

# Voices to Lead Us

*"Our time on earth is short, how short we do not know.  
I may have only today or I may reach one hundred.  
I cannot separate learning from living. Indeed, to live is to learn.  
I pray that I may be open to learning until the last breath of life that is given to me."*

—Donald H. Graves, 1930–2010

(*How to Catch a Shark*, p. 134)

I began this column six years ago with a "Where I'm From" quick-write based on George Ella Lyon's (1999) poem that I still love using with students. Even on that awkward first day of school, kids will write and find lines they like. Students listen to their voice on the page and want to write more. For my final column in *Voices from the Middle*, I want to consider where we come from as teachers and which voices we listen to for guidance in our work each day.

Piled beside me at my desk are the books that have led me to deep thinking in my work. I thumb through them for guidance and reassurance as outside forces continue to increase pressure on my daily classroom life. I still believe we must invite students into writing as a necessary, daily part of classroom life, because student voices gain confidence and power as they discover what they have to say. I find that invitations to write in notebooks work like the poppers you can buy for holiday gatherings—pull the string and there's an explosion of paper and air. Likewise, an invitation to write often allows students to unravel unexpected words on the page with force and passion. I ask students to write what they know from the center of who they are, and they respond with power and surprises.

I honor the unexpected rabbit trail of student writing. I use poetry to prompt writing, not a list of story starters. I don't want students to respond in a prescribed, determined way; rather, I want them to honor their own thinking, gaining confidence as they gain independence. I know that a script for what to teach in writing cannot meet the needs of the myriad writers who are in my classroom this year. I know this from reading Donald Murray and Donald Graves, two heroes of this work who have now passed on. I teach on the foundation of these giants. I teach better when I listen to them, adapting their principles to my current practice. I cling to their words and vision.

Disparate voices are battling for attention in education today. There is a voice that believes teaching is what Yann Martel (2003) describes in *Life of Pi*, "It was my luck to have a few good teachers in my youth, men and women who came into my dark head and lit a match." Teachers are one catalyst for original thinking. We guide students through daily, complex decisions toward the best writing they can create. We lead them through our own discoveries in reading and writing. We model decisions, craft writing beside them, and honor their processes. As Maja Wilson (2010) said, "Our practices are expressions of our principles—our beliefs about learning and the nature of what's being taught" (p. 53) and "good teaching depends on responsive and grounded decision making" (p. 53). Yet too many teachers I know are being pressured by another voice to

his Vietnamese mother sent him away to live in America, and why his American father deserted them in Vietnam. Through visits to a counseling group for Vietnam War veterans, a team-building activity at a baseball practice, and learning to play the piano, Matt comes to understand himself, his past life in Vietnam, and the reason his mother sent him away.

***Hate List* by Jennifer Brown.** Little, Brown and Company, 2009. Bullying and its repercussions are the themes of this book about a shooting in a high school. The girlfriend of the shooter is left alive to deal with the aftermath of the shooting. She must come to terms with the "hate list" that she and her boyfriend kept, as well as her role in causing the shooting. During a time when bullying is so much in the news, this book provides a way to discuss both the bullies and the bullied, as well as the consequences of teenagers' actions.

***Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson.** Viking, 2009. In this starkly realistic story of a teenager's battle with anorexia, the voice and thoughts of Lia are shared with the reader, revealing a girl who demands of herself that she count every calorie, because that is the only thing she can control.

***North of Beautiful* by Justina Chen Headley.** Little, Brown Young Readers, 2009. Terra, a girl with a port-wine stain on half of her face, learns the difficult lesson that beauty begins on the inside, not the outside. This beautifully written story is a must-read for adolescents, especially in this commercialized world where valued beauty is often only skin deep.

***Waiting for Normal* by Leslie Connor.** HarperCollins, 2008. Twelve-year-old Addie is "waiting for normal" in her life that is anything but normal. Middle school students will relate to the struggles Addie faces as she moves to a new neighborhood and a new school, learns to fend for herself when her mother is away, and looks for the normalcy that has been elusive in her life.

***Shark Girl* by Kelly Bingham.** Candlewick Press, 2007. *I remember / the first time, / and the last time, / I wore my / pink bikini* begins the story of Jane, a 15-year-old girl, who is attacked by a shark during a family beach outing. After an arm amputation, this teenager must deal with the fact that her "good arm" and, perhaps, her desire for a career as an artist, may be gone. Poetic form makes this a quick, easy read, while the subject of the book helps the reader vicariously experience a year of recovery after a devastating loss.

***Dunk* by David Lubar.** Compact Disc. Full Cast Audio, 2003. The audio version of *Dunk* is recorded with different readers for each character, helping struggling readers to literally hear the voices of the characters in their head.

