

Our Writing Lives

Leap of Faith

BY KRISTEN HAWLEY TURNER

"How does she do that?" I wondered silently. Writing seemed to come so easily to my mom, a veteran English teacher. I echoed my awe aloud as she swept her red pen over my paragraph to demonstrate yet another technique.

"How do you know how to do that?" I exclaimed. "I've already read this paper three times, and I didn't see it! You make it look so simple. Why can't I do it?"

My mother's ability—to manipulate language, to make sentences flow, to fill in what she calls "leaps of faith"—amazed me when I was a struggling, 16-year-old writer. Now that I am an "expert" writer, however, I seem to have internalized her abilities, making them part of my subconscious drafting rather than pieces of a drawn-out revision process. I now think of myself as an effective writer, and I know that it was my mom who encouraged, inspired, and taught me to be one. She gave to me, her star pupil, every basic skill, every fundamental understanding, that now enables me to manipulate language, to make sentences flow, to avoid "leaps of faith."

Shaking her head and flipping the red pen across the page, she said, "You did it again." I turned my attention from the spider that was effortlessly traversing our farmhouse window. I was tired. I had been working on my Salem witch trials paper, it seemed, since the Puritans admitted their horrific mistake and paid the families retribution in the early 1700s. I did not want to hear another place where I needed to revise—yet again. My eyes shifted lazily from the bubbled pane to my mom's expression. Her tensed jaw and shaking head made me sigh. I knew I had missed something that I should have known by now to fix without her pointing it out.

As a junior in high school, I was plodding my way through the first research paper I had ever been assigned. Working through the stages diligently as my classroom teacher assigned them, from note cards to drafts and revision, I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the foreign process. I continually turned to my mom, respecting her expertise as a writer and longing for her critical feedback as a teacher. At times her honesty was difficult for me, a sensitive teen, to accept. However, I trusted her

because I knew that she cared about me, not only as an individual but also as a student; she wanted me to become a better writer, and her desire infected me—I wanted to become better too. I valued then, as I do now, the individual time I was able to have with my personal writing tutor, time that was not afforded to me with my classroom teacher in the structure of my high school. At that time, conferencing had not yet entered mainstream pedagogy, yet somehow it seemed the natural way for me to learn to write at home, with my mom.

"Who was Dorset Good? You can't assume I know. You're making a leap of faith there." She wrote the word *who*, followed by a question mark with a pronounced dot, in the margin. As I revised the paper later, I was frustrated by the amount of detail she "required" in my writing. It seemed like I could never explain my ideas clearly enough, and the many drafts I submitted for conferencing to my household writing tutor always bled with questions in the margin, comments at the end, and points of grammar noted duly in red ink. At that point in my life, I hated writing. Like most of the activities in which I participated, I wanted to be good at it; unfortunately for the teenage me, this goal required strenuous effort, constant practice, and ultimate frustration. Fortunately for me today as a writer and teacher of writing, I trusted my mom to help me find what was "good" writing.

Today, in the margin of Paul's first high school research paper, I write the word *who*, followed by a question mark, whose dot mistakenly falls off in my hurry to move the conference along. I do not have the same luxury of time with my ninth-graders that my mom and I had in our conferencing at home. I say to Paul, "My mom calls this a leap of faith." He looks at me with bored, uncomprehending eyes. I try again. "You can't assume I know anything." He still stares. "Pretend I'm a visitor from outer space who has never heard of Derek Jeter. In a few words, tell me who he is!"

"He's the shortstop for the Yankees," Paul asserts with disdain for my "ignorance."

"Okay," I smile. "So let's write that here." I hand over my purple pen, and he writes, using the chicken scratch of a boy who loves baseball a

whole lot more than writing, "Derek Jeter, the shortstop for the Yankees." I wonder silently how many times Paul will need to be told before he stops making leaps of faith in his compositions. I wonder wistfully if he ever will.

How many times have I mimicked my mom's actions, words, and comments as I assess students' papers, conference with them about their drafts, or teach them the finer points of writing? Perhaps this is not the right question, however. For my mom is so much a part of who I am, particularly who I am as a writer, that I hear her voice all the time. I wonder if someday in the future, as he is writing his first paper for college English, Paul will hear my voice echoing, just as I hear my mother's whenever I write. I hope that he will. I hope that I, as his teacher, will have gained his trust and respect, just as my mom had mine when I was a young writer.

As we sat at our family dinner table that spring afternoon, reviewing my third draft of the paper I wrote on the Salem witch trials, my mom paused to reflect on my question. I urged her response by repeating softly, "How do you know what to write?" Resting her head on her closed fist, her elbow propped on the table while her right hand held the pen, poised to return to the task at hand, she said with a thoughtful smile, "I couldn't do it until I started teaching writing."

I didn't really understand her response then, as I was only a teenager who had just stepped onto the path that would lead me to find my writing self. But today, like my mom, I can see just how far I, a teacher of writing, have traveled. Following in my mother's footsteps, inspired by her caring, expert instruction, my continual practice and my desire to better my writing has led me to guide my students on this same path. I can only hope that they, too, will trust those guiding them—another leap of faith—long enough to find footing on the path that will lead them to success in their own writing journeys.

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