



The Guided Memoir Process: A Reflection in Four Voices

SUMMARY

This empathy-based approach to memoir writing fosters social and emotional learning, while enhancing listening and narrative writing skills, as students learn how to convey stories of the challenges they face. It comes with a toolkit based on the simple notion of daring an imaginary “stranger/reader” to care, which is very accessible — and therefore quite replicable — in working with students for whom other approaches have failed to bring mastery or ignite a spark.

If you had to choose any “Page One Moment” where you would like an imaginary stranger/reader (Duncan, 2008) to meet you, to give voice to a burning issue, what would that moment be? What opening scene might you pick in order to help someone who had no reason to care about you — who maybe even was prejudiced against you — to walk in your shoes? If your words had the power to change a heart, practice or policy, what moment in your own life might dare your community to care?

For ninth to 12th graders from Hempstead and Roosevelt, Long Island’s two school districts most profoundly affected by poverty, gang violence, teen pregnancy, early

incarceration and addiction, these questions would start a semester-long journey of solving complicated literary puzzles through a guided memoir process usually reserved for graduate level MFA students. But here every tool would be couched in new and accessible language, designed not to intimidate even those students who came into the project with large gaps in their reading and writing performance.

The “Dare to Care” project, taught in classes sponsored by Herstory Writer’s Workshop, brings high school students together with college partners to teach writing workshops after school. The method is documented in a published curriculum that can be replicated by high school classrooms anywhere.

Erika Duncan is the founder and executive and artistic director of Herstory Writer’s Workshop, based in Centereach, Long Island.

Felicia Cooper-Prince teaches English at Hempstead High School. A member of the Hempstead Classroom Teachers Association, Cooper-Prince has used her training to become a powerful memoir writer in her own right.

Margaret O’Connell, a retired member of the United Federation of Teachers, is the principal of the Sharing and Caring Diploma Program for Pregnant and Parenting Girls of Long Beach Reach. Since 2012, she has used the dare to care approach with the homeless and gang involved teen mothers in her charge.

Bonnie Thivierge is a retired high school English teacher and member of the Smithtown Teachers Association. She has worked with Herstory as a writer, observer, evaluator and co-teacher.

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There has been increasing awareness of the importance of personal writing within a classroom context, whether through journaling assigned throughout the year or special units devoted to the personal essay. However, without providing students with the tools to examine the elements that allow personal stories to reach larger audiences, opportunities to foster both social-emotional literacy and new pathways to writing proficiency are missed.

When we ask students to write about the most important time in their lives, or the saddest or the happiest moments, the results rarely take them into a new level of social-emotional awareness. Nor do they adequately bridge the gap between personal journaling and writing for a stranger. Within any given group, we find students who are easily able to create those well-organized compositions that they think the schools want. Rarely do these compositions connect deeply personal experiences to larger social issues; rarely do they become journey narratives, taking their writers and classroom audiences into deeper emotional realms.

Could this all be changed if students’ writing assignments were coupled with examining what causes other people to care? Could taking each student seriously as a writer, combined with a hands-on exploration of what causes reader empathy, fast forward those students whose lives had allowed little opportunity to thrive in school settings into creating works of literary power and beauty that would stun us all?

The Guided Memoir Process

It had taken a village to put the “Passing along the Dare to Care” project together involving school administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and college partners. But the journey that resulted was something the participants would never forget. Some came only for a few times, but most continued week after week in this voluntary after-school program that was designed to become a pilot model to be brought to other districts throughout New York state and beyond.

The educational question was a big one: Could a focus on what created reader empathy address narrative

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structure, college preparedness and social-emotional literacy all at once? Could it provide both a stimulating and safe passage into the world of reading, writing and listening, where other approaches had failed to help students achieve mastery or ignite a spark?

