

although they turned out to be no less determined!

What puzzled many at the orientation session was the relation between the academic work they would undertake and the career counselling the course promised. Although we didn't let it faze us, it puzzled Nancy Lane Burghardt, the counsellor from Seneca and me, as well. At the information session, I blithely promised the students that they would be amazed about how essay writing and planning your life went together. As it turned out, I am as amazed as they.

I was prepared for the fact that learning to write is a process of wrestling with one's soul, that papers are written in blood more frequently than in ink, and that what stands in most people's way is that they have the firm conviction they have nothing to say worth putting on paper. I know that the last barrier is the one to which adult women cling, even when they put nouns and verbs in the correct order with relative ease. I wasn't surprised that the students loved the literature and that they soon wondered, as I do, whether life imitated art or art, life. Or that they are devouring Meg's exciting and compassionate analysis of housework, finding it raises more issues than we have time to discuss.

What is amazing and confirming of many things is this: the discipline of reading and writing and thinking and discussing seems to provide a focus for the larger changes that these women wish to make in their lives. The essays in particular represent the things they never thought they would be able to do: wrestle with expression, convince themselves they have something to say, put it on paper, submit it to the scrutiny of their classmates, as well as to my critical pencil. All of these processes they experience as agony and yet they do not falter. One of the most apparent changes in the group as a whole and in most of the individuals is that they are simply saying more. Their papers are longer (there is no set length), they talk more in class. About half of each class is spent working in groups of four or five and, in the small groups, everyone contributes. The confidence in the room grows week by week.

We spent one full Saturday together (pot-luck lunch) on career counselling material; the morning was devoted to discussing skills and their transferability to the job market. The students had just read the first three chapters of *More Than a Labour of Love*. It kept coming up. "What

do you mean you haven't accomplished anything in the last year?" "How many skills are involved in moving a family of four from Alberta to Toronto?" Luxton's analysis helped concretize the complexity of their daily lives, helped provide a foundation for placing skills developed in the home on resumes and presenting them in interviews.

The difficulties we have writing often mirror the difficulties we have in other regards. Developing ideas on paper is less a matter of having something to say (most people have lots to say) than of having the conviction it is worth saying. "Putting it in writing" gives what we think a reality, a concreteness, that it does not have when it is more loosely defined in our minds – the very term acknowledges this feeling. To write a good paper, we must continually ask ourselves what we really do mean; we must seek precise language to reflect precise thought. We must continually question the significance of what we observe and then state it.

All the women observed that the materials stirred up in them a lot of things they had not reflected upon, and had even avoided thinking about. "Relevant" material is not necessarily the best material to teach writing from, for analytical writing, in particular, requires some objectivity. Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" gave the most difficulty: we are all Emily, and if we are mothers, at least sometimes we are the mother, and if, as is true for one woman in the class, one has given up two children so that they would not suffer Emily's fate, analyzing the story takes more courage than anything else.

However, disturbance signals the presence of creativity as well as of tottering apple carts and memories too painful for words. An essay written is something accomplished: mentally and emotionally, it is something sorted out; physically, it is something one has found the time for, made the space for, applied one's energies to and completed. In the course of producing excellent papers, one woman realized that the time it took away from her children was not worth it to her and decided to delay attending university until her children are older. Others found that finding the time and place to do the work gave them the opportunity to create spaces of their own.

The women's comments reflect that their difficulties are just like their other difficulties, whether they be trusting their ideas and intuitions or looking past simple responses or "black and white" judge-

ments of situations. Many comments also reflect this tapping of creativity: one woman entered the course wanting to be a writer, but others have found that writing fills their needs for reflection and expression.

The effect of the writing is paradoxical. We all have bad memories of school writing: it never pleased, it always came back decorated in red, we never really knew what *they* wanted. The women in this course feel the same way. "Is this one better?" they ask; and then, "I wasn't so pleased with this one because . . ." And finally, "I think this is a good one." Writing is empowering, and that is what the course is about.

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Don't cover your face

I hate shyness
this masquerading as mimosa
refusing to be
thighs and cloud
oktoberfest and tears,
and not acknowledge the existence
as a gift of grace from nowhere.

We are nothing but
an iconography of questions
without an answer.
Why then, use hands and words
to cover your face
even though it's really my face
and your blood is my blood?
Mimosas do not know how to ask
or to whom tenderly give.

Giovanna Peel
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