***Rules* by Cynthia Lord.** Scholastic, 2007. Catherine's brother is autistic, and the "rules" she gives him to live by help her to cope with his disability, while giving her hope that the rules will help others to treat him more normally. The plot becomes more complicated when Catherine meets another disabled boy and must come to terms with how she treats him in her quest for a normal life.

set aside their own thinking about their students and adopt a script for their work. Every student on the same page in every classroom, I've heard. As if young people are receptacles on a factory assembly line. This creates a tension many will not tolerate. I've watched cherished colleagues resign. I've interviewed dozens of students who have given up on reading and writing because they believe it has no purpose beyond a test they do not value.

As I sit on this Sunday thinking about teaching next week, I listen to the voices of the teachers I most admire. I can hear them beside me as I think through all of the complexities of this work. Smart people have been making good sense for decades now, and when we listen to them, students write better. They write with attention to what they are trying to say, and they also live better. They pay attention to the world differently when they are reading books "with answers to questions I didn't even know I was asking," as my student Jacob said. Then they write to discover what they think and believe about the world. I reach for voices that still believe in the power of individual student writers who create and imagine and see possibilities in words. I teach children, not curriculum.

There are voices in our media who speak as if they know our work. Do we listen? We sit at the end of the day amidst the fading clatter of students heading out the doors, and we consider our next steps in teaching. Whose voice do we hear as we think about tomorrow? Is it a hysterical TV commentator or a politician ranting about the US falling behind other nations in test scores? Is

it a principal or central office directive to plan more test prep instruction that you know will zap the life out of students and banish any hope you may have had of leading them to love reading and writing and reach for it throughout their lives? We have too often responded with acquiescence instead of research, with quiet venting instead of a principled stand. The voices in the media are not ours. We have been silent when we should speak.

I crave the voices of my colleagues today. We need your voice here in this journal, in workshops at NCTE and IRA, and in National Writing Projects all over the country. Join the voices in our profession that seek to preserve the dignity of this work and challenge the thinking that leads to despair in our students and in ourselves. You understand your students and the art of this work. Write what you know. You'll find a way toward words that can show what you mean. You'll enter a decades-old conversation about what we learn when we follow students and write with them, creating communities of joy and collaboration and fine writing. Write your teaching life. Today. Right now. Find your voice and lead us.

### References

- Graves, D. H. (1998). *How to catch a shark*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lyon, G. E. (1999). *Where I'm from: Where poems come from*. Spring, TX: Absey & Co.
- Martel, Y. (2003). *Life of pi*. Orlando, FL: Mariner Books/Harcourt.
- Wilson, M. (2010). "There are a lot of really bad teachers out there." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(2), 51-55.

## My Wishes for Beginning Teachers: A Coming Full Circle

**A**s I write this last column of “New Puzzles, Next Moves” for *Voices from the Middle*, I find myself in a unique position. My eldest granddaughter is graduating from college and starting her career as an English language arts teacher. When I proudly tell this to my friends, they ask, “So, did *you* recommend teaching as a career?”

Knowing what to say to new teachers about the benefits of teaching as a career is a challenge right now. There is so much “noise” in the profession: demands and stresses coming from every direction as teachers, schools, and districts scramble to make sense of them and learn to balance them. Both courage and insight are needed to focus on the really important and meaningful parts of a teacher’s work—and to make teaching feel rewarding.

In the end, would I still recommend teaching as a career? My answer, after careful consideration, is “yes.” As beginning teachers start their careers, perhaps what I have learned will provide perspective on what they may gain. Most important, teaching has given me the opportunity to meet interesting people and to develop many unique, lasting friendships. Equally important, it has allowed me to share with students the gift of learning to use language and other sign systems to make sense of the world. It has afforded me the pleasure of continuing to be an avid reader and writer myself. It has allowed me to both sustain a fascination with how adolescents learn and to make meaningful career contributions over

almost 40 years. Finally, the career of teaching has offered me the opportunity for many adventures—a wish that I would have for all new teachers as they journey down the path of their own careers. Don Graves, “the gentle giant,” as Ken Goodman and others have written about in tribute, so exemplified the teaching life that I am talking about here (<http://unhmagazine.unh.edu/w05/writeway.html>).

I hope that beginning teachers will stay in particular schools for three to five years or sustain contact with old friends and students to learn whether their work has made a difference. I predict their biggest impact will be in their influence on individuals—students, fellow educators, and parents—more than on educational systems. For this reason, my own best advice to new teachers is this: treat the relationships that you create in schools with deep care, because they will be what you can influence and what may matter most.

Right now, the field of education is changing at an exponential rate. The demand is for schools—be they public, charter, or private—to develop more focused visions and missions in order to become discrete “choices” that parents select for their children, in the hopes that a specific curriculum and a specific school will result in significant learning gains. This “choice” environment often feels competitive, but it may be placing necessary pressure on schools, districts, communities, states, and our nation to better serve all students’ needs ([http://www.all4ed.org/about\\_the\\_crisis/students](http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/students)). In my own state, schools are being rated not only on students’ achievement, but on their ability to help students grow (<http://www.schoolview.org/>).