These after-school workshops were part of a larger experiment developed by Herstory Writers Workshop, an organization devoted to giving voice to some of the most isolated and vulnerable populations on Long Island — women in prison, in homeless shelters, women on disability and welfare, domestic workers, Asian, Hispanic and Caribbean immigrants, pregnant and parenting teens and, more recently, to young men and boys — including students caught in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Understanding someone and feeling empathy creates a compassion that reduces the likelihood to harass, bully or discriminate. This program does just that. The members identify with each other and develop a tenderness for others who silently suffer or suffer out loud, but are misunderstood.

Every session starts with the writers reading their stories. It is a homework assignment that they rarely fail to produce. Each participant yearns to understand the pain that their community members face, so they listen with a care and engagement that allows every story being written to be seen as a gift. Then they challenge their peers to use such techniques as inner monologue and reflection to show the strength of their spirit or the hope that brought them through their struggles.

They provide feedback that validates what causes the listener to be “right there” in the moment of the event, giving courage to the other people in the room who might be going through the same thing while inspiring others to take action to change their own attitudes and behaviors. Possible revisions are noted, and the fellow writer is inspired to continue.

Each week, in addition to adding several new pages to their memoirs, the students are charged with reading the stories in Herstory’s *Passing Along the Dare to Care* manual (Duncan, 2010). They study the side-bar topics of “Catching Moments of Awareness on the page,” “The Less-Than-Perfect Narrator,” “Nesting and Weaving,” “There-ness as opposed to About-ness,” and “Working with the Voice of the Child” as they apply each new tool to their work.

The concept of this program is not to provide a cathartic social-emotional experience disconnected from academic development. The curriculum invites the students to employ writing strategies and to identify schemes and tropes used in their peers writing. They speak of the effectiveness of passages and communicate proof of their assertion without offending. A manual is used to guide the writers and shape the discussions. Provided writing objectives aid in the maturation process. The facilitators are not restricted to follow a linear path in implementing the strategies offered. The discussion about student writing evokes the referencing of support provided in the manual.

To date, more than 50 public high school students from four Long Island school districts have participated in this project (Hempstead, Roosevelt, Mineola and Patchogue) along with sixteen mothers from the Sharing and Caring alternative high school and three students from Cardozo High School in New York City. Each semester, 15-25 college interns, volunteers and community engagement students participate in the program, along with a handful of professors and community advocates who write with the students. There have been four college host sites, SUNY College at Old Westbury, Hofstra University, Adelphi University and St. Joseph's College, with sponsoring departments including

Education, Criminology, Social Work, Creative Writing, English, Modern Languages and Religious Studies, providing high school students a rich exposure to a diverse number of disciplines.



The Writing Workshops

Inspiration for the workshop came from the idea of allowing people to reveal themselves in a situation in which at any given moment, just when the young writers were pouring out their hearts, a new stranger might walk in.

As the pedagogy was brought to young people in the schools, it was critical to distinguish the conscious mission of writing to be read and heard from private journaling. A whole new kind of empowerment came to the fore as together the students learned the art of choosing which parts of their stories they wished to reveal and which parts they might wish to protect. Not only did their stories become resources for discussions about what they might do to make their worlds better, but slowly and steadily, as the semester

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progressed, a sense of level ground was established, with the students with the lowest proficiency levels in formal reading and writing often stealing the show.

Students from diverse backgrounds participate in the writing workshops including English language learners and honors students side by side. The method has been used with large and small groups. Without even noticing, students are succeeding in a program that introduces advanced writing techniques. From arguing about what would make the most strategic “Page One Moment,” to exploring when to drop into a memory, or when to create an “Invisible Backstitch” without interrupting the drama, 14- and 15-year-old high school freshmen and sophomores and senior level college students became so enthusiastic about how to best dare one another to care, they forgot the differences in their proficiency levels, each bringing in more pages each week while they took turns playing the stranger/reader and the narrator.

