THE QUICK FIX WORKSHOP VS. THE TOOTH FAIRY: OR, HOW TO WIN IN THE BATTLE FOR WRITTEN LITERACY

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From keynote addresses to both the Executive Committee of the Delaware Valley Writing Council and the Indiana Teachers of Writing

There is an old story of a young college man, forlorn at the progress of his love life, who was plagued with doubts about his adequacy. At the library one warm spring afternoon his heart pounded as he spotted on the reference shelf a thick volume named *How to Hug.* Here was help he needed desperately! Now, no virulent young teenager in broad daylight, and before the eyes of a librarian, could ever take such a book out, of course, so he checked up and down the aisles for prying eyes, and without even a glance between the bookcovers, undid his shirt buttons and stuffed *How to Hug* in close to his chest. Sneaking up to his room in the dorm, he flicked on the light and finding himself alone, extracted his prize and prepared for an evening of heavy reading, if not for heavy breathing. Lo, to his surprise, *How to Hug* was no

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book about the ways of love. It was the tenth volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica.*

This story helps me this evening, for it reveals the how-to-do-it spirit that I wish to address, a spirit that because of its promise holds us in its grip despite obvious pitfalls. The disappointed young man with encyclopedia *believed* there was a way to solve his problem, but the simplicity (which we see as a transparent simplism) of the proposed response, done him in as Liza Doolittle would say.

As we carry on the battle for literacy (and its special manifestation in writing that concerns so many of us here in this room), we can recognize this battle as one that raged powerfully in the seventies, yet that lingers with little hope for decline as the century pushes onward. And as a result, we too are looking for the secret magic of process, wherever it may be. Just how are *we* to do it, this job on which we hang our professional lives? Is there a book out there, a television program, a crash course in *How to Win in the Battle for Written Literacy?* In the era of the quick fix, how does a parent, an educator, a citizen of a culture committed to a literate citizenry win the great war against writer's block, against poor logic, against limp, incorrect sentences huddled on a page of prose like whimpering pups in a cage? Well, as you might have suspected, I have some responses to those questions tonight, responses that seek to avoid over-simplification and that suit, I believe, the special goals of the Indiana Teachers of Writing, which I know as one of those rare groups of circuitry, reaching out to make connections for educational partnerships that turn on floodlights over a large field.

I do realize that we have a mixed group here: we have parents and we have teachers, and in some cases we have people with both identities — a teacher in one place, a parent in another. I want to be sure to make clear that I do not think these roles are perfectly interchangeable, however, despite overlap we could all acknowledge easily. Teachers do their work; parents theirs. Although some of their goals may be similar, their methods vary. One might argue that whereas the teacher will provide formal, structured learning experiences that often require evaluation, the parent can enjoy being a facilitator, someone who helps establish conditions for learning without the pressures of achievement, someone who can see golden possibilities within a simple, everyday moment in a child's life. Of course, good teachers

do that too. And, certainly, when it comes to religious and moral instruction in the home, the parent will often need to structure and to formalize learning. But it's clear to me that we must acknowledge the similarities between parent and teacher roles, and these cry out for partnership.

But I don't want to get ahead of myself, making recommendations for partnerships before I lay out the problem with specifics. I have both a tooth fairy and a workshop touted on two full pages of *The New Yorker* Magazine of April 20, 1981 to bring into the fray tonight, "and so grow to a point." But let me take them up one at a time, and in reverse order.

The president of Bard College, Leon Botstein, decided, along with his faculty that — and here I quote from the *New Yorker* — "Bard's entering freshmen should know how to think and write before their first semester in college begins. According to Mr. Botstein's calculations, fulfilling this prerequisite will take three weeks." Under Peter Elbow and other really good instructors outside Bard this past August, students wrote and thought for the first of those three weeks about themselves; for the second week about da Vinci's "Last Supper;" and for the third week about "justice." These were six day weeks, a nine-to-five program of writing each day, revising twice weekly, reading work aloud, "and dropping in, when necessary, at something on campus called the 'Syntax and Grammar Crisis Center.'"

Does this sound a bit to you like one of those bottled miracle cures? The proposal for the three-week Workshop in Language and Thinking, President Botstein confesses, "originated in a feeling of (and these are his words) 'Damned if I'm going to go through another semester in which I have very bright students and yet have to grapple with their terrifying locked-up capacities, with the awkward kind of written analysis they produce, which is almost insulting to themselves.'"

