We hereby approve the Dissertation

of

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This qualitative interpretive dissertation consists of five acts. Each act uses the theory of narrative inquiry and the practice of multigenre writing to investigate the stories teachers at the Ohio Writing Project tell as they complete their own writing, as well as the classroom implications when teachers view themselves as writers.

**Prologue:** Provides an overview of the dissertation.

**Act I:** A fictional story based on the author’s life and factual research experiences at the Ohio Writing Project.

**Act II:** End notes which illuminate issues introduced in the fiction and elaborate on what is fact and what is fiction in the research.

**Act III:** Writing from the author’s past presented in multiple genres to highlight the theoretical foundation of narrative inquiry.

**Act IV:** End notes which examine existing literature and the author’s rationale for writing a dissertation from a different methodological approach.

**Act V:** The author’s Ohio Writing Project Portfolio that provides additional critique of teaching, writing, and curriculum.

While an abstract may provide an initial outline of this dissertation, it cannot effectively capture the creativity and risk of the author’s writing style. To learn more, keep reading.
WRITING A TEACHING LIFE

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Miami University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Educational Leadership

by
Jennifer Lynne Bird
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
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Dissertation Director: Tom Poetter
c.

Jennifer Lynne Bird

2005
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Dedication

To my parents

Dann and Marilyn Bird

For everything
Acknowledgments

To my family and friends: Listing names requires more space than I have here, which shows me how much I am loved. I am writing this today because of your love and support. I love you and thank you.

To my professors, doctoral student colleagues, and everyone in Miami University’s Educational Leadership Department: Thanks for making my journey through the program a fun and memorable one.

To my dissertation committee: Thank you so much for believing in me and giving me the chance to write something meaningful. I had a wonderful dissertation writing experience because of all of you.
Prologue

“This is me. This is who I am as a writer, teacher, researcher, and person.” I conclude my conference presentation and my explanation of how I used the theoretical foundation of narrative inquiry and the practice of multigenre writing to create a unique dissertation.

“Why did you decide to resist a traditional dissertation format?” The audience member who asks the question waits for a response. I suspect everyone else in the room, as well as everyone reading this document, would like to know the answer.

“During the five years I taught high school English, I encouraged my students to take writing risks. I told them to move beyond the standard five-paragraph essay. If I didn’t follow my own advice and wrote a traditional five-chapter dissertation, I would feel like a hypocrite.” As I prepare to conclude my answer, I think of something else.

“I also want to lend my voice to the research debate. People may or may not like my ideas or agree with them, but at least I’ve stated them. In the first classes I ever took for Miami’s doctoral program, I hardly said anything. Now, it’s impossible to shut me up. I need to make my voice heard.” I wait for the next question.

“I’m curious to know how you end your dissertation. What is the last sentence?” You’ll know the answer in about 240 pages, at the end of my exploration involving fiction writing, the Ohio Writing Project, teachers’ narratives, numerous genres, and my own life story. For now, enjoy the journey.
I Wrote My Dissertation This Way

Because I want to take a risk

Because I want the only dissertation I write to mean something to me

Because I want to contribute to existing scholarship about narratives

Because I want to pave the way for other scholars to include fiction in research

Because I want to challenge the way other scholars think

Because I feel confident in my ideas and my writing

Because I feel confident in telling skeptics to bring on the criticism

Because writing a traditional dissertation might be safer, but involve less learning

Because even if writing this dissertation means

not getting a job or tenure at a prestigious university,

publication in a prestigious journal,

or praise by prestigious colleagues,

I will still be happy about myself and my writing

Because I will still be able to face the woman in the mirror with pride

Because I am proud of myself

Because I am me
Decision

The case: Jennifer passed her comprehensive exams, defended her dissertation proposal, and became the dissertation scholar thanks to the following research synopsis.

My research quest involves two questions: What stories are teachers telling as they complete their own writing? What are the classroom implications when teachers view themselves as writers?

During the summer of 2004, I planned to enroll in the Teacher As Writer seminar of the Ohio Writing Project. My intent was to become a participant observer to document my own experiences in the class as well as interview other participants about their experiences as teachers and writers. I designed questions to be used as prompts; the intent of the questions was to determine how and why teachers view themselves as writers and the ways such beliefs influence classroom experiences.

1. How do you feel about being a writer? How do you use writing in your classroom? When your students write, what are you doing (writing, observing, conferencing, etc.)?

2. Have you ever showed students an example of your own writing? If yes, what? Why? Did it work? What would you do differently next time?

3. How is the resource guide (sample lesson plans and curriculum suggestions) helpful? What activities, if any, do you plan to try in your classroom?

4. How has being a teacher who is also a writer influenced the experiences of your students?

5. What is your biggest success story involving writing, teaching, and/or curriculum?
Jennifer now has several options.

A. Forget everything and become a tap dancing waitress at a coffee shop.

B. Take the safe route and write a dissertation that contains mostly expository writing and does not use the pronoun “I” a single time.

C. Take a risk, venture into the world of qualitative interpretive research, and use the foundation of narrative inquiry to create a multigenre dissertation.

Now it is time for you to decide which option Jennifer chose.

If you think Jennifer chose option “A,” get some sleep. You have been reading too much academic writing and it has caused impaired judgment.

If you think Jennifer chose option “B,” please turn to page 5.

If you think Jennifer chose option “C,” please turn to page 6.
Wrong Answer

If you selected this option, either you thought Jennifer would take the safe route and write a dissertation that contains mostly expository writing and does not use the pronoun “I” a single time, or you were simply curious to see what she wrote on this page.
Stories and Confessions

I decided to take a risk, venture into the world of qualitative interpretive research, and use the foundation of narrative inquiry to create a multigenre dissertation.

But what does that mean?

As a writer, I believe in showing instead of telling. I begin with several stories.

For those of you who are getting kind of nervous now (she’s gone almost five pages without a parenthetical documentation!!!!), I explain everything at the end of the stories.

This dissertation is a roller coaster ride. Hang on.

************************************************************************

In the fall of 1993, my mom and I attempted to watch the series premiere of the television show *NYPD Blue* from a hotel room near Bowling Green State University. The local station preempted the police drama because the content might potentially offend viewers. Fortunately, my dad taped the show in my hometown of Kettering, Ohio, so my mom and I could watch it later.

Now, in the spring of 2005, the series finale of *NYPD Blue* will air in a matter of days. I am reflecting on the last twelve years and thinking about life when I recently graduated from high school and Detective Andy Sipowicz first started solving crimes.

Twelve years ago, my mom and I had an intense discussion about my future instead of watching the safe weather special which aired instead of *NYPD Blue*. I was a high school valedictorian considering dropping out of college because I was so homesick. I decided to transfer to Miami University, closer to home. Little did I know the next twelve years of my life would include the overlapping experiences of eight years as a college student earning three degrees from Miami, five years teaching high school
classes, two years teaching college classes, one year writing news stories, endless
learning, and the tragic death of my mom.

Like the television show *NYPD Blue*, I take a risk with the content of my writing.

Like the show’s main character, I have endured personal hell.

************************************************************************

“You go halfway, you get hurt.” In my favorite movie, *The Cutting Edge*, an
Olympic figure skating coach yells the command at his champion pairs team, who
halfheartedly practice the combination that, if executed perfectly, will win them the gold
medal. They keep hurting themselves because they do not feel passionate about their
craft, because they fear what the skating judges will think.

I no longer feel I can go halfway with my writing. I may not physically hurt
myself like the Olympic skaters, but I will drain myself emotionally.

Incidentally, the skaters in the movie gave their best performance and won the
gold medal.

************************************************************************

In an episode of the television show *Lois & Clark*, Lois Lane discovers Clark
Kent hid from her his other identity as Superman. “Let it go,” Clark pleads as he asks for
forgiveness while Lois tries to understand why he hid part of himself from her.

I need to reveal my personality on the page and share my true self, like Clark
eventually did with Lois.

************************************************************************

In the previous narratives, I connect my life to the stories of others. I also tell the
stories in a creative manner. I apply the same process to my dissertation.
Notes to Self

✓ Take walk and remember what the outside world looks like.
✓ Finish copy editing articles.
✓ Buy cat food. Don’t forget to buy food for yourself.
✓ Answer following questions for dissertation.

Why Narrative Inquiry?

I live in a world of stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as “a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 20). During my years of taking dance classes, I enjoyed performing more than watching other dancers perform. During my years of teaching, I enjoyed writing with my students more than watching my students write. I needed involvement. I needed to feel part of the stories happening around me. When I read about narrative inquiry, I felt like I finally found my place in research.

Why Multigenre?

Ever since I wrote my first multigenre research paper almost ten years ago, I loved the concept of writers creatively presenting their research. Romano (2000) describes multigenre writing as “each genre is a color slide, complete in itself, possessing its own satisfying composition, but also working in concert with the others to create a single literary experience” (p. 4). Multigenre papers give writers the opportunity to dovetail research and creative writing.
Memo

To: Readers

From: Jen, the writer

Re: Dissertation format

As the previous examples illustrate, I believe academic writing and research can connect personal and professional experiences. I want you, the reader, to enjoy my work and not fall asleep or feel confused, so I provide a preview of upcoming events.

I considered making my entire dissertation a novel, but fiction tells only part of my story. The other part of the story exists in my reflections following the fiction, in the fact that my life is not identical to the life of Jenna, the main character in my story.

Think of my dissertation in five acts, kind of like a Shakespeare play.

Prologue: What you are currently reading.

Act I: A fictional story which incorporates my research.

Act II: My analysis of what is fact and what is fiction.

Act III: A multigenre presentation symbolic of my theoretical foundation.

Act IV: A literature section illuminating my choices in theory and practice.

Act V: My Ohio Writing Project portfolio and additional critique.

Epilogue: What I learned during my research and writing journey.

Throughout my dissertation, I incorporate critical analyses of events that take place both in my personal life and in my professional research, since both became intertwined throughout the duration of my doctoral program.
Act I: Fiction!! In a Dissertation??

Narrative inquiry involves not only personal narratives, but fictional ones as well. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) believe, “in narrative inquiry, the distinction between fact and fiction is muddled” (p. 179). Recently, there has been support in the research literature for incorporating fictional elements into factual research. Kilbourn (1999) writes about the potential for fictional theses and explains, “the art of thesis writing involves knowing when and where fiction might be appropriate. At the end of the day, there will always be judgments about writing” (p. 31). Duke and Beck (1999) concur that, “opening up the dissertation to a range of professional genres, and thus formats, offers an opportunity for individual students, committees, programs, and departments to think through their goals and missions” (p. 34). For me, incorporating fiction into my dissertation involves exploring controversial territory few scholars have studied.

In order for my dissertation to make a contribution to the intersection of research and creative writing, there needs to be a solid foundation on which to build my creative castle. Bridges (2003) argues, “this relationship with fiction is brought even closer if we also acknowledge, as I think we must, that educational researchers, like writers of fiction, employ both art and artifice in the construction of their research writing” (p. 90). He also cautions, “indeed many writers in the narrative fiction or fictional-critical genres are careful to acknowledge the difference between the real and the fictional” (p. 95). As a researcher, it is my responsibility not to make up information. I can present research data in a creative way, but I cannot change the essence of meaning to fit my creative story.

So now I arrive at the issue presented by Lamott (1994), who states, “a writer paradoxically seeks the truth and tells lies every step of the way. It’s a lie if you make
something up. But you make it up in the name of the truth, and then you give your heart
to expressing it clearly” (p. 52). Fictional characters can still discuss factual issues. In
fact, fiction may actually help writers focus on the facts. Goldberg (2000) explains,
“sometimes the more fictional a writer becomes, the closer he actually gets to dead
center. Fiction lets us unhinge from facts and unleashes the soul of a thing” (p. 129).
The soul of my research is comprised of stories of teachers as writers. O’Brien (1990)
believes, “what stories can do, I guess, is make things present” (p. 180). Stories resonate
more if they are interesting. If my reader falls asleep while reading my dissertation, I
have not accomplished my purpose as a writer by making the issues engaging enough to
sustain interest.

