

Our Writing Lives

The Parable of the Bridge

BY BETH HAMMETT

"Write...write..." the teacher would say. Mrs. Jennings, my seventh grade teacher, required each of her students to keep a journal. By the end of the year I had several notebooks filled with words. I recorded my life through journal writing. I wrote about school, peer pressure, and boys. I wrote notes to friends, complained of homework assignments, and vowed to write a book when I got older. Mrs. Jennings wrote back, "I know you will be a famous author someday." Her words urged me on. From the beginning of my seventh grade year to the end of my senior year, I chronicled my life on paper.

My journals became my diary. I included anecdotes about family, vacations, getting my driver's license, parties, and everyday life. I developed a code in case the books were discovered. I hid my journals underneath the clothes in my closet. I did not want anyone intruding on the tidbits of information and gossip that consumed each page of what I considered classic literature. Writing was my life, and the notebooks held my fantasies.

During my junior year, I met my former husband, and my writing slowed. I wrote about special events such as the junior/senior prom, the birth of a nephew, my uncle's wedding, but I no longer made journaling a daily event. Then in May of my senior year, my writing stopped completely.

I was very excited to be graduating, but most importantly, my wedding was to take place two days after graduation. As my fiancé and I were moving my belongings to our new home in the country, we stopped on the Washita River Bridge. My fiancé grabbed the cheap, plastic crates sitting between us in the front seat and proceeded toward the bridge's metal railing. At first it did not register to me what he was doing. Then, suddenly, I gasped in horror as he began to dump the belongings into the flowing, muddy river several hundred feet below us. My life was in those plastic crates; every journal I had written between seventh and twelfth grade was gone. I crawled out of the pickup and watched as the books quickly disappeared from my sight, sinking into the ugliness of the swirling red water. Tears streamed down my face. Yet, I was determined



not to show my true feelings of hurt and anger. I did not want him to know how much those journals meant to me. My thoughts, feelings, and dreams were in those journals and in one swift movement he had destroyed all of these. My former life was gone, my past demolished.

The loss of my journals devastated me. I could not make myself pick up a pen to write. I would never be a writer. Why had I kept the journals? What would I do with them? I had wanted to compile a book similar in style to the high-school cult favorite *Go Ask Alice*. Maybe I could reach other teens with problems similar to mine through my writings. But I would not keep a journal again until I participated in a creative writing class (given by Mike Angelotti, former director of the Oklahoma Writing Project) 17 years later.

Now as a teacher, I keep in mind the incident on the bridge. I realize that a teacher can do symbolically what my ex-mate did literally. I want my students to embrace life with words, growing and exploring their identities, using writing to build their confidence and self-esteem. I want my response to their writings to be helpful and positive. I know that without praise and inspiration, I may as well be throwing their written words over the bridge.

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