Now in all fairness to Mr. Botstein, his is not the only such band-aid workshop I've read about. And, there are *some* valuable elements in his plan — the emphasis on the writing process, the genuine effort to raise a student's ability to go beyond cliché, to analyze the thinking of others, to build up confidence "that he or she has something really serious to say, something outside the most narrow personal confines." However, I see this plan for action at Annandale-on-Hudson as retrogressive, overall a serious and depressing

return to ancient history. Does the three-week quick-fix conference not vitiate much of what we believe, correctly, that it is the very heart of the teacher's job to go through semester by semester with bright students — and otherwise — "who have to grapple with their terrifying locked-up capacities, with the awkward kind of written analysis they produce?" It is the nature of learning in general education for students to grapple with locked-up capacities, to produce raw, lumpy prose that only humanists immersed in subject matter can lead the novice to kneed and make supple, to mold into a piece of work of value. The Bard College Workshop is saying that you learn to write and to think before you come to content. Put another way, it is suggesting that thinking and writing are no fit territory for teachers and students and parents to explore together amid the ongoing dynamics of liberal studies and of personal adjustment. It is saying, further, that a summer syringe will immunize writers against a lifetime's struggle against the painful writing virus, an affliction that still attacks me each time I hold a pencil. Believing that they have in their hands the Bard College Three Week Comprehensive Volume for self improvement, students will be no less stunned at its inadequacy as a cure-all than our young friend was as he discovered the encyclopedia instead of a tome on the art of love. With a solve-all-the-problems-convocation on how to write-once-and-for-all, we only can wonder about the fate of the English department at Bard and, by extention, at other institutions who believe that good thinkers and good writers blossom in a fortnight and a half.

In fact, as any parent with a young child knows, the blossoming begins much earlier, in the unlikeliest of places. But it is a blossoming that must be nurtured. My daughter Melissa, the hero of my book *Any Child Can Write,* convinced me in countless ways of the obvious — that literacy has such profound human dimensions that humans in widely varying contexts can influence it and can make it grow. Parents who encourage children to explore language plant the seeds of writing as a necessity for growth and for self-awareness. These parents know how integral written forms are for even the very young, how a child's creative effort provides a pressure valve for the child, a means of confronting and working out failures, fears, and doubts. Writing is a magical realm of expression that allows a child to come to terms with the joys and pains of daily living. It is a way for

the child to explore the inner self. It is statement of the child's own vision, her perception of the world as she sees it.

At six (she's now ten) Melissa was creating her own audience and was already convinced before the Bard College Workshop that she had something serious to say, despite its admittedly narrow personal confines. The New York tooth fairy outraged Melissa with twenty-five cents for her second lost tooth after a generous dollar for the first. Melissa grumbled at us a bit and then headed straight for pencil and paper.

"Dear tooth fairy," she wrote in bold black letters, "I am a big girl. I want more money. I want to now what is the matter. I'm going to put the corter under my pillow. Love, Melissa." (There's a smiling face drawn within the circle of the letter *a* in her signature.) Now my wife and I take some credit for this daring note (Melissa is an incipient Herzog) because "put it in writing" is one of our household mottos. Melissa draws up shopping lists, writes invitations and thank you notes, creates pictures with sentence captions, wrote last year in fifth grade a rhyming alphabet book for young children. She knows — or rather senses — that an idea recorded in written language is an idea that won't escape, that can be altered and modified, that can open doors to further thought. She, of course, could not say it in this way, but she is on the road to discovering that writing is a means of access to concepts, a method of thinking through those concepts, and a way to demonstrate mastery of them.

Now, there is a strange cast of characters I have laid before you so far this evening: a college president, a six year-old's letter to the tooth fairy, and the Indiana Teachers of Writing (including their friends in this audience). Along with Bottom the Weaver, you may be thinking that "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report" the nature of this alliance.

In fact, however, the relationships here are not too hard to puzzle out. First, as I mentioned earlier, I see the Indiana Teachers of Writing as an organization devoted to making links with all of those concerned with the teaching and the learning of writing. I know that college and secondary school teachers will clasp hands through your council, a rare but wonderful coupling; and I know that writing across the curriculum projects at some of your member institutions have reached out to colleagues in other disciplines as well, so that

instruction in and reinforcement of writing is the thread that runs through the intricate efforts designed to pass on humanistic studies in your territory. These next days' conference will underscore the continuing interrelationships between writing and the teaching of content in a subject area, and the role of the humanist as a moving force in the drive to literacy. Yet, just as we might succumb to complacency, we must redouble our efforts. Upper-level administrators in high schools, colleges and universities cannot be faulted for seeking the quick-fix, as President Botstein has, given the rising costs of education and the ever-changing nature of students and their needs. However, audiences like this one must continue to keep strong all programs for converting the heathens. Elementary and secondary school principals, university presidents and provosts, college deans, must hark to our sermons. Regularly we must continue to assert the need for an entire faculty to assume responsibilities for students' growth in writing and to see writing as an integral, essential element in the curriculum for any subject matter.