Foundations for my fiction exist in my research and emotions. The characters in
my fictional story attend an Ohio Writing Project (OWP) seminar almost identical to the
one where I conducted my research. In reality, the Ohio Writing Project Seminar
“Teacher As Writer” took place over two weeks. Sessions such as peer groups and
sharing of writing occurred more than once. In the fiction, I only include one synopsis of
each session. I also condense the length of the seminar from two weeks to one. I make
slight changes while maintaining the essence of events which occurred.

I invent most of the characters, although a few real people are part of my story.
The three men and four women (Frank, Brad, Robert, Henriann, Chris, Alyssa, and
Molly) who attend the writing seminar are pseudonyms for the seven teachers who chose
to participate in my research project. Since I was required to give all of them a
pseudonym, I decided to make them characters in the story. The characters’ names are
the pseudonyms chosen by the individuals I interviewed. I deliberately did not include
any physical descriptions of them so I would not give away their identities. These characters speak only during OWP discussions; their words are direct quotations from my transcripts. More detailed information follows the story in the end notes section; to reveal more at this point in time would subvert the story’s suspense. Each chapter in the story corresponds to an explanatory end notes section. When assigning multigenre papers to his classes, Romano (1995) “asked students to write a note page that explained some of the nitty-gritty, the ins and outs of particular pieces” (p. 142). My end notes elaborate on the factual issues introduced in the fiction.

Zimmermann (2002) emphasizes, “the soul knows what it needs to heal. Through writing, it will lead you where you need to go” (p. 18). My dissertation would be different if my mom hadn’t died, if my dad hadn’t moved away and started a new life in a new city, or if I had lived different experiences during the writing process. Cameron (1998) believes that writing “is a way to transform what happens to us into our own experience. It is a way to move from passive to active” (p. 94). Interestingly, it took writing fiction to finally make me realize that my mom’s death was a random tragedy and that the question of why it happened can never really be answered. I created a similar tragedy for Jenna, the narrator of my story, to gain clarity and insight into the events of my own life. Zimmermann (2002) writes, “the act of writing brings a structure and order to the chaos of grief. It taps into the healing power of your own unconscious” (p. 18). In a way, this writing experience was somewhat healing for me. I sent Jenna into horrific circumstances. In forcing my character to deal with loss, I could better confront what had happened to me. Cameron (1998) explains, “what writing brings to a life is clarity and
tenderness” (p. 83). It is difficult to write about what happened to my mom, but through fiction I can capture the same emotions and view them with more clarity.

Wanner (1994) argues, “not only can my mind formulate narratives of actual events – ordering and giving form to particular details from a chaos of sensations or from the language of someone else – but it is able through imagination to create stories that embody my concept of what is ‘true’ about human experience” (p. 14). The human experience of a mom’s death at an early age remains the same, whether it is my own actual event or the created event of a story. The same can apply to any event, whatever I decide to include in my writing. Interpretive qualitative research requires the researcher to make interpretations instead of simply listing observations. Mertens (1998) elaborates, “the interpretive/constructivist paradigm emphasizes that research is a product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them” (p. 11). I present my interpretations through the eyes of fictional characters.

O’Brien (1990) writes, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (p. 179). In the case of my fiction writing, the interpretation and critique of events remains mine; the only difference is the “I” in the story is Jenna the fictional character instead of Jenny the author. With the story-truth of fiction, I feel free to focus on an experience without feeling confined by specific details that exist in my happening-truth life. Wanner (1994) believes, “a story’s ‘truth’ depends more upon its coherence than upon its faithfulness to actual events” (p. 18). In describing the Ohio Writing Project, I stay faithful to actual events; in writing about the relationships between characters, I completely invent them. The rest falls somewhere in the middle.
I wish I possessed the ability to turn back time and escape my current life. Such a thought typically accompanies nightmares of the recent tragedy which befell me, though it also creeps into my mind during mundane situations, like the party I longed to leave.

I stood at the top of an elegant indoor staircase watching a party the Great Gatsby would envy. Samantha and Albert Morris gathered an interesting menagerie of people together on this warm late August Sunday evening to wish a woman I didn’t know a happy thirtieth birthday. I would celebrate the same milestone the following year and intended to never forgive Sam if she attempted to throw a party for me with numerous strangers involved. One random stranger, wearing a blank expression and a shirt with a picture of a grizzly bear, gawked at my blue sleeveless dress that matched my eyes and my reddish blond hair hanging loose to my shoulders.

“You look like an angel.” The stranger leered at me. “How are you?”

“Terrible,” I responded. I glared at him, wishing he would trip and fall.

“Oh. Okay.” The man slowly backed away from me and mumbled, “I need to get some ice.” It was less than a year since my mom died, and I possessed no desire to talk to people I didn’t know. I either told people I felt fine and hated myself for lying, or I told the truth about feeling miserable and sent companions running from me in search of happier people.

I noticed his matching pink shirt and tie when he walked through the front door. His gray pants didn’t quite reach his loafers, causing me to observe that he was also
wearing pink socks. Only a few people could make such a fashion statement work, and the handsome man with blue eyes and short dark brown hair was one of them. Trevor Emerson scanned the room until he saw me. Our eyes locked. I smiled at him and descended the stairs. As I reached the second to last step, I slipped on a spilled substance and lost my balance. Trevor caught me before I fell.

“Jenna, you know I’m already crazy about you. You don’t have to do anything elaborate to get my attention.” Trevor grinned.

“Hey, Trev,” I said, hugging him. Seeing his infectious smile made my terrible day a little bit better.

“You look beautiful,” Trevor said. “I’m going to go talk to people. Will you be sulking in the corner or making people cry tonight?”

“Tonight I’m opting for sulking.” I checked the bottom step to make sure nothing was spilled on it and sat down. “Want to know why, or would you prefer to use your deductive powers as a journalist to figure it out?”

“Someone who had no idea what happened to you probably asked where your parents lived,” Trevor answered. He sat on the step next to me, causing grumbles from the people on the stairs who were forced to squeeze by us.

“It’s a logical question for people to ask, I guess. Most people our age still have both their parents.” I wanted to say more, but couldn’t continue or I would start sobbing in the middle of a crowd of people. It wouldn’t have been the first time. Trevor placed his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

“At least you didn’t get into a shouting match like you did at Sam and Al’s last party. Remember when that woman found out you were an English teacher and asked
you how to spell a word?” In spite of the fact I currently hated everyone who had two living parents, I managed to laugh.

“Who is the guest of honor tonight?” I asked, thinking a different topic wouldn’t upset me. “ Doesn’t she work with you and Sam at the Cincinnati Chronicle?”

“Vivian Martin?” Trevor didn’t seem surprised that I changed the subject. He stood up, took my hands in his, and pulled me to my feet. “Yeah. I’m going to wish her a happy birthday. I’ll catch up with you later, okay? Let me know if you need anything.”

“I need my mom.” I said. I felt a twinge of guilt looking at Trevor’s stunned expression. He couldn’t bring my mom back. No one could. All my friends were extremely supportive, but I often wondered if I asked too much of them or ruined too many of their evenings. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Why are you still friends with me, anyway? Lately, I haven’t exactly been great company.”

“Because you would help me if I was the one hurting,” Trevor said. “I also think of you as being much more than a friend, but I know you need time to sort things out right now. Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thanks,” I said softly. We looked at each other for a moment before I felt the conversation was getting too serious. “Go say ‘hi’ to Vivian. No sense in both of us being miserable.”

I playfully pushed Trevor toward the crowd of people before he could protest. I watched him disappear into the crowd before locating a quiet corner away from the chaos. It wasn’t easy. Attendance at this gala event rivaled the number of spectators at a Cincinnati Reds baseball game. Ever the elegant hostess, Samantha twirled across the room in an orange dress that looked great against her dark skin. She had fastened her
black hair into braids accented with a silver clip. Albert, Sam’s husband, saw me sulking and leaned against the wall next to me. Outfits like the one he currently wore, a gray shirt and black pants, made him one of the best dressed teachers at the school where we taught. In honor of the upcoming school year, he had exchanged his summer afro for a winter buzz cut.

“Scaring people off tonight?” Al asked, a smile spreading across his face.

“It hurts too much to mingle,” I replied. “I don’t know why I even go out anymore. At least I’m not home alone lamenting my life. Congratulations on being named Hill Valley High School’s Teacher of the Year. It’s an incredible honor for you and all of us in the English department.”

“Thanks.” Al’s brown eyes looked troubled. “It bothers me that Dr. Winston Wilson hasn’t called to congratulate me. At first I thought he was upset because a black man other than him won a prestigious award. Then I remembered principals have a lot on their minds this time of year. I might be making too much of this.”

“It’s obviously upsetting you,” I said. “You only refer to Winston as ‘Dr. Winston Wilson’ when you’re mad at him.”

“Enough about me,” Al’s kind smile returned. “How are you? Sam told me you have been struggling lately.”

“When have I not struggled since my mom died? Today was worse than usual. I tried running away from my life this morning,” I confided, looking down and picking my fingernails. “My heart hurt as I watched the mother and daughter in front of me in line at Charlie’s Coffee Hut. They were happily chatting with one another. I don’t think they had any idea how lucky they were to have each other. I feel a knot in my stomach
whenever I see a mother and daughter shopping together, but for some reason it really got to me. Anyway, I got back in my car and kept driving. I had no idea where I wanted to go, but that pretty much sums up my life right now.”

“Don’t feel bad about it,” Al said. “I felt like running away, too, once.”

“Really?” Relief washed over me knowing someone else once understood what it was like to live life without a parent. “How old were you when your dad died?”

“Twelve. I know that feeling, the feeling you get when you think life can’t get any worse and it somehow does. I hated hearing stories from kids at school who had two parents. I hated the world. One day Mom said we were moving because there were too many memories in the house where I lived all my life. I took off and only got as far as my grandma’s house. She lived down the street.” Al closed his eyes briefly, as if remembering caused him pain.

“It really hurts,” I whispered. “Does the pain ever end?”

“It’s always with you, but it gets different over time,” Al said. “I was lucky, too. My mom was a determined woman who refused to give up and I also had the support of my family. Your family isn’t there to help you. That’s sad.” Al’s face brightened when he saw Sam walking over to us.

“Hi Hon,” Sam embraced Al and kissed him. I coughed, reminding them of my presence.

“I can leave if you two want privacy,” I offered. Sam turned and hugged me.

“Jenna! Great to see you!” Sam’s brown eyes took in my appearance. “Your dress has dirt on it. You’ve been crying. Were you at the cemetery today?”
“It’s been eight months since the accident. I had to go there,” I confessed, longing to return home where no one would disturb me. “I have to get out of here. I’m not in a festive mood.” I searched for my keys before remembering I didn’t have my purse. “Where’s my purse? Did one of the partying fools take it?” I looked around, frantic. “I have to find it!”

“Calm down,” Sam insisted. “I put your purse and everyone else’s in the library. Al, go greet the guests who just arrived. Jenna and I need to talk.” Sam put her arm around me while we walked through the maze of beige corridors. I looked at the faces of the smiling people in the family pictures hanging on the hallway walls and wondered if I could somehow join this family instead of mine. With the back of my hand, I wiped the tears forming in my eyes.

“Sam, are you sure I can’t join your family?” I asked. “I know I would be the only white person at holiday events, but your family would be okay with that, right?”

“You must have talked to your dad or your sister today,” Sam concluded. She paused to adjust a tilted picture. “Whenever you have a conversation with one of them, you want to join my family.”

“Jillian called this morning to tell me she’s moving back into our childhood home and claiming it for herself because Dad’s never there,” I said. “I asked her what Dad thought, and she said he didn’t even care. I feel like I lost both my parents. Ever since Dad packed his bags and decided to travel, he’s never around when we need him.”

“Is she there by herself or did your insensitive older sister bring her man of the moment?” Sam opened the door to the library. The two of us stared at the bespectacled woman inspecting the books. She flicked ashes from the cigarette in her hand onto her
white dress. Forgetting she held a glass of wine in her other hand, she smoothed her short blond hair and spilled wine all over herself.