Bonnie Thivierge: Hear me; see me; understand my story

The history of telling stories begins before any student had a yellow pad or an iPad. Our stories, the tales of creation and exploration and heroes and monsters began before there was the word. The “call of stories,” as Robert

Coles, a children’s physician so eloquently writes (Coles, 1989), was heard a very long time ago, before the development of an English curriculum and state and national standards for effective narration.

As an English teacher in the public schools on Long Island for more than 30 years, I have taught the stories of the prominent gentlemen authors, from Hawthorne to Faulkner, and have required students to discern important themes, to write with these statements, or to do a research paper on the effects of cloning, perhaps, as a preparation for college reading and writing. As a curriculum writer and classroom consultant, I have observed many practices of classroom instruction, strategies that provide experiences designed to prepare young learners to be effective readers and skillful writers. We might ask these high school readers and writers to express their thoughts in a third person point of view. “How is the American Dream reflected in Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*?” Or, we require them to examine the cause and effect of the Crusades and write a three-page document. What do high school juniors and seniors think about these topics? What voices will we hear when they compare Natty Bumppo to today’s explorer? We are told that in order to write in an honest voice, about a time and place or person, we first need to

know, to feel, to be able to see the situation in which we find ourselves.

As a participant in a unique method that encourages empathy as a basis for understanding literary structures, I entered a world of story writing different from my experiences as an English teacher. As a trainee, co-facilitator and workshop member, I have discovered a method that will allow readers to hear me and see me and hopefully, understand my story.

I observed young mothers of children without fathers, and I listened to Yazmyn write about what she will tell her 2-year-old son about his missing father. When I explained about my spending a lifetime looking for a biological father, she at first thought the story made no sense until she listened more carefully; then our relationship changed. Each of us had “Dared the Other to Care,” a demand we make on readers when we want to engage them or to compel them to continue reading.

What if students set out a problem or observation that honored their own experiences? If Sheena were able to tell us how she felt as a light-skinned Haitian in a dark-skinned environment, or if Nelson described himself as a 10-year-old living out of the back seat of a car with his grandmother, would we care? Would these stories work their way into one another’s

worlds, and by doing so, lead to “Promoting Social-Emotional Development and Physical Well-Being?” an accomplishment schools desire.

What if the students explored their own stories so that they were able to write and read them in their own unique voices? We would be continuing the skein of storytelling that has been at the heart of human experience centuries before Penelope waited for the return of Odysseus.

Felicia Cooper-Prince: Taking Students from Victims to Victors

I trained to co-teach for Herstory Writer’s Workshop, a program that inspires young people to mature socially, emotionally and academically. We went over the goals of the program in which each participant would become aware of the injustices others experienced in their journey and begin to utilize their voices to encourage, empower and renounce victimization.

The process began with an anticipatory set serving as a muse throughout the project. The group members are asked, “If you were to write a book about your life, what would be your page one moment? My students from Hempstead High School wear their emotions on their faces when they

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hear this question. One was anxious to share an experience in a syncopated rhythm that carries the beat of a classical rap song. Another looked challenged as he furrowed his eyebrows, and later we would learn he was conjuring colorful phrases to describe a confusingly painful loss. Two girls grin at each other as they have a silent conversation about the fact that they are beyond page one, because they were in the program last year. Another, she has a blank stare, because never did she dream that anyone would dare her to write her story.

The students are also intimidated the first day. They are sitting at Hofstra University amongst college students who vary in age, ethnicity and backgrounds. However, timidity fades with the desire to share, constructively critique and garner advice. The tool of unification was writing. Lines of division fade as words are used to describe the human condition.

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Culminating events such as reading in a public venue or having a piece published have enabled family members

and strangers to better understand the injustices that arise due to issues such as physical and emotional abuse, teen-aged-motherhood, assimilation as an immigrant, grieving abortion, grieving the death of a peer or a loved one, gang involvement, rejection, cutting, academic failure, divorce of parents and dysfunctional relationships.

