leaves and smash them into phonetic shapes in our journals. We use crayons and markers, write messy and large, we doodle and decorate. We write publicly, we write privately. We write bumper stickers and protest signs. We eschew spelling, savour consonants, read aloud from the dictionary. Make fun of words.

I read whatever writing of Gertrude Stein’s I can find in the moment, "It was all so nearly alike it must be different and it is different, it is natural that if everything is used and there is a continuous present and
a beginning again and again if it is all so alike it must be simply different and everything simply difference was the natural way of creating it then." Toss sense and syntax to the wind. I read Richard Brautigan’s two sentence short story, “The Scarlatti Tilt”:

“It’s very hard to live in a studio apartment in San Jose with a man who's learning to play the violin.’ That's what she told the police when she handed them the empty revolver.”

“How long does it have to be?” becomes a joke instead of a question. We talk about discovery more than character or plot, creativity more than structure. I try to expand the boundaries, hoping, all the while that one of these students one of these days will find a crack that I didn’t even know existed and dislodge something wonderful with words.

She was the blueness inside him, the colour of his appetite.

Take this sentence, from Alberto Rios’ “Waltz of the Fat Man,” and make as many new combinations as you can on one page.

*I always write with them. Model the fact that creative writing is a practice you can commit your life to and still be mystified. Experiment.*
Next make it three dimensional, add sound, emotion, shape. Find meaning. Make it matter. Choose four favourite words. Assign a movement to each. Make a three dimensional poem.
The problem is, it is risky, and tough to measure, and messy, and unreliable, and impossible to explain to visitors. And a lot of the time, it looks bleak. And many of the children look green, like they’ve been stuck on the Ferris Wheel for too long. And I can tell that some of them already have language living at the base of their skull right next to hunger and fear.

But they always find a crack. Someone, every time, someone dislodges something wonderful with words. Like the group of students who manipulated the words of Alberto Rios’ sentence until it became a monastic chant of consonants and vowels, interrupted by the gleeful revelation “comma”!

Ssssshhheee

Or the group that made an oral acrostic of the sentence using colour words associated with their props. “She,” became “Salmon, Honey, Evergreen” which they spoke, one after another as the sighted performer handed a coloured object to the blindfolded one—who also happened to be feeling lost and petrified, until she took the blindfold off, and saw us staring back rapt and delighted, relieved and surprised.

Shit. I feel that seductive pull to write. My senses are piqued. My memories are vivid. My observations are lusty and tinged with pink. And then as I sit down in front of the blank screen, “Your computer may be at risk” a little bubble warns, and I think, “I am at risk,” feeling naked, and not seduced but hog tied and slippery wet with newness.

References


**About the Author**

**Lisa Lusero** enjoys spending time playing with her 3 and 5 year old sons, often playing Princess Leia and Darth Vader in one sitting. In fact, playing multiple roles is a speciality for Lisa as a queer, mestiza parent, writer, community organizer, teacher, student, doula, and performance artist. She has enjoyed teaching young gifted students at the Logan School for Creative Learning, touring her one-woman show "Impossible Body," and applying to law school. She is deeply rooted along the front range of the Rocky Mountains and makes her home in Denver, Colorado.