“I hate life,” the woman moaned. “I can’t think of anything more horrible than turning thirty.” She extinguished her cigarette by tossing it into her almost empty wine glass. I didn’t realize my hands had clenched into fists until I felt what was left of my fingernails digging into my palms.

“I can think of a few things worse than turning thirty,” I said, not even attempting to hide the sarcasm in my voice.

“Jenna, this is Vivian Martin from the Chronicle,” Sam said, intervening.

“Vivian, this is my best friend, Jenna Kepler.” Without saying anything else, Vivian exited the room and almost collided with Al. She ignored him and kept walking.

“Vivian,” Al called after her. “So nice to see you appreciate all the effort we took to plan this party. Sam, I spoke to a woman in a hoop skirt who kept batting her eyelashes at me. A man resembling walking wallpaper replaced the CD in the stereo with one of his own polka recordings. Did your coworkers think this was a costume party?”

“Vivian circulated an office memo telling everyone to wear something silly,” Sam replied. “I didn’t find out about it until tonight. If she’s bored enough to compose an elaborate memo, she can write more columns. What do you think?” The ringing doorbell interrupted Sam’s tirade.

“Saved by the pizza!” Al shouted. Sam sat on an overstuffed yellow couch and motioned for me to sit by her.

“Sorry about Vivian,” Sam said. I finally located my purse underneath a pile of others and began inspecting its contents. Satisfied Vivian hadn’t stolen anything, I
collapsed on the couch. “Don’t worry about her,” Sam continued. “She performs in plays for the community theater. Sometimes she forgets to leave her drama onstage. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

“When I was at the cemetery, I could have sworn I saw my mom standing next to me. Is that weird?” I hoped stress and fatigue weren’t causing me to see strange visions.

“You mom’s always going to be with you,” Sam reassured me. “I like to think there’s something beyond this life and that you’ll see her again. Anything’s possible. Your mom would be really proud of you, for everything you’ve done in the last year.”

“I’m proud of myself, for getting to this point in time.” I looked into Sam’s concerned eyes. “Remember a couple months ago when I got distracted, drove my car on the wrong side of a two lane road and didn’t really care?”

“I was worried you might hate me after the lecture I gave you.” Sam gently placed her hands over mine, forcing me to stop picking my fingernails. “You may not like everything I have to say, but I’ll tell you what you need to hear.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’m sorry I spend so much time talking about my problems.”

“Remember when we were in college and I was debating whether or not to marry Al as soon as I graduated? I kept you up too many nights listening to me. Real friends don’t keep score,” Sam said. “Even though you may not see it, you are doing better.”

The library door opened, revealing Trevor holding a plastic snake.

“Sam, Al needs your help,” Trevor tried to suppress a smile. “Some guy wearing a grizzly bear shirt put a fake snake in one of the open pizza boxes as a practical joke. Vivian’s telling everyone her birthday is ruined. She says she’s feeling sick and not planning on working for a few days. I’m willing to cover her stories.”
“Sorry, Jenna,” Sam said, sighing in frustration. “I have to make sure Vivian has a ride home. Take care of yourself. Trevor, as your editor, I am ordering you not to change your plans. Your story idea is brilliant. Go with it. I’ll ask some of the other reporters to help cover for Vivian.” Sam hurried out of the library. Needing to escape the smell of smoke left behind by Vivian, I opened the first floor window and jumped to the ground outside. Trevor followed me. I walked through the garden, feeling the urge to trample the flowers. I was about to stomp on a sickeningly perfect red rose when I heard Trevor’s voice behind me.

“Don’t do anything you’re going to regret.”

“Too late for that. I’ve done a lot of things I regret.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine!” I yelled, not caring if half the party heard me.

“Your mom’s death wasn’t your fault,” Trevor said, concern in his eyes.

“Easy for you to say,” I snapped. “My mom’s dead, my dad finds solace traveling across the country imposing on various relatives, and my sister sleeps in a different man’s bed practically every other week. I feel like I’m the only sane one in my family. My life is one big screwed up country western song.” I paced around the garden, vowing to replace any of Sam and Al’s flowers I ruined. Once again I felt helpless when the accident returned to haunt me. “I should have died. I should have seen the other car. I shouldn’t have been talking. Why did she have to die? Why?” I was screaming now. “I had a good life! Why did all this have to happen?” The words caught in my throat as I started sobbing. Trevor hugged me.
“I don’t know,” he whispered. “Life hurts so much and we never know the answers. Just remember your friends are here for you.”

“I’m too much of a burden to all of you right now,” I said as I attempted to walk away from him. He held onto me, forcing me to spin around until I was back in his arms.

“No, you’re not. We wouldn’t offer to help you if we didn’t mean it, if we didn’t care about you.”

“I have to go,” I said, once again breaking away from him. It was like we were rehearsing for some bizarre dance contest. “I signed up for an Ohio Writing Project seminar that starts tomorrow morning. I want to hit the people who perpetuate stupid myths about teachers having summers off and an easy life.”

“OWP has gained a lot of local and national attention for helping teachers become writers.” Trevor said. “I told Sam that a reporter from the Chronicle should write an article about the seminar. He works for the national news division, but I think you know him. He wrote that excellent story exposing swindlers posing as aides at a nursing home. It was nominated for a Pulitzer.”

“You’re going to be at the seminar tomorrow?” Not wanting to look at Trevor, I forced myself to focus on the flowers that mocked me with their perfection. Stupid flowers. They were still alive. “How can you possibly be objective? You know most of the English teachers at Hill Valley High School, including Al and me, have said wonderful things about the Ohio Writing Project. You have a biased opinion.”

“I’m not planning on being objective,” Trevor grinned. “Have you ever heard of participatory journalism?”
“You enrolled in the seminar! Last time I checked, you weren’t an English teacher! How do you have the time to enroll with all the stories you have to write?” I should have felt happy he wanted to spend time with me, but I looked forward to the writing seminar as my own personal temporary escape before school started.

“Sam liked my creative idea, so this is all I’m working on next week. It’s been awhile since I wrote a large feature article. I also want to continue improving my writing. You don’t have to be an English teacher to enroll in the seminar. I distinctly remember you telling me that fact the first summer you signed up for OWP.” Trevor’s expression suddenly turned serious as he waited to see how I would react.

“You actually remembered me saying that?” I was trying to be angry, but found myself starting to smile. Trevor simply nodded, pulled me toward him, and kissed me. “I have to go,” I said, reluctantly leaving him. “I need to get some sleep before the seminar tomorrow.”

“Take care of yourself!” Trevor yelled as I ran to my car. It was good advice, if only I would take it.

Chapter II

Home was a small one bedroom apartment on the second floor of a large complex called Silver Trees. Even though my current living space was all I could afford on a teacher’s salary, I liked the apartment complex. At least I did once, back in my other life when everything seemed perfect. I know life really wasn’t as wonderful as I remembered it, but I wanted that life instead of this one. I snapped back to my dismal reality when I discovered cars occupying all of the parking spaces near my building. I finally found a
place for my gold Monte Carlo and trudged to my apartment. Spotlightes illuminated the parking lot, supposedly to deter muggers and burglars. I glanced all around me as I walked to my building, feeling relief when I didn’t encounter any criminals lurking in the darkness.

I stopped at the row of mailboxes on the first floor. I had forgotten my mail for several days and wanted to scream when seeing more bills and ads. I missed the cards my mom sent me. She always seemed to know when I needed a card with a funny animal on it or a note giving me encouragement. No one else in my life sent cards. I threw the ads promoting pizza and lawyers into a nearby trash can, unlike some of my messy neighbors who chose to litter the community mail area. I walked up the creaky stairs and heard an annoying screechy guitar echoing from the apartment below me. I opened my front door and was greeted by the ugly blue carpet I couldn't afford to replace and my roommate George. He was standing in the hallway leading to the bedroom demanding a meal. “I know I’m home late,” I explained, throwing my bills onto the desk near the door. I would deal with them later. “Sam had another one of her crazy parties. Why did I even go? I’m sure there was something good on television tonight.” George yawned. He didn’t care. I looked into his bright green eyes. “I suppose you want food,” I said.

“Meow,” was the gray cat’s response. I picked him up, causing him to begin purring in anticipation of a meal. If I couldn’t have my old life back, I at least wanted George’s. I glanced at a framed photo on the desk next to the discarded bills. Last year my family attended a local carnival and Dad took a picture of Mom and me standing in front of the carrousel. Why did the most important person in my life have to die? I slid to the floor, holding George and crying. The ringing phone jolted me out of my daze; the
caller identification revealed my older sister Jillian wanted to talk to me. Every week she had a different hair color and a different boyfriend. As a computer consultant, she earned more money than I could ever dream of possessing. Anticipating the latest battle, I summoned my strength and picked up the phone.

“Hello, Jillian.”

“Jenna? Did Dad leave a number where he can be reached?”

“No. Try his cell phone.”

“When was the last time he was in town for more than two weeks?”

“What do you want?”

“What is my natural hair color?”

“What?”

“I don’t remember. I’ve been trying to look at pictures, but I can’t figure it out. I had a little accident with hair dye. Right now my hair is blue.”

“What?”

“I have a floppy hat here somewhere I guess I could wear on my date. Remember what going out is like? When are you going to get out of your apartment and quit being a hermit? If I had a boyfriend that a magazine once wanted to name its sexy journalist of the year, I wouldn’t neglect him. He might find someone else.”

“My social life is none of your business! At least I’m comfortable staying home, unlike some people I know. You can’t be alone for two minutes.”

“Once again, you remind me that the happiest three years of my life occurred before you were born.”
“I have nothing more to say to you. I wish you had died instead of Mom!” I slammed down the phone. George looked up from his empty food bowl at the sound of the noise. I opened the kitchen cupboard and sorted through the cat food cans. “It’s true, George. Am I a terrible person to wish my sister had died, to wish anyone had died except Mom? Why can’t my sister and I ever have a normal conversation? Why am I expecting you to have the answers to my questions? You just want your food!” Nothing, not even a long bath, my favorite flannel nightgown, and my warm fuzzy slippers, helped me feel tired or relaxed. I lost track of the last time I slept through the night; tonight would not change the pattern. I decided to retreat into the past, sinking into my green plaid couch and removing my high school yearbook from the end table. I traced the gold letters on the purple cover before opening the memories. My picture was on almost every page. Cheerleader, yearbook staff, school play, service organizations. Signatures covered the inside front cover.

Jenna, my best friend forever! Stay in touch!

Loved being on the cheerleading squad with you!

You’re a great actress!

You were a major part of my life!

Hey yearbook girl! You’re not on the cover!

Love you like a sister! Don’t change!

Write me! Don’t lose my number!

I hadn’t seen most of my former classmates in over ten years. If I did it was someplace unexpected, like the grocery. Usually I would chat briefly in the frozen vegetable aisle with someone who used to be a friend and resolve to stay in touch more. I
never did though, convincing myself people naturally drifted apart over the years. My high school accomplishments didn’t matter anymore. I would trade them all to have my mom back.

As the yearbook advisor, I needed to be thinking about Hill Valley High School’s future yearbooks instead of the past ones. I was days away from beginning my seventh year of teaching, and after all this time it still felt strange to call my former teachers by their first names or see current high school students using my old locker.

Reminiscing about the past served no purpose other than to make me miss it more. I closed my eyes, hoping against all logic that I could wake up and be in high school again. I opened my eyes and actually felt surprised when my little magic trick failed. I staggered from the couch to my bed. After setting the alarm clock, placing it across the room, and watching the numbers slowly change, I fell asleep.

Once again, nightmares of the accident claimed me as I returned to that horrible December day. Had I known I would never have another conversation with my mother, I wouldn’t have wasted our last moments together complaining about my principal.

“Don’t worry, Jenna,” my mother said. “Just because Dr. Wilson is obsessed with standards doesn’t mean you have to be.” She finished the rest of her hot fudge sundae and tossed the empty bowl into a trash can near the mall’s food court.

“I know I’m making a difference in the lives of my students. That’s why I teach.” I savored the remaining bites of my sundae.