The entire process causes the young people to be less self-absorbed and more globally aware. They don't wallow in the pain of their past, but they move forward with other writers to bring awareness of the pitfalls that serve to stifle progression. They graduate as public advocates.

When they are first asked to write a story that would dare others to care about their problems, most sound like victims at the start. But it works out that they complete that task and they take on the challenge to care about others. The end result, a community of victors.

Margaret O'Connell: The Courage to Write and Share

As we rode from the Sharing and Caring Diploma Program for Pregnant and Parenting Girls to Hofstra University that first day, I wondered what page one moment my students would share with the stranger/reader.

Would the teen mother — who came to the alternative school with a second grade reading level but now arrives an hour early to work on writing — talk about the thrill of being looked at as a real student? Or would the voice of a small child, excited about a new swing, sadly recount the horrors of sexual abuse by the uncle who had days earlier hung the swing? Would they speak of their everyday fears of being identified as one of those girls, bad girls? Would they do what they had been trained through Herstory to do for the past three years ... dare others to care, to share their stories, their shared experience?

These are truly remarkable young women. Most have been born into poverty, began experiencing academic difficulties by grade three, have been sexually abused/assaulted, live in communities of high gang involvement, and dropped out of high school at least two years prior to becoming pregnant.

They are back in school because they want to be here. They want to make a future for themselves and for their children. It is often believed that a sense of hopelessness can contribute to teen pregnancy. Hope for the future can help to make teen mothers more self-sufficient, less depressed, more reliable, better mothers and less likely to become pregnant again until they are emotionally prepared.

Once we are on campus at Hofstra the usual high school posturing takes place. One school on one side, one school on the other. Shy looks are exchanged, but no words. Then the college students come. Gradually the college interns find seats in the middle, they smile, they ask questions of the high school students, and they get answers. They break up the division, four from Hofstra, another three from CW Post who have traveled together, who at first are equally shy. Finally a biology teacher in training, completing her fifth year at Adelphi, who wants to learn more about the real lives of her students joins the group.

Then the magic happens. I join Felicia, the facilitator from Hempstead High, to present an overview, the manual and our hopes for the next few weeks. Then we circle the room and everyone imagines out loud the most effective way to engage a stranger/reader, and suddenly the shyness goes away. One college intern tells about his involvement in a gang and asks how to incorporate flashbacks about his childhood. And suddenly the Sharing and Caring girls relax. They are not alone and they are not so different. Another college intern shares a moment where he was used as a shield by his grandmother and then passed along to a stranger. My girls see that others who came from hard backgrounds have made the college journey.

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Week after week as students brought in new writing, that sense of honoring one another's work grew. There was a quiet dignity during the readings and respect given to all who had the courage to write and to share.

When it is my students' turn to share their own page one moments, the college students are deeply attentive and that gives everyone the courage to begin. The bonding that we might have hoped would come in sessions two and three began that day.

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We wondered at first whether students would find it too difficult to write a 7-15 page paper and to use Herstory's manual for younger writers. We underestimated our group. Students came each week with more work than we had expected.

As strategies for exciting compassion in a stranger/reader become more enjoyable, there was always the question, why Dare to Care? We are daring our students to help someone else share in their experience, to, as the manual says, walk in their shoes. There can be no question that the students were successful.

Erika Duncan: My Reflections on Dare to Care

I will never forget the day when I first met Edwin Solis, who had joined the class a few weeks later than the other Hempstead High School students, only finding out about it "through the talk of the hallways." He was a bit too conscious of my presence at first, as he kept glancing shyly at me. But soon he became lost in the power of his words.

"Seeing my friend lying dead without any hope of coming back, I didn't shed one single tear," he read, as the other students fell silent. They were breathing along with him, as sometimes he read with assurance and conviction, sometimes he hesitated a bit to see how he was being received.

It had taken Edwin several weeks to set up the scene that would allow a reading stranger to be part of the aftermath of the street fight that took his friend's life.