And so my first recommendation is that we continue to fortify old bridges as the battleground for written literacy broadens and takes new turns across stormy, albeit familiar waters.

But next is my recommendation for building new routes across the waves. I believe that in parents whose children fill our classrooms and the classrooms of our colleagues in the elementary and junior high schools lies an enormous resource in our struggle for literacy. Mothers and fathers are awaiting direction for joining hands with teachers and administrators in order to help students learn to write. With our skills in teaching writing, we need to educate these parents about how to establish in the home the kind of atmosphere conducive to the written word, an atmosphere in which tooth fairies, for example, may be impelled to action by means of language. It's hard to believe but it is true in fact — at least based upon my conversations with parents throughout the country — that parents do not know about the infinitude of resources in the home for stimulating creative language activities. Teachers — Indiana Teachers of Writing — need to work with parents at all levels in helping them help their children to develop skills that will make obsolete the Bard College Workshop and its unavoidable clones we will no doubt suffer over the years. And, this council must work together with elementary school colleagues in reaching out to

parents of young children as you yourselves reach out to those parents and to the parents of youngsters sitting in your own classrooms.

What kinds of things can parents and teachers do, each in their own way, to help children write, to work together toward literacy? In this age where "writing crisis" continues to make headlines, we must get this partnership going.

I have some recommendations designed to focus your energies so that young children develop favorable attitudes toward writing.

First, *make available the tools of the trade* by providing easy access to pencils, crayons, papers, chalkboard, word books and by keeping a "writer's drawer" or "writer's box" where a child easily can go for supplies.

Next, develop a *"Put it in writing" philosophy.* Children learn by imitation. How often do they see a parent with pen or pencil in hand? Why, there are innumerable projects in home and in classroom for mutual cooperation on writing projects between parent and child or teacher and child:

a. the shopping list — let the child write down the word for a favorite item, and then pick it off the shelf in the supermarket.

b. the handmade sign for room or door, a sign like *no smoking,* or *keep out* to reflect the child's needs or desires.

c. personal notes and letters to far off grandparents, to angry older brothers, to tooth fairies.

d. the speak, listen, write approach to pictures and drawings. When young artists present their latest works, help advance creative expression. Encourage the child to talk about the picture by asking for information and details. Then, for a young child you can make a caption with a single word or two directly above an illustration; *house, girl, bicycle.* You can write the word first, on separate paper, and then can help the child copy the word onto the picture. As soon as possible, move into *full sentence* captions for pictures. A big problem even for college students is the *sentence fragment;* I believe that much early writing, unfortunately, encourages incomplete expression through caption writing that lacks a subject or a legitimate verb.

Another step to take to help the child is to *describe* his efforts and to withold judgment unless it is praise.

Those who know Chiam Ginott's work will recognize that I have borrowed — even altered — one of his basic tenets in dealing with children. When you look at a child's

work, say only what you see: "I like the sentence about the frog. The words 'green and brown spots' paint a clear picture." Avoid offering judgments. "This is very confusing." "I don't like the beginning or ending." "What a silly story!"

Even on graded papers teachers can offer comments that describe the child's effort — that say what he has done and what he hasn't done and that set a program for future action. Those comments go much further in assuring an effort at improvement than a *B* or an *F* on top of a page. In fact, by not feeling obliged to judge *every* written effort, teachers can reduce the pressure of paperwork.

Do not use writing as a punitive exercise. Children are still writing compositions as penalties for talking out of turn or for forgetting homework assignments. When writing is used as punishment, writing becomes a punishment, an activity always associated with guilt, fear, anger and retribution. Many of these emotions about writing many adults hold even today, and these attitudes keep them from writing altogether.

Encourage appropriate attitudes toward the writing process. Writing proceeds through a series of definable stages. Yet children seem unaware of these. No professional writer is ever concerned with being correct or with being neat in early stages of production; the writer wants only to get ideas down on a page before they escape so that he can mold them. We all must work to make sure that children know about this.