Thirty seconds. If only I hadn’t wanted the hot fudge remnants, things may have been different. We would have driven through the intersection thirty seconds earlier. I could have more sundaes in my life, but I could never have another mom.
Mom and I were laughing when we left the mall and loaded shopping bags full of clothes into the trunk of my blue New Yorker. The roads had recently been cleared from the previous night’s snowfall. I felt pleased the way my tires handled the damp streets. Mom turned on the radio and changed the station until she found one of her favorite disco songs. We both knew the words and sang along, loudly and badly. The light at the intersection turned green and I pressed on the gas. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a pickup truck to my right run the red light and race into the intersection. I tried to stop, but the roads were too slick. Our screams echoed in my ears as the truck slammed into the passenger side of my car. I looked to see if Mom was okay and hit my head on the steering wheel.

My head still hurt when I regained consciousness after the crash. A nurse watched over my hospital bed. She was the age my grandparents would have been had they lived. “Where’s my mom?” I asked. “How is she?” Silence. I felt dizzy.

“There was nothing we could do for her. I’m sorry.”

“She’s gone? No!” I grabbed the nurse, and shook her. “You mean there’s nothing you can do?” Certainly the emergency room staff could try something else, some medical procedure that would save my mom’s life.

“Do you need something? More medicine?”

“I need to see my mom. Where is she?”

“This way,” the nurse said. Apparently she wasn’t afraid of getting hurt, because she put her arm around me and led me down a narrow corridor and into a trauma room. My mom looked like she was sleeping. I held one of her cold hands in mine. Hands that...
would never hug me again. I threw myself across her body and kissed her cold forehead.
The nurse was saying something. “I have to talk to you about organ donation.”

“What?”

“Would you like to donate your mom’s organs?”

“She was an organ donor. Look at her driver’s license.”

“Thank you. We won’t take any part of her you will be able to see at the funeral.
Do you have a funeral home in mind?”

“No! My family wasn’t planning for this to happen!” I slapped the evil nurse,
wanting someone else to hurt as much as I was hurting. She yelped in pain and clutched
her face. I ran out of the trauma room. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. The sound of
my sister’s voice calling my name interrupted my escape. Instead of comforting me, she
started screaming at me.

“You killed Mom!” Jillian lunged at me. “What happened? You were too stupid
to see the other car?” Dad held her back.

“Jillian! Don’t yell at your sister! Jenna, how are you feeling?”

“I want to go home, Dad. Now.”

“Sorry. They have to keep you overnight for observation. You need to go back to
bed and rest.”

“I don’t want to! Quit talking to me like I’m a child!”

“Will you girls stop yelling? I just lost my wife!” My father looked like he had
aged twenty years in a matter of minutes. The evil nurse heard the commotion and
jumped into the middle of the conversation.
“Enough! All of you are grieving, but fighting with each other won’t change what happened.” She continued talking while escorting me back to my hospital bed, but I refused to listen. Looking over my shoulder, I noticed a hospital chaplain holding the hands of my father and sister to begin a prayer. Why was he praying now? If my prayers had been answered, my mother would still be here.

“My head hurts,” I whined to the nurse. I leaned back against the pillows.

“I’ll check your chart and get you something for your head,” the nurse said. I covered my eyes with my hands and started crying. I wanted the physical and emotional pain to stop. I wanted my mom to tell me everything was going to be okay. I wanted to relive the entire day and make it have a different ending. I felt someone sitting on the edge of my bed and realized I wasn’t alone.

“Mom?” I asked hopefully. Trevor looked back at me, tears in his eyes.

“I wish I could take away your pain,” he whispered.

“Then this wasn’t a dream? My mom’s really dead?”

“I am so sorry this happened.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault, it’s mine. Everything’s my fault.” I threw myself into Trevor’s arms and sobbed.

“Who told you that?” Trevor pulled away from me slightly so he could look into my eyes.

“Jillian. I blacked out before I could help Mom.” Guilt consumed me. I suspected it would stay with me the rest of my life. Trevor handed me a stack of tissues from the table next to the bed. He covered my hands with his.
“The doctor said there was nothing you could have done. Your mom died instantly. So did the truck driver. A witness to the accident saw him run the red light. It was his fault, not yours.”

“How do you know all this? Didn’t you just get here?”

“I’ve been here for about an hour, Jenna. That’s how long you were out. You were lucky to have lived.”

“I should have died. I want to trade places with Mom!”

Chapter III

Monday

I woke up screaming, sending George diving under the bed. I was still in my apartment, my mom was still dead, and nightmares of the accident still haunted me whenever I attempted to sleep. Silence. None of the neighbors must have heard me scream. Not that they cared. I hardly knew any of them. I reached for the phone and dialed my dad’s cell phone, hoping he would actually answer. After several rings, I heard a muffled greeting.

“Dad?”

“Jillian!”

“No, it’s Jenna. Dad, I’m thinking about the accident again and what happened to Mom. I really need to talk. Where are you?”

“Cousin Irma’s house in Indianapolis. All the neighbors are over for a poker tournament.”

“Who is Cousin Irma?”
“I forget exactly how she is related to me, but I’ve always called her Cousin Irma. You know I can’t keep track of the relatives. That was your mom’s job. We’re about to start another round of the tournament. I’ll call you later this week. Get some pills to help you sleep. Works for me. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Dad. Bye.” I glanced at the clock. Midnight. My friends all told me I could call them anytime, but I hated to disturb them at such a late hour. I stared at the ceiling for awhile and somehow fell back asleep. Morning brought the sound of annoying chirping birds and my ringing alarm clock. I briefly wondered why I had set my alarm before remembering the writing seminar. After careful consideration of my closet’s contents, I chose an orange shirt, tan shorts, and my new sandals with orange flowers on them. I intercepted George, who attempted to sneak out the front door with me. Needing my morning ritual, I drove to Charlie’s Coffee Hut.

Charlie owned the only coffee shop in Cincinnati that never closed. The yellow and orange neon sign beckoned me into the place I visited nearly every morning. I was thankful to be the only customer because I didn’t really want to talk to anyone. I blinked my eyes to confirm the sight of Samantha wearing a yellow and orange striped smock and working behind the counter.

“Sam, what are you doing here?” I gasped.

“Hi Jenna!” Sam laughed. “I wanted the Chronicle to feature a story on the popularity of Charlie’s Coffee Hut. Charlie insisted I take a shift here so I would gain an insider’s perspective of the business. It’s motivation for my reporters to see their editor writing a story.”
“That’s the type of participatory journalism Trevor’s doing with the Ohio Writing Project,” I yawned.

“More nightmares?” Sam asked. I nodded. Sam placed a cup of hot chocolate and a lemon muffin in front of me. “I thought you might want your usual breakfast.”

“Thanks,” I said, sitting on one of the yellow and orange striped stools in front of the counter. I dug several crumpled bills out of the bottom of my purse. “Is Charlie here?”

“Are you kidding?” Sam inspected the muffins and straightened the napkins. “He hates mornings. When he’s here, he prefers to stay in the back room and watch his little television. Why didn’t you call me last night when you couldn’t sleep?”

“I didn’t want to bother you.” I picked up a napkin and started to tear it into pieces.

“Have you thought about talking to a therapist?” Sam asked, taking the napkin from me. “You know your friends will always be here for you, but it may help you to see a professional, especially with your family being so distant right now.”

“I don’t know,” I covered my face with my hands. “I don’t know anything anymore. Why do the good people die and the bad ones live? It’s not fair. I’m a good person. Why do I have to live with my mom’s death for the rest of my life? Fifty years from now, I will still remember that horrible evening. Fifty years from now I will still be wondering what would have happened if I had only made a different decision. I’m a teacher. I’m supposed to help people. Why couldn’t I help the one person I needed to help the most? At the end of my life will I know the answers to the questions no one can answer?”
“You really did have a rough night,” Sam sighed. “If having Trevor write about the Ohio Writing Project is going to upset you, I can convince him to write another feature article.”

“No,” I said. “Trevor and I are good right now. At least I think we are.” I took a long sip of my hot chocolate and broke off a piece of my lemon muffin. “Jillian said if I don’t pay more attention to Trevor, he might cheat on me.”

“Jenna, you know I love you like a sister, so don’t get mad at me when I tell you you’re absolutely crazy to even think that. Have you seen the way that man looks at you? Since when has your sister been an expert on relationships?” I glanced at the clock on the wall. The writing seminar would start in a little over an hour.

“Does this outfit look okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” Sam replied. “Enjoy the seminar. Don’t stress too much.” Sam turned to help the other customers who walked into the coffee shop. I removed the writing seminar’s welcome letter from my purse and read it one final time.

Dear participant,

Thanks for enrolling in the Ohio Writing Project seminar entitled “Teacher As Writer.” Over the next week, you will have the opportunity to complete individual personal writing and exchange professional ideas with colleagues from other schools. I look forward to a fun four days of educational excellence!

Sincerely,

Evelyn Harris

Seminar instructor
Chapter IV

I drove to the campus of Miami University. The hilly roads and red brick buildings welcomed me to campus. I enjoyed being part of the Ohio Writing Project; it was like a summer writing camp for teachers. I searched for a parking space and dodged construction crews completing campus renovation projects. I won the parking lottery when I spied a car leaving its space. After a scenic walk across campus, I stood outside the English building’s main entrance for the longest time before finally convincing myself to walk through it. The building remained the same, but I was not the same person. Too much had happened in the last year; I felt like I lived a lifetime in the past few months. I ascended the stairs to the second floor classroom. The classroom looked vaguely familiar, making me wonder if a previous summer’s seminar had taken place in the same room. I peeked into the room and watched a secretary hand out nametags to three men and four women signing in for the seminar. I didn’t recognize anyone until a familiar voice called my name.

“Jenna? Jenna Kepler?”

“Evelyn!” I smiled at the woman waving at me from the other end of the hallway. Her print dress of numerous colors accented her dark skin as she glided through the corridor. “It’s great to see you,” I said, hugging her.

“You, too!” Evelyn exclaimed. “I am so sorry to hear about your mother.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I should have stayed in touch after last summer’s seminar. Life kind of got in the way.”
“Girl, don’t worry about it,” Evelyn dismissed my comment with a wave of her hand. “We’re both here now and that is the important thing. I’m so happy you signed up for the seminar.”

“So am I. How’s the Ph.D. program?”

“I’m defending my dissertation the day before the seminar ends. At the end of the week, I’ll be Dr. Harris. Well, hopefully. I don’t want to jinx myself.”

“I can’t believe you’re almost finished. You’ve worked really hard for this.”

“Tell me about it. I am doing something different with my dissertation while still trying to be taken seriously as a scholar. Hopefully, my idea will work. I’m tired of the lack of connection between theory and practice.”

“If anyone can pull off something creative, you can.”

“You should think about enrolling in the doctoral program, Jenna,” Evelyn said as she gestured toward the classroom door. “It’s time to get started.”

I took a seat in one of the uncomfortable student desks arranged in a circle. The four women and three men I had seen earlier waited for Evelyn’s seminar to begin. Except for Evelyn, everyone in the room was white. Unlike my high school classroom, no posters decorated the walls of this college seminar room. I opened my yellow daisy spiral notebook to a blank page. A shadow darkened the doorway. I glanced up and saw Trevor, who wore a black suit, white shirt, and red tie. He was way overdressed for the seminar.

“Hi,” he whispered as he walked by my desk. A woman racing into the classroom collided with him, dropping everything she carried. Her eyes never left Trevor as he helped her pick up her papers. She tucked her short brown hair behind her ear. In my
opinion, she smiled a little too flirtatiously. I clenched my teeth and began doodling in my notebook. Evelyn clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention.

“Welcome!” Evelyn enthused. “I’m so happy all of you decided to enroll in this wonderful seminar! We’ll begin with introductions. My name is Evelyn Harris. I am a former high school English teacher and currently completing my Ph.D. I have taken many OWP seminars, but this is the first one I’ve taught.” Evelyn looked at Trevor, signaling him to speak next.