"I had a strong animosity at myself for not showing any emotion at all. A deep sick thought had manifested itself inside my mind. Was the reason I didn't cry was because I felt relieved that his death had actually happened?" he had written when he finished making the opening scene real enough for a reading stranger to walk in his shoes.

Week after week he would add to his piece, while the others around him would pose as his stranger/readers, puzzling out which techniques created empathy for the reader and which created too much distance. Through using a special vocabulary based upon what created empathy in a reader, the differences in skills levels among the participants disappeared.

As we moved around the writing circle, Erika Vasquez, a teen mother from Sharing and Caring, read the opening of her piece proudly and loudly, after spending the first hour of the workshop daring the other students to make sure that their images were vivid enough to create a true sense of presence and wonder.

“People might look at me and think ‘That girl has a happy life!’ Truth is my life has not been a walk in the park. I went from changing my dolls’ diapers to changing my baby’s diapers within a blink of an eye.”

When Erika first arrived on the campus of Hofstra University, she had tears in her eyes. “My grandmother always wanted me to go to college,” she said. “Could someone please show me around?” Four months later her beloved “abuelita” would be among the more than 80 family members, school officials and youth advocates to celebrate what the young people had produced.

Meanwhile Arooj Janjua was working on a piece that opened with the lines: “I just look like a Muslim to most, but to a few I am an unwanted creature, a terrorist. The thought of me being called a terrorist ran through my head over and over again as I tightened my scarf and took my first step into middle school in a hijab. I thought it was bad enough being how I was before. Even though throughout 6th grade I didn’t wear a scarf on my head, all I heard around me was ‘ugly terrorist,’ ‘you need a bag on your head,’ and ‘immigrant.’ I went mute after that. Barely spoke a word. That innocent little girl became what she believed herself to be.”

The trick for the rest of the group, in this guided memoir process, was to help Arooj to follow the story line through a succession of scenes until the reader could see how the journey from being bullied to becoming a bully had so heartbreakingly, inevitably evolved.

The fact that each new piece was a puzzle in narrative form made it safer for the students to enter the dangerous waters that had marked so many of their lives in these districts where teen pregnancy, gang violence and school drop-out rates were high (Duncan, 2002, 2006).

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Final Thoughts:

To begin with a hunch as to how a model might work, to try it out first in one setting and then another and another, to watch it grow as each new teacher and each new site host makes it their own, is a magical and

wondrous thing. This article has focused on the contributions of three classroom teachers who have trained in the Herstory method, but the richness of the project lies in the interplay between these classroom teachers and the teaching artists who have been working with the technique as writers in their own right. As we come together for our training session, we explore the parts of the Dare to Care pedagogy that must remain fixed in order for the methodology to work well. We explore the ways in which each new facilitator can adapt it to fit his or her personality and teaching style.

I could not have dreamed of a project in which teen mothers would be working to create scenes that would help the reading stranger to know how their choices evolved, side by side with college girls who for the first time told the stories of deciding they weren't ready yet to be mothers. Nor that 14-year-old boys were listening with compassion, as they dared the girls to help them even more to walk in their shoes, as the whole class realized that teens who became pregnant were stigmatized whatever they decided.

I could not have dreamed of the depth of the exploration that would be unleashed as one after another, students wrote not from their head, but from their hearts, yet stringently followed the stranger/reader rules to create a 7-15 page paper that would be powerful enough to move the heart and mind of a stranger, using his or her own experiences to move the needle on the justice issue that each student chose. Nor could I have anticipated the kinds of discussions that came up every week, from the effects of family separation through harsh immigration laws, bullying and gang violence, to the need for protection of children, and becoming the family caretaker.

And as I drive from site to site all over this 125-mile long island of ours, I ponder many questions, and the images come back from each new student story in evolution and each story told by a teacher who has been working with the method. And I dream of a time when all writing will be taught with the view to what will allow another person to truly care.



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