

Bravery in Writing? Confronting the Imposter's Syndrome

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When my first-year composition students decided that they wanted to be brave in their writing, I was delighted. What a wonderful quality for the classroom. Then I began to question my own bravery. How could I ask the students to be brave when I stood on the sidelines? About that time, the flyer announcing NWP's Summer Professional Writing Retreat arrived. Was I brave enough to apply? Doubts swirled, picked up momentum and turned into a hurricane. I crept into the calm eye of the storm, trembling with fear. What would I tell students in the midst of crippling writing terror? Easy, simply write—anything. Drafts are in flux, not chiseled in stone. Words on paper can be changed.

I took my own advice and begin to write a proposal for the retreat. Half-formed thoughts bubbled and disappeared. My writing had no process, no content, nothing. The words made no sense. There wasn't even a vague idea lurking. I escaped the search for words and wandered into a musty bookstore. Wandered is the key word; there was no plan. I scanned books on architecture, American plays, gardening, historical fiction, even statistics. Nothing held my attention until my eyes found a copy of Aesop's Fables, short stories with an easily comprehensible moral. The pen and ink illustrations assured me this was the same edition of my childhood when I was a reader, not a writer. Instead of comfort and distraction, Aesop offered inspiration. Maybe these stories could find a place in the composition classroom. This idea was worth a try since I had no other arrows in my quiver.

I wrote the proposal and waited. When NWP sent an acceptance letter, I grinned, danced and sang until I realized that an abstract alone does not a project make. Nonetheless, I headed to Santa Fe with yellow pads, pens, books, scissors, tape, and more trepidation than bravery.

My fear of rejection was, I was sure, visible. The retreat organizers would soon realize what an imposter I was and invite me to leave. How dare I call myself a writer in public? I did dare because that is how I am beginning to see myself. A writer with an audience, a writer with something to say. And a writer writes. That's what I tell the students. Write, read, revise, repeat. I began to listen to my own classroom strategies.

The first night—welcoming, getting acquainted. Not so scary. Free writing, sharing exercises. Whew! I'm still alive.

The next day came the assignment into writing groups. The writers in my group came from Maryland, Delaware, Ohio, and Iowa and wrote about business writing in college, high school peer review, development of district-wide writing strategies and enhancement of the local writing project. The six of us gathered on the back stairs of the conference center, introduced ourselves and read—sketches, lists, lines, ideas, stumbles—just like mine. There was not one finished manuscript. I was no longer a neighborhood walker in an Olympic marathon. For a weekend, we were a team helping each other develop a piece of writing. As we read aloud, listened attentively and talked,

our jumbled pieces began to resemble a mosaic, a picture, a whole with almost identifiable colors and forms. More shifting, more changing. "I don't understand. Tell me more," gave way to "You're getting closer to your idea," and "I can't wait to read what else you have to say."

We separated to meet with writing staff consultants, to reflect, write, and gather in three hours to share our progress. Three hours! That left little time for procrastination and no time for process; content was necessary. My group became shop stewards who needed my widgets/words at the end of the shift.

We reconvened, read our new drafts, rearranged ideas, made suggestions for clarification, and turned our words into the not quite finished pieces we read to the whole group. Oh my. The ideas we all found and the way we put them together was a sight to behold. We had done it. We had changed lists and stumbled into real pieces. We were writers. Yes!

Back in Baltimore, my bravery still comes in fits and starts. I don't work without a net, but I do share my writing process with the students and urge them to find their own brave voices. Today as peer groups read and commented on literacy narratives, Matt grinned, "No one has ever liked my writing before. You all heard my story. Thank you." Another student shared his "growing appreciation of the artistry of words." Sometimes bravery means being still and letting the students tell their courageous stories.