“I’m Trevor Emerson, reporter for the Cincinnati Chronicle. I will be writing down my observations for a story I am working on about the Ohio Writing Project, but I will not describe any of you specifically without your permission. I hope this won’t be a problem for any of you, but please let me know if you have any questions. I’m really happy to be here. I’ve heard a lot about OWP, but never attended a seminar before.” The introductions continued. All of the other participants were high school English teachers, although none of them were from my school. Most of them seemed truly excited to spend the week discussing the teaching of writing. Maybe this seminar was exactly what I needed to feel motivated for the upcoming school year. Sensing everyone staring at me, I realized it was my turn to speak.

“Jenna Kepler. This year will be my seventh year teaching at Hill Valley High School. I’ve attended OWP every summer since I started teaching. It’s good to be back.” My introduction was the last one. Evelyn proceeded to outline the seminar and tell us about the writing portfolio we were required to submit at the end of the week. Soon the introductory information ended, indicating a retreat to the computer lab for personal writing. Trevor caught up with me on the way to the lab.
“You look tired,” he said.

“I couldn’t sleep again,” I stifled a yawn. “More nightmares.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Sam asked me the same thing this morning. I didn’t want to bother you. Did you know Sam’s writing a story about Charlie’s Coffee Hut?”

“Yes, and don’t change the subject. Next time, call me. I mean it. If you want, I can stay at your place this week.”

“So both of us can be awake all night?”

“I’m used to your inability to sleep.”

“I’m fine. I need to go write.” I located a computer in the back corner of the room where no one would bother me and promptly lost ten minutes attempting to triumph over my malfunctioning computer. I sighed and trudged to the lab manager’s desk. She ignored me, remaining engrossed in her novel. Finally sensing my presence, she folded down the corner of her current page. I took that as my cue to start speaking.

“There’s something wrong with my computer. It ate my disk for lunch.”

“Let me check it out.” She walked over to my computer and began pressing buttons. “I have never seen a problem like this before.” Her observation did not comfort me. “I got your computer working. Unfortunately, I couldn’t save your file.” So much for the wonderful short story I had been in the midst of typing. Unsure if the characters in my story were worth recreating or if I should start something new, I became mesmerized by the black cursor blinking brightly on the blank white screen. Lost in my thoughts, I didn’t see the man sitting at the computer next to me until he spoke.
“You appear lost,” he said. He had blond hair, glasses, and a nice smile. “I’m Cole Reid,” he said, extending his hand.

“Jenna Kepler,” I shook his hand. He kept my hand in his longer than necessary. “Are you here for a seminar?” I asked.

“No, I just like to hang out in the computer lab.” Cole laughed at my confusion. “I’m actually attending the same seminar you are,” he said. “I was on vacation. My flight arrived late. Your name sounds familiar. Are you related to a woman named Jillian? She was my girlfriend for about a week.”

“Jillian’s my sister.” I admitted. “I don’t remember her ever mentioning you.”

Seeing us talking, Evelyn joined our conversation.

“Cole!” The two of them hugged. “How are you?”

“Great! I had an exciting vacation. Jenna, did you know Evelyn before today?” I started to answer, but Evelyn took over before I could say anything.

“Jenna and I took a writing seminar together last summer,” Evelyn explained. “Cole and I used to teach together in the English department at Cincinnati Catholic High School before I took a sabbatical to finish my dissertation. Isn’t this great? Now we all know each other!” Evelyn was obviously boring Cole, considering he was paying more attention to his cell phone than to her.

“I need to make a phone call,” Cole said. “Jenna, it was nice to meet you. Evelyn, good luck with your dissertation defense. It’s this week, right?”

“Yes. Thank you for remembering,” Evelyn said. “Why don’t you join me for lunch? I want to hear about your vacation.”
“Absolutely,” Cole said. He left us, still entranced by his phone. Evelyn sat down in the chair Cole vacated.

“I saw you looking at him,” she said with a shrewd look. “He’s a nice guy. One of the sweetest I know. Why don’t you ask him out?”

“I just met him!” I exclaimed. “I also don’t date my sister’s rejects.” Several rows away, Trevor remained focused on his computer screen. I had no idea if he overheard the conversation. “Anyway, I’m seeing someone,” I told Evelyn.

“I didn’t know,” Evelyn said. “Cole’s wife died of cancer last year. He’s now a single parent to his young daughter, Hailey.”

“That’s why you thought Cole and I would be perfect for each other?” I lowered my voice when I saw several teachers stop typing in an attempt to eavesdrop on our conversation. “So I could bond with his daughter over the dead mother thing?”

“Relax, Jenna.” Evelyn wistfully watched the teachers working on various writing projects. Her mood suddenly changed. “I used to feel like I fit in here,” Evelyn said. “Now I’m caught between the theoretical world of academia and the practical world of neighborhood schools. Sometimes I really don’t know where I belong professionally.” She seemed sad. I attempted to think of a topic that wouldn’t lead back to my mom or Evelyn’s dissertation.

“Our seminar seems like a microcosm of the English teaching world,” I commented.

“You mean mostly white women?” Evelyn responded. “I agree. There are more men in this seminar than I have seen in others, but the composition of the group doesn’t surprise me. It reflects the English Departments in a lot of schools. I believe teachers
can be good role models for students regardless of race and gender. Now let’s talk about the fact that all I see on your computer screen is a blinking cursor.”

“Writing about certain things makes me too upset,” I said, figuring that if Evelyn was about to receive her Ph.D., she was smart enough to know the topic I wanted to avoid.

“Choose a topic that makes you happy,” Evelyn said. “Trade places with me.”

“Sure. I’d rather have your life instead of mine. Oh, you mean you want to trade computers?” I changed seats and watched Evelyn position her fingers above my computer keyboard. “What are you doing?” I inquired.

“Tell me about the person you’re dating. Close your eyes. I want you to remember details. You’ll do that better when you’re not distracted looking at the other people in the lab.”

“What do you want to know?”

“How did you meet?”

“It’s funny. I don’t remember him not being in my life. One day when we were in kindergarten, I stole his toy farm animals. He started crying, making me feel guilty enough to give them back.”

“Certainly you haven’t been dating since kindergarten. There has to be a story. Tell me.”

“We were friends all through school. Not best friends, but we hung out with the same group of people.” I smiled at the memory. “Neither one of us had a date for the prom senior year, so I asked him out. I kind of had a crush on him but never told him.”

“And you fell in love at the dance, right?” Evelyn concluded.
“No.” I laughed. “The day of the prom, I got sick with the flu. I called my date and told him to go to the dance without me, but he said he didn’t want to go with anyone else. He spent the evening at my house watching old sitcoms with me.”

“So it was still a romantic evening?”

“Not exactly. He wouldn’t touch me. He said he liked me, but didn’t want to catch my germs. My sister was home from college and spent the evening fighting with my parents because she wanted to drop out of school. We could hear the three of them arguing in the next room.”

“I see. But the two of you have been together since that day, I assume?”

“Don’t assume anything. I went to Bowling Green State University for college and he went to Ohio University. We decided not to have a long distance relationship.” I opened my eyes and saw Evelyn had been typing an outline of my story as I told it to her.

“Wait a minute. You’re writing my story?”

“This is your story. I’m just the scribe. Keep talking. When you’re finished sharing with me, you will have an outline to use as a guide for your writing. Sometimes other people can see things you can’t because you’re too close to them.” Evelyn expectantly waited for me to finish the story.

“Brilliant idea, Evelyn,” I said. “I’ll use it when my students work in peer writing groups. But I don’t think I want to finish the story right now. It’s too complicated.”

“Which is exactly what makes a good story. I would like you to finish this story, but only if you want to share it with me. That’s why I love being an OWP instructor. We encourage writers to share and most of them eventually do, but we respect writing people prefer to keep private.”
“Okay,” I relented. “During my last semester of college, I was the maid of honor in my sister’s wedding. She walked out of the church before the exchange of vows, shocking everyone. After witnessing her saga, I realized distance was a stupid reason not to be with someone.”

“What happened?” Evelyn looked intrigued. “Wait. Let me guess. Your sister walked out because the man she was supposed to marry was in love with you!” She looked at me for confirmation.

“Wrong again. My sister was seconds away from marrying a man who constantly hit her. My family didn’t know until after she left him. The guy I broke up with in high school was my date for the wedding because we were still good friends. He stayed up all night with me while I cried because I didn’t have a clue about my sister’s abusive relationship.”

“Thank you for sharing your story with me. Did you see what I was attempting to accomplish?”

“I get it. By making predictions, you encouraged me to elaborate and explain events more in detail. Very sneaky, but it worked. I’ll try this with my students.” I kept working on my writing and actually kind of liked it. Evelyn had provided an outline, leaving me to sketch in description. Most of the seminar participants left for the campus food court across the street when Evelyn announced the lunch break, but I didn’t want to leave a piece of writing unfinished. I was still staring at the computer screen when the person who occupied my thoughts interrupted me.

“What are you writing?” Trevor asked, leaning over my shoulder to read the words on the screen.
“You didn’t hear me talking to Evelyn?”

“I was too engrossed in my own piece. It’s about how people who aren’t teachers don’t really respect the amount of time teachers put into their jobs.”

“Good idea, but I’ve read numerous variations of the same theme. Another article reporting that teachers don’t hibernate all summer won’t change public opinion. Read this and tell me what you think.”

“Not a conventional love story,” Trevor said, grinning. “How does it end?”

“I kill him for asking stupid questions. I’m going over to the food court.”

“I’m working through lunch. I need to check my email since I’m not going to be at the office much this week.”

“You don’t have to keep proving to Sam you’re a great reporter. She knows it.”

I arrived at the food court at the same time as the students from soccer camp. A crowd hovered around the eating area attempting to decide among the various food options. I finally escaped with my food and joined Evelyn at her table.

“Jenna, I have a favor to ask you.” Evelyn removed the lid from her yogurt container and studied it. “Interesting. There are four new flavors.”

“What do you need?” I asked. I took a bite of my grilled cheese sandwich.

“Our discussion this afternoon is going to be very intense,” Evelyn replied. “I am going to be focused on the questions I ask, so I was wondering if you could write down the discussion points for me to review later.”

“I’d love to help,” I said. I wanted to feel like some part of my life actually made sense. Evelyn saw Cole and motioned for him to eat with us. Cole soon started talking about all the games of golf he played on his vacation. I finished eating and told Evelyn
and Cole I would see them after lunch. On my walk back to the seminar room, I saw two women drinking coffee and sitting on a nearby bench. They looked content to sit and enjoy the sun. Needing to escape the happy scene, I ducked into the English building to seek sanctuary in the women’s restroom. No such luck. I saw the teacher who had dropped her papers at the beginning of the seminar standing at the mirror and fluffing her short brown hair. She turned, saw me, and smiled.

“Hi! I’m Nancy Pearson! We’re in the same seminar! Isn’t your name Jenna? I just finished my first year of teaching. I’m so happy! I also feel I have a lot to learn before the school year starts. How are you?”

“Fine,” I said, trying to absorb all the information Nancy related.

“It’s been a great day,” Nancy chirped. “I don’t know if you noticed, but I was sitting at the computer in front of you when you were talking to Evelyn in the lab. I liked your story. I love to hear love stories, especially since I’m way too busy to live one of my own.”

“Thanks,” I said, shocked at the unexpected complement.

“Hearing what happened to your sister helped me feel better about myself.” Nancy paused before exiting the restroom. “My ex was an abuser, too.”

I felt terrible for thinking Nancy couldn’t possibly have as many problems as I had, then I reminded myself to focus on the conversation about teaching writing. I tried to remember the names of the seven teachers I hadn’t really talked to yet. The four women were Henriann, Chris, Alyssa, and Molly. The three men were Frank, Robert, and Brad. If I could remember the names of over one hundred teenagers during a school
year, I would hopefully remember the names of the seven teachers, plus Nancy and Cole. Evelyn waited for all of us to reassemble in the classroom.

“This afternoon’s discussion will focus on the topic of teachers as writers,” Evelyn said. “I want us to examine our attitudes about teaching writing.” The discussion commenced.