Next we must work to *define together the extent of parent involvement in the child's written school work.* Here is a productive area for exploration between groups of parents and teachers. How can a parent reinforce some of the teacher's goals for language learning? Where would the parent's assistance be considered excessive or inappropriate? Elsewhere I have proposed a number of do's and don't's on how *I* think parents can help with writing for school, but these suggestions need to be discussed and agreed upon by interested parents and teachers like yourselves.

Finally, you want to celebrate the child's sensory awareness and to help convert that awareness into language. Let me read tonight from the paper of a child in a fifth grade class I visited and wrote with last year:

As I Look Around

On this November morning I am sitting in my brown desk in Mrs. Sharnak's fifth grade class at Kellum St. School. As I look around

> I see a dark green blackboard. Also I see a long brown table in the front of the room. The desks are very cold. I hear clicking of pens and children whispering. I smell the wonderful fresh air. There is a red, white, and blue flag hanging over my teacher's desk. My friend Tina is wearing a bright yellow shirt and two barrets in her hair. I feel my sticky pencil touching my hand as I write. Far off I hear trucks buzzing. Now I am sitting in my desk and looking around. I smell the fresh smelling soap I washed with this morning. At last I am done with this composition.
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> — Kelly Behnken

What better way to demonstrate the child's sensory awareness as conveyed in the power of the written word than to let it speak from the pen of a young child?

Now, although I have attended to young children especially in my last set of remarks, I urge you not to dismiss as impractical or unnecessary the need to build a network that reaches into the homes of high school and college students too. Certainly, the relationship between a teenager and his mother and father is incredibly complex, so I am not suggesting that there exists an easy passage into this land. But parents and other family members can be valuable aides as young writers work through the pains of the writing process, and unless we help parents see where they may best serve a child we will either lose them as a resource or we will risk their taking the wrong kind of initiative in assisting their children, such as writing their children's papers, or retyping their children's drafts and correcting all errors, or doing basic library research for their children. I do believe that many of these errors stem from genuine desires to help, from a terrible fear in parents that there is something in their power to make a child succeed, but that they are not at all sure of what really can help a youngster in executing a task in writing. How may a parent assist a tenth or a twelfth grader, a college freshman or a sophomore? Motivated by the work of Thom Hawkins and Ken Bruffee, we have encouraged peer collaboration as a critical element in good growth to writing in the classroom — why not encourage a similar partnership between writer and parent with some helpful guidelines drawn up for Family Writing Councils? I can remember throughout my high school and college days chaining my mother or my father or my sister to a chair and forcing their attention to the final copy of my freshman theme or of my research paper in art or sociology. I remember now their obedient yet blank stares: just what was it I wanted them to do? I'm not sure I knew. (In fact, other

than a suggested spelling change or a recommendation about a comma, they could do little other than to smile with reassuring approval, for here was a paper all finished, one I'd hand in within a few hours.) How they — and I — would have benefited from pointers about aid during draft stages of creation, about what a sympathetic reader can do to help an inexperienced writer taking new risks with every word committed to a page. Parents can learn what we are still learning:

(1) that producing multiple drafts is the very heart of the writing process and that without rewriting and revision there is no writing process (2) that readers who want to be helpful ought to look at and make suggestions more about a writer's drafts than about a final copy (3) that if an attentive reader at home does not understand a concept the writer presents — even if that concept involves subject matter unfamiliar to the reader — odds are that the teacher or the rest of the class will not understand it either (4) that a reader who revises or edits a writer's efforts violates the creative spirit, and that a reader should suggest change but should not make it in someone else's prose.

This partnership I propose between developing writers and their families, these guidelines to insure the success of that partnership, both are products that an informed, dynamic and assertive association like this one can assure by means of continuing efforts at connections between and among allies in every corner of the battleground for literacy.

Let us by our work, then, write a volume not called *How to Hug* but instead called *How to Help* and let us address the universe of aids that can nourish sapling writers. Let us guide educational institutions to dig their roots deep in humanistic learning that is inseparable from written expression as a means by which that learning flowers. Let us guide parents to build stakes that will support their children's efforts at writing by means of specific recommendations that our profession can support. Let us remember with Stephen N. Judy who writes in *The ABCs of Literacy* that "language is what binds us all together in the human community. We are all inexorably committed to careers as wordsmiths." Finally, let us echo Prospero's words by remembering that these are projects many of us must do together. So "Let me not . . . dwell in this bare island by your spell; But release me from my bands/With the help of your good hands/Gentle breath of yours my sails must fill, or else my project fails. . . ."