*Teachers as Writers*

*Responses by members of the Ohio Writing Project seminar.*

*The setting is a classroom. All the teachers are sitting in a circle.*

**Evelyn:** How do you feel about being a writer?

**Frank:** I enjoy being a writer. I was a writer before becoming a teacher.

**Alyssa:** I am starting to gain confidence in my writing, but continue to worry about sounding too juvenile.

**Molly:** I don’t know how I could teach writing without being a writer.

**Brad:** I love being known as a writer, though I feel fraudulent using that title sometimes.

**Robert:** I take pride in being a writer and knowing that my writing enables me to be a better teacher of writing because I am engaged in the process.

**Chris:** I enjoy writing and it is utilized quite a lot in my classroom.

**Jenna:** I love writing, even though it isn’t always easy. I appreciate what my students experience when I ask them to write something.

**Cole:** Wait a minute. Are all of you telling me you like to write? I hate it. I’m not that good at it. Why do I need to be a writer to teach writing? I’m not convinced why I should sit down and take out a notebook when my
students write. I’m the authority figure in the classroom. Students don’t need to know anything about my personal life.

**Evelyn:** The point isn’t to share secrets, but to show your students you are a writer.

**Cole:** Whatever.

**Nancy:** Can we please get back to the conversation about writing? I’m a new teacher. I need as much help as I can get. Teaching is difficult. You have to be good with classroom management.

**Evelyn:** Managing a classroom and covering curriculum aren’t the only things that make a person a good teacher.

**Trevor:** I’m a writer, but not a teacher. I’m curious about writing classrooms.

**Evelyn:** That was my next question. How do you use writing in your classroom?

**Frank:** I love to write with my kids. It helps all of us improve as writers.

**Molly:** I use writing to further thinking, explore questions, offer expression, develop critical thinking. My students write every day in a variety of contexts.

**Brad:** We write daily in my classes. I ask my students to use it for generating ideas, clarifying thoughts, and displaying what they know.

**Cole:** Hello, people! Don’t any of you have to deal with state required tests? The tests are part of the curriculum. I refuse to teach to the stupid tests, but that’s what the curriculum at my school has become. How can we get the kids to pass the tests? We’re judged by how well our students perform. The writing all of you advocate typically doesn’t appear on standardized state tests.
Jenna: I don’t think about the tests. I just teach. There is a space in the classroom for all kinds of writing. If students are good writers, they know how to write for different audiences. Ultimately, my students perform well on the state tests. They also enjoy writing. They see me as a good role model.

Nancy: But you’ve been teaching for years. What about us new teachers? There is so much to accomplish in any given school day, how can we find time to write? I have to take attendance, deal with interruptions, and prepare my lesson plans. I’m also a rookie trying to prove I belong. I feel excited here at OWP, but will I use what I learn here in my classroom?

Trevor: Writing helps keep me sane and gives me a chance to have fun. Do students see writing the same way?

Evelyn: Let’s discuss it. When your students write, what are you doing? Are you writing, observing, conferencing…..?

Henriann: When students write, I observe, conference, or do other work. That is, grading. I usually do not use class time to write – I’m afraid I will become too engrossed and not be managing the class well.

Chris: Usually I am writing at the same time as my students. When we are finished we exchange and share our work.

Alyssa: I have a daily writing workshop with my kids and that includes a mini-lesson, kids writing. I write or conference with them during this time and then we share.
Molly: When my students write, I write. I write all of the assignments, and I share my writing with my students.

Robert: When my students are writing, I conference with them, I observe them, and occasionally I write along with them. I also prepare for the next segment of the class when necessary.

Brad: I usually write when they write, but sometimes I conference, too.

Jenna: I try to build a community of writers in my classroom. I find writing builds community. It also shows mistakes are okay. As a teacher, you have to know you aren’t perfect. The trust issue is an important one.

Evelyn: Exactly. How does writing help you empathize with your students more?

Chris: It helps me to understand their frustrations and concerns. Also, it allows me to answer some questions they have.

Alyssa: Writing myself helps me understand their difficulties with writing details and not overusing words.

Molly: My credibility rests in my actions – seeing me write, as I struggle with ideas, revise, seek help, and publish promotes greater trust and openness from my students. They know that I know exactly what they go through.

Robert: I can empathize with writing difficulties because I have been there. I can also help them to get beyond their difficulties when they are having them.

Brad: I can empathize with the struggles of all writers more exactly when I am writing myself.

Cole: I think I am a good teacher even though my students don’t see me write.

Nancy: I feel too nervous when I think about sharing my writing with students.
Trevor: There is a risk factor involved with sharing your work. As a journalist, I’m used to it. Newspaper readers constantly tell me whether or not they like my stories.

Jenna: I can’t teach any other way. I have to write. I know other teachers may not feel the same way. I respect that.

Evelyn: Let’s interrogate this. Have you ever showed students an example of your own writing? If yes, what was it? Why did you share it? Did it work? What would you do differently next time?

Jenna: You asked a lot of questions at once, Evelyn.

Evelyn: If I generate discussion about teaching writing, I consider class – whether I teach high school students, college students, or other teachers – a success.

Henriann: I’ve used an old college essay for editing practice with seniors – did not tell them it was mine. I share poetry during read-arounds. Not as a model, but to participate with the class.

Chris: Yes, I have shared a narrative with my students composed during OWP to give them an example of description. They could see how I worked on something and it seemed to make them work harder. I would do this with more pieces.

Frank: Yes. I try to write with them and share.

Alyssa: I have read my students my writing – memoirs, tall tales, poems. Usually I have students look for a specific skill I used in that writing for them to try in their own work. I found it works very well, so I wouldn’t change it.
Molly: Yes. I can’t count the number of pieces I’ve shared in eighteen years. An atmosphere of trust needs to go both ways. I rarely show my writing alone – it’s nearly always with student work, and the student work is often much better! I think it’s very important for my students to see my writing not just in its polished form but in its rough and clunky state. I seek and use their input. I want to build a community of writers.

Robert: I have shared poems with my students, short stories and various essays. Recently, I have gotten into the habit of showing them my preliminary work and the first couple paragraphs of my writing on a topic that is parallel to something they are doing. In general it helps because my credibility as a writer increases my credibility with them as a writing instructor. In the future it may be helpful to show students more of early drafts with cross-outs, arrows and insertions so that they know I am a messy writer, too.

Brad: Yes. Poems, short stories, essays. Almost always it goes well. Once, however, I showed a class a poem I had written about Emily Dickinson. One outspoken student grabbed it, read it, and loudly proclaimed that “this poem sucks!” It was actually fun telling her that I was the author, and then we had a class discussion about how to handle criticism….

Jenna: Modeling is a very important part of teaching writing, but a lot of teachers feel they will be too vulnerable if they share their own work. I sometimes worry what my students will think of my writing.

Cole: Well, good for all of you.
Nancy: I’m really feeling intimidated. I’m never going to be where all of you are.

Trevor: I don’t think the OWP is the magic answer to writing problems.

Evelyn: It does help. How has being a teacher who is also a writer influenced the experiences of your students? In what ways have students been influenced by you either sharing your own writing or writing with your students?

Henriann: I think that my own experience as a writer guides my response to student writing, molds my writing assignments, and shapes my view of them as writers – they are influenced in less visible ways.

Chris: I believe being a teacher and writer has made me a more flexible person. Hopefully, they can catch my enthusiasm for writing.

Frank: They seem to be motivated when I write with them. It helps bolster the community or readers and writers bond that I consider important in my classroom.

Alyssa: I think that since I’ve started sharing my work with my students, they’ve seen me as someone who understands their struggles and so they can talk to me as a peer sometimes to help them get through those struggles.

Molly: I don’t always know the long-term effects, but I think its greatest effects are in building credibility, trust, and a sense of shared goals. Over the years, several students have talked about how much they appreciate English teachers who write with them – they talk about it as a way of establishing that “we’re all in this together.”

Robert: Occasionally, I tell students about winning a contest, receiving a grant, or getting published. The better and more motivated writers in my classroom
tend to venture farther into those areas when they realize that someone in their classroom has done this and is encouraging them to find a wider audience for their work.

**Brad:** My being a writer and teacher has positively affected my students. They see me as a fellow writer, a supporter rather than a judge.

**Jenna:** Students see we know what we are talking about because we experience the writing process and are writers ourselves.

**Evelyn:** What is your biggest success story involving writing, teaching, and/or curriculum?

**Henriann:** Revision of poetry. My students said they’d never revised before. I found they really saw themselves as writers.

**Chris:** My biggest success involving writing was having my peers at OWP tell me I had some good ideas and that I’d done a great job with my presentation.

**Frank:** I actually get eighth grade students passionate about Shakespeare because we do it together. This is some of the best writing we do all year.

**Alyssa:** My biggest success was when I wrote a tall tale with my students. Just like them, I shared halfway through and at the end. They made comments to me as I had taught them to do.

**Molly:** Several students have told me that before my class they didn’t know they could write. That makes me feel good, but also concerns me – they’ve been in school for eleven years already and I know many of their previous
teachers are wonderful teachers and writers. It reminds me of how one wrong phrase can squelch passion and how one right word can fire it up!

Robert: Several of my students, actually dozens, through the years have won or placed in local, national, or state writing competitions. Such awards affirm for those students that they are strong writers. I have also seen low-achieving students gain confidence in themselves as they make progress. Certainly, within my own classroom, I believe that I have a sufficient number and variety of writing assignments to push students forward. As a department chair, I always encouraged teachers to dedicate themselves to teaching writing, and I influenced the curriculum in that direction as well.

Brad: My biggest success story is simple, I guess. I have become a better teacher, writer, and researcher since OWP. The writing and teaching support of fellow OWPers has meant the world to me and has helped to keep my writing and my teaching fresh.

Nancy: My biggest success has been surviving my first year of teaching and wanting to return for another.

Cole: I consider it a success to survive every year of teaching.

Jenna: Even if my students don’t love writing as much as I do, I consider it a success each time they improve or feel excited about writing.

Evelyn: Thank you for your honest answers. Sadly, we are out of time. I’ll see you tomorrow. Tomorrow we will share writing in small peer groups, so please bring a work in progress to class. Keep writing!
I tore the pages recounting the discussion out of my notebook and handed them to Evelyn. She was busy talking to several of the other teachers, so I didn’t have the opportunity to compliment her for leading a great discussion. Trevor waited for me in the hallway. “Well?” I asked. “What do you think of OWP?”

“It’s a very supportive writing environment,” Trevor said as we walked to the parking lot. “I really liked today’s discussion. Are you still planning on cleaning your classroom today?”

“I’m going over there this afternoon,” I confirmed. “My classroom needs a makeover. I can’t believe school starts on Friday. Al promised to tell me what I miss at Thursday’s opening faculty meeting if Winston happens to say anything new this year.”

“Isn’t Winston due to retire?” Trevor asked. “He’s been the principal there since we were freshmen in high school. That’s a long time.”

“He loves his job. I just wish he would be less obsessed with the Ohio Graduation Test the students have to take. There’s more to education than standards.”

“I’m going to the office for awhile. I’ll stop by the school later.”

“If you do, you’re helping me clean! You know how much I hate it.”

Hill Valley High School’s halls seemed almost too quiet when I walked through them, as no students were slamming locker doors or attempting to get the attention of their friends. I unlocked room 113, my teaching home ever since my first year of teaching. I surveyed the light yellow walls and the brown tile floors. The sun had caused most of the posters in my classroom to fade, and I wanted to replace them for the upcoming school year. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail with a rubber band I found in my desk and removed a poster from the nearest wall. I heard a knock on my classroom
door and spun around to discover the principal of Hill Valley High School. Dr. Wilson looked very distinguished, even though he was wearing shorts and a golf shirt instead of his usual suit. He removed a handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe the sweat from his bald head.

“Hello, Jenna. Is it usually this hot in here?”

“Yes. Why don’t we have air conditioning in our classrooms?”

“Let’s go to my office where there is air conditioning. I want to discuss an important issue with you.” As we walked through the school corridors, I attempted to make polite conversation about Winston’s wife and kids as well as the weather. Winston opened the door to his office and motioned for me to walk in ahead of him. He shuffled papers on his desk and read memos from his secretary. I wondered when he intended to return his attention to me. To occupy my time, I studied his office walls. Family pictures alternated with numerous framed awards he won for being an excellent administrator.

“Why did you want to see me?” I asked, no longer able to endure the suspense. Winston leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head, while I reminded myself not to feel intimidated.

“Well, Jenna,” he said. “I know you have had a difficult time with your mother’s death. Don’t get me wrong, you are a wonderful teacher. The guidance office still gets dozens of requests from parents who want their children in your classes. I am concerned because several teachers have confided in me about you. The guidance counselors can recommend some outside therapists if you don’t feel comfortable talking to someone here at school.”
“Why didn’t the teachers express their concerns to me?” Even as I asked the question, I wasn’t shocked. Some of my colleagues loved to gossip and run to authority without directly confronting the problem.

“That’s confidential information,” Winston said. In other words, he wanted to protect the teachers’ identities. “I want you to continue being a good teacher,” he stated. “To be honest, your department chair didn’t think your teaching last year was up to its usual high standard. Still, your evaluation was better than half the teachers here. I am proud of you for continuing to teach when you had every right to take a leave of absence. You do need to get yourself together a little more, however, before the start of the upcoming school year.” As I listened to his speech I nodded, willing myself not to cry in front of him. I could always cry later. He wasn’t firing me. I still had my job. Nevertheless, it hurt to hear the words he had to say.

“Okay,” I said, hoping my voice wasn’t quivering. Winston took his time as he methodically pulled a stack of papers from a file folder on his desk.

“I also want to talk to you about your teaching evaluation,” he added, as if I needed more humiliation. “According to this evaluation written by your department chair last spring, you were completing your own personal writing while your students were working. Your department chair doesn’t have a problem with it, but I think you should write in your diary when you are away from school.”

“It’s not a diary!” I clutched my hands together to keep them from shaking. “I was modeling a writing assignment for my students. It helps them to see their teacher is also a writer and mistakes are an acceptable part of the writing process.”
“It is too personal for my liking,” Winston calmly continued. “We have to think about the upcoming Ohio Graduation Test. The state standards don’t test this type of writing.”

“There is more than one type of writing!” I was on the edge of my seat by this time. “This is about establishing a community of writers. I don’t share intimate details of my personal life with my students. If you look at students’ records, you will see every one of my students passed the required state tests on the first try. If students learn to write well, they can adapt to different styles of writing.”

“I’m not quite convinced, but I will give you the benefit of the doubt. Thank you for your time, Jenna.” Winston resumed shuffling the papers on his desk, indicating the meeting was over and I should leave. Dismayed, I left the office and returned to my classroom. Trevor was there removing posters and placing them in a pile on my desk.

“You left your keys in the door,” he said, tossing me my keys.

“Wonderful,” I said, catching them. I tried to grab too many posters at once and dropped the entire stack. Trevor picked up the posters while I sank into my desk chair and held my head in my hands. “My world does not make sense anymore. Winston doesn’t see why teachers should write when their students write.”

“You brought up the same point at the seminar discussion today.” Trevor leaned against the doorframe.

“Are you siding with Winston?” I glared at him.

“He likes data and standards. If you have a detailed rationale for why you’re doing what you’re doing, he might feel less inclined to debate you,” Trevor looked at the
posters left on the walls. “This is a nice classroom. I wouldn't mind being a student here.”

“You were a student here,” I said. “This used to be Ms. Peabody’s classroom when we were in high school.”

“I was trying to forget her,” Trevor grimaced. “At the weirdest moments I remember her writing lectures even though I’ve tried for years to block them from my mind. English was an adventure that year.”

“She made her students work and didn’t take excuses,” I argued. “She encouraged me to improve my writing. I became an English teacher because of her.”

“I became a journalist in spite of her.” Trevor smiled. “I knew I was a good writer, even if she disagreed with my creativity. You know, I never saw her write anything except progress reports. That’s why it was easy for me to dismiss her critiques of my writing. You want to go to dinner tomorrow night? I volunteered to write a review of Pine Place Restaurant since Vivian’s planning on being sick for a few days.”

“Sounds like fun,” I yanked a poster from the wall and accidentally tore it.

“I thought it would be a chance for us to go out.” Trevor grinned. “We are still seeing each other, right? Or did we break up again and you forgot to tell me?” Trevor caught the roll of tape I threw at him just before it hit the person passing my classroom. Al laughed as he slowly slunk into the room, jokingly holding his arms over his face.

“Hi, Jenna. I’m glad I’m not the only one cleaning today.” Al said, slapping hands with Trevor. “You want to shoot some hoops, Emerson? Most of the guys will be at the gym tonight.”

“Prepare to lose, Morris,” Trevor teased.
“Al,” I said, interrupting the basketball conversation. “Do you have any idea which teachers complained to Winston about me?”

“Wasn’t me,” Al said. “I can think of a few candidates, probably the teachers who feel jealous about all your innovative classroom activities. Don’t worry what they think. How do you like your teaching schedule this year?”

“I love it,” I said, wondering if Winston had given me a good schedule to make my life a little easier. “I’m teaching four classes of seniors in addition to the yearbook class. I also have the last class period of the day free. It will give me a chance to get some work done before I go home. How about you?”

“My schedule is okay,” Al said. “I’m teaching juniors for the first time this year, which means a lot of new prep work. I volunteered for it because I don’t want to fall into a teaching rut. At least I still have the newspaper class. It’s a great group of kids.”

“I taught juniors last year. Let me know if you want to borrow some of my lesson plans,” I offered.

“Thanks. I wanted to ask you if you were interested in serving on the curriculum committee this year. I volunteered to chair it.” Al glanced at Trevor. “Are you bored with all the teacher talk? We could talk more about where I bought Sam’s engagement ring.” Al looked from Trevor’s stunned expression to mine. “Oh, no. Did I give away a secret?” There was no way I could continue to concentrate. The posters could wait.

“I need to be alone,” I said. I ushered Al and Trevor into the hallway and slammed my classroom door closed. Both of them were calling my name, but I pretended to ignore them. After returning home and feeding George, I turned on my computer and tried to write. I had to deal with Trevor first.
To: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org

From: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu

Subject: Don’t even think about buying a stupid engagement ring

Emerson, what are you thinking? Most women would be ecstatic with this news, but I don’t need one more thing to stress me out. People will start asking about the wedding plans, kids, all that stuff I’m not ready to deal with. I have no intention of ever planning a wedding. I already went through it with my sister, and I was left holding her bouquet after she stomped out of the church. I’m happy we got back together that night, but I think Jillian’s still mad at me for finding happiness on the day she was so miserable.

Love,

Jenna

To: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu

From: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org

Subject: Re: Don’t even think about buying a stupid engagement ring

J.J., calm down. I asked Al where he bought Sam’s engagement ring, but it doesn’t mean I’m thinking about asking you to marry me this week. I do want to marry you. Someday. I don’t know the exact moment I fell in love with you, whether it was high school or even earlier, but even after we broke up and dated other people I still wanted to be with you. Who says there has to be a wedding? Eloping is always an option.

Whatever you want.

Love,

Trevor
No longer able to procrastinate, I returned to writing. I managed to type a somewhat decent piece in preparation for peer editing. I would write something, delete it, revise it, decide I hated it, and start the entire process again. No wonder my students sometimes felt frustrated with writing. Writing at home didn’t help. There were too many distractions. I thought about the clothes piling up in the hamper, the bills I should pay, and all the other distractions of daily life. I needed my mother. I could almost feel her standing next to my computer and wanted to believe it was somehow true. What did I really know about life after death? I needed to sleep, even though I suspected my efforts would be in vain.

Chapter V

Tuesday

Sure enough, I overslept, having only fallen asleep shortly before morning after succumbing to nightmares once again. I had forgotten to take care of the laundry, leaving me with few clothing options. I found a green polo shirt, a pair of jeans, and my running shoes on the floor of my closet. Even though I was running late, I still stopped by Charlie’s Coffee Hut for my hot chocolate and lemon muffin. To my relief, a stranger worked behind the counter. Sam must have finished her story. I didn’t have time to chat with anyone. In my tired state, I tripped on the stairs and spilled hot chocolate on my already wrinkled shirt. Hopefully, no one would notice. Everyone in the writing seminar wore a variation of my casual outfit in honor of the warm summer morning, although none of them wore their breakfast. Evelyn was engaged in a conversation with Nancy
and hadn’t started class yet. Trevor removed his briefcase from the seat next to him when I staggered into the room.

“Thanks,” I said. “No suit today?”

“I went for a more casual look,” Trevor said. “It seems to be the uniform here.”

“How was basketball?”

“Al’s team won.”

“I got your email. Thanks for being so understanding.” I attempted to juggle my breakfast and my writing materials while Evelyn gave her opening announcements.

“I have placed all of you in peer groups,” Evelyn explained. “Remember to share, comment, offer suggestions, communicate your needs, and be true to yourself. It sounds like advice for relationships, but remember that being in a peer group is a relationship. It requires commitment, dedication, and honesty.” Evelyn smiled at all of us and read the names of the people in each group. I would be working with Trevor, Cole, and Nancy.

Evelyn split the other seven teachers into two groups and made herself a participant in the final group so there would be three peer groups of four people each. Nancy motioned to the window.

“Let’s meet outside. It’s a beautiful day. Is that okay with everyone?” She didn’t wait for an answer before starting to walk down the stairs to the outdoor courtyard. We found two benches located under a shady tree. Trevor and I sat on one and Nancy and Cole sat on the other. I opened my notebook, prepared for the group to take turns reading and offering suggestions. Cole looked up at the tree.

“Look! There’s a squirrel! Wait a minute! I see another one!” He seemed lost in his own world. Nancy impatiently tapped her pen against her notebook.
“Will you please take this seriously?”

“Can I have your phone number?”

“Shut up, moron!” While the two of them fought, Trevor and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes. I wanted feedback on my writing and felt impatient by the delay.

“We have a limited amount of time. We need to start working.” I said.

Peer Groups

Cole: I’ll read first so I can get this over with.

The Adventures of Glorp

Once upon a time there lived Glorp. Glorp lived on the planet Gloop. Glorp had lots of friends. “Gleep,” said Glorp to his friends. “Gleep, Gleep!” Glorp lived happily ever after.

Nancy: Were you trying to write a children’s story for your daughter?

Cole: I have no intention of writing a children’s story. If you want, I could compose an epic poem about the witch who stomped on my heart.

Jenna: Are you talking about my sister?

Cole: Is it obvious?

Nancy: Would you like other suggestions about your writing?
Cole: No. I’m not doing anything with this piece. I’m turning in my work and getting credit for this class so I can renew my certification and forget about it.

Jenna: Why aren’t you taking this seriously?

Cole: Why do I have to? This isn’t serious work.

Trevor: The rest of us spent a lot of time on our writing. Yours seemed like it took you a minute to write.

Cole: I’m not a very good writer. I don’t like the idea of sharing personal incidents in my life with people I hardly know.

Trevor: Who says it has to be personal? You could write about your classroom.

Cole: My summers are my time away from students. Why would I want to write about them?

Jenna: Look, we’re trying to help you.

Cole: Maybe I don’t want your help. Maybe I think this entire activity is silly. Wait a minute! My story is silly! Perhaps my character Glorp is babbling because he had to sit thorough a peer group session like this one!

Nancy: Well, since I’m planning on trying to get my work published, I’m going to read my piece. There’s no use wasting more time on yours when you obviously don’t care.

My Silver Shoes

I like to think of the silver shoes I saw in the store as a metaphor for my life. The shoes glistened and stood out from the other shoes on the rack. I checked the size and
couldn’t believe it. The shoes fit perfectly. The practical side of me took over. When
would I wear these shoes? They certainly would not be comfortable after hours of
standing on my feet at the chalkboard, attempting to interest teenagers in grammar,
writing, and literature.

I put the shoes back.

I found the other items I needed in the store and prepared to leave. My whole life
I have been the good girl, playing it safe and not taking risks. I survived my first year of
teaching. I needed a reward. I needed something different.

I bought the shoes.

Jenna: Great start.

Trevor: I like the description.

Nancy: You don’t get it, do you? The shoes are supposed to be symbolic of my
life’s journey.

Cole: I was going to say that.

Nancy: No you weren’t! I’m a horrible writer! I’m never going to get my work
published.

Trevor: I like your writing. It just needs some revision. I like how you illustrate
the tension between being practical and adventurous.

Jenna: There are other issues that you could address if you wanted to. Teachers
don’t make a lot of money, so I can see the dilemma with wanting to buy
something fun. You feel you should save your money, but sometimes you
need to do something to take care of yourself.
Nancy: What a good idea! I didn’t think about that angle.

Trevor: Don’t obsess about publication.

Cole: Easy for you to say. Your writing is published almost every day.

Jenna: I tell my students to write for themselves first. If they worry too much about their audience, they worry too much to write.

Cole: Have you ever worn the shoes?

Nancy: No. I guess I’m just waiting for the right occasion.

Trevor: You might want to mention it in your essay.

Jenna: Have there been other incidences where you wanted to buy something expensive? You mentioned this piece is symbolic of your life’s journey. How?

Nancy: I need to think about it. Thanks so much for your suggestions. You really helped give me some ideas.

Jenna: I’ll read next. I wrote about my mom.

*An Ongoing Journey*

My sister recently painted the house where we grew up pink. Pink with blue shutters. It looks horrible. My dad, who left for some state other than this one, doesn’t seem to care. The house that holds years of memories now looks like a candy store reject.

I guess I should feel happy my sister lives there and not a group of strangers. It feels strange to walk into the house and see everything different. The days of my
childhood are over. My memories remain in my heart, not the house. It has changed too much. We have all changed too much.

I only recently saw the house, since it has been too painful to talk to my father or sister much since my mother’s death. In our own ways, we are all running from the pain and searching for something that will heal it. My sister finds solace in the arms of different men, rejecting them before they have the chance to hurt her. My father travels to different cities, never staying in one place for long. Me? I realize it is impossible to run from the pain of grief. It is something that stays with you, changing as the days, weeks, and months pass, but never quite leaving entirely. Wishing I could somehow turn back time to relive the happy moments only provides a temporary fix, not a lasting solution. You cannot repeat the past. You can, however, admit you need help and ask for it. I am proud of myself for learning to lean on others and realize I do not have to be perfect all of the time.

Nancy: That was beautiful.

Jenna: Thank you.

Cole: I think you should rework the intro.

Jenna: What?

Cole: Hey, you read the piece. That opens it up for critique.

Jenna: Does your negative attitude have anything to do with me writing about my sister?

Cole: You mean the witch who stomped on my heart?
Jenna: I had no idea you would be in my peer group. This piece is about me, not you.

Nancy: It’s not about you. It’s more about how mad you are at your dad and your sister.

Trevor: You were very brave to write about your mom. I think you need to include more emotion.

Jenna: What do you mean?

Trevor: You’re telling us what you feel, not showing us.

Nancy: You’re angry with your sister for more than the house. Do you want to live there?

Jenna: Not with her.

Nancy: Instead of her.

Jenna: I don’t know. I look at my apartment and think I should have left there years ago, but I don’t know if moving to the house is the answer.

Trevor: Maybe it’s not about the house. Maybe it’s about change. You write about not being able to repeat the past, but it seems like you want to.

Cole: Everyone deals with grief differently. Everyone in your family seems to run away from it in different ways.

Jenna: I don’t know if I can get more emotional with this topic.

Trevor: You might want to think about choosing a different subject if this one causes you too much pain. You can always return to it at a different time.

Nancy: I’m glad you tried to write about it. It was courageous of you to share this with us.
Falling

She finally fell asleep. It has been the worst day of her life. Why did she have to go through this much physical and emotional pain before she turned thirty? The doctors insist she stay in the hospital overnight, the police officers question her about the accident, and the lawyers prepare legal advice. Her family is with her, so I watch the scene with her other friends. We remark how brave she acts during everything.

She starts to scream. She has to be medicated in order to sleep. Various relatives I do not know take the rest of her family home. Her other friends continue to talk to the lawyers, the police officers, and the doctors to learn new information. The accident was not her fault. I have a feeling she may never believe that no matter what people tell her. I sit in a chair next to her bed and watch her sleep. I want to be there for her even though I feel helpless. I don’t know how I can help her, but I do know I’m not leaving her.

Cole: I have no idea what you are writing about.

Trevor: What do you mean?

Cole: You’re too vague. I get the sense you’re talking about your girlfriend, but you don’t say it.

Jenna: I liked the emotion behind the piece.

Nancy: Me, too. But it needs something else.
Trevor: Like what?
Nancy: You’re not confronting your own feelings about the accident. I don’t even know what kind of accident it was.
Jenna: Are you scared to write about it?
Trevor: I guess. I’m not sure if I would be as strong if something horrific happened to me.
Jenna: So tell us that. We won’t think you’re weak. Admitting you feel helpless is not a bad thing.
Nancy: You’re doing too much observation. You’re a journalist, so it must come naturally for you, but your girlfriend doesn’t need you to observe. She needs you to be there for her.
Jenna: Interesting perspective. I know I wouldn’t want my boyfriend acting distant if I needed him.
Trevor: I’m used to writing news articles. This piece sounds more like one of my articles than I originally thought. Thanks for the feedback.
Nancy: Nice work, everyone. It’s almost lunchtime. I’m going to get some coffee.
Cole: I need to make a phone call.

I looked at Trevor’s notebook after Cole and Nancy left. He had written an accurate depiction of the peer group. Worried about what he intended to do with the information, I decided to ask him about it. “You aren’t including any of this in your article about OWP, are you?”
“I can’t. I don’t have permission. Earlier today, I asked Cole and Nancy if I could interview them. Neither one of them agreed. I’m getting really frustrated.” Trevor leaned against the tree. “I wrote about our peer group because it is still really good data. I might be able to use it someway.”

“Our lives are data to you? You have to admit, you’re not really one of us. Everyone else at this seminar is returning to a classroom when the school year starts. You’re not.” I stared at Trevor, hoping he would understand.

“I guess you’re right,” Trevor said. “It’s tough being an observer one minute and a participant the next. I feel like people don’t trust me.”

“By people, you mean Cole and Nancy. Cole is here to get credit for the seminar. He doesn’t embrace the values of the Ohio Writing Project like the rest of us. Nancy’s a new teacher. She’s worried about her classroom performance and may not feel confident sharing stories about her teaching,” I said. “Regardless of the reasons they don’t want to participate, you have to accept their decision. Talk to the other seven teachers and Evelyn. They might be willing to help you. If not, you’ll think of another angle for your story.” I saw the members of the other peer groups walking to the food court. “Are you working through lunch again?”

“I have to since we’re going out tonight,” Trevor said. “Is it okay if I pick you up at six for dinner?”

“Sure. I liked the piece you read today.”

“Thanks. Why don’t you want anyone here to know we’re dating?”

“I like to keep my personal and professional lives separate. I never realized how much OWP represents both. People write about personal issues in a professional setting.
I’m starving. See you after lunch.” Once again, I opted to dodge a sensitive topic instead of discussing it. I passed a group of high school students taking a college tour when I crossed the street. I didn’t see any students from Hill Valley. After buying my lunch, I searched the food court for an empty table. I saw Nancy sitting at a table by herself. My need to talk to someone trumped my desire for solitude. “May I join you?” I asked.

“Of course!” Nancy exclaimed. “I was hiding from that Cole creep.” She took a bite out of her pizza. “So he dated your sister?”

“Yeah. I don’t even remember the two of them dating. That’s how fast Jillian changes men.”

“It could be a response to what happened to her. I know I was really reluctant to get serious with anyone else after dumping my abusive ex.”

“I never thought of it that way.” I took a bite of my grilled cheese sandwich and pondered if I had misjudged my sister.

“Jenna, I wanted to tell you that you’re really a role model to me.”

“Are you serious? Me and my messed up life?”

“I mean it,” Nancy sipped her juice. “It’s obvious from our class discussions how much you care about your teaching and your students. You’ve showed me that it is still possible to feel excited about education.”

“Thanks,” I said. We spent the rest of lunch telling teaching stories and talking about our favorite lesson plans. Nancy wanted to buy a sweatshirt, so we ended our lunch hour shopping at the university bookstore next to the food court.

“Oh, no!” Nancy gasped and hid behind a rack of red and white sweatshirts. I looked in the direction of her startled gaze, wondering if she had seen her ex. Instead, I
saw a short woman with gray hair and a large crucifix necklace. She breezed by me and peered over the rack of clothes at Nancy.

“Nancy! How are you? Why are you sitting on the floor?”

“Hi, Sister Stella. I, um, dropped my bracelet. Jenna, this is Sister Stella. She teaches with me at Heights High School. Sister Stella, this is Jenna Kepler from the OWP seminar.” Trying to be polite, I held out my hand and awkwardly ran it through my hair when I realized Sister Stella had no intention of shaking it. She removed a stack of papers from the seemingly bottomless bag on her shoulder and handed them to Nancy.

“Here is some professional reading for you before the start of school,” Sister Stella said. “I think all novice teachers should read more journal articles.”

“I appreciate the thought, Sister Stella. I’m not sure if I have the time.” A glance at Sister Stella’s icy stare caused Nancy to change her mind. “Well, I guess I can find a few extra hours. I’ll read them.”

“Good. Have fun at your seminar. I love what the Ohio Writing Project does for teachers.” The nun smiled, but Nancy didn’t notice. She quickly selected a red sweatshirt from the rack and walked to the checkout counter to pay for it. I followed her. Nancy glanced around her to make sure Sister Stella couldn’t hear us.

“I can’t believe her,” Nancy hissed. “She’s a very nice lady, but she doesn’t realize new teachers have no life. I wake up, teach my classes, grade papers, prepare my lesson plans, go to sleep, and start all over again. When do I have time to read professional articles?”

“It’s nice she cares,” I said, not wanting to take sides. “Sometimes veteran teachers forget what it’s like to be a new teacher.”
“Does it ever get any easier?” Nancy looked like she was about to cry.

“Teaching or life?” I asked. “I’m certainly not an expert on either. Hang in there. You do make a difference in the lives of your students.” A haiku poem written on the chalkboard awaited us when we returned to the classroom.

\begin{quotation}
Dance to your writing

Let the music of your words

Lead to perfection
\end{quotation}

Evelyn swept into the classroom after all of us had the chance to read the poem. “I wrote the poem in preparation for this afternoon’s activity,” Evelyn said. “I have a writing prompt related to the poem. Please take out your notebooks and respond.” She paused while all of us located pens and paper. “Describe your perfect life,” Evelyn instructed. Easy. A perfect life was any life other than what I was living now. A perfect life was a life where my mom was still alive. A perfect life was someone else’s life, not mine.

Our writing time passed faster than I realized. Evelyn read several additional prompts and encouraged us to share our writing. “Remember presentations are tomorrow,” she announced. “Each person needs to present a favorite teaching activity to the rest of the class so we can exchange educational ideas with our colleagues.”

When I packed up my things to leave for the day, I saw Sister Stella lurking in the hallway and motioning for Nancy to meet her. Apparently the nun had been visiting some of her friends in the Ohio Writing Project office and copied more articles for Nancy to read. By the time I finished eavesdropping on their conversation, Trevor had already
disappeared. I found a scribbled note in my notebook informing me he was looking forward to dinner.

    Returning home, I felt tempted to curl up on my couch and stay there. George had the same idea. He briefly woke up from his nap on the couch when he heard me. “Want to trade lives?” I asked the cat.

    “Meow,” As much as I enjoyed conversing with George, I really needed to talk to a person instead of a cat. I called Sam and agreed to meet her for a run in the park near her house. I opened my closet, successfully locating old running shorts and a tank top on the floor. I couldn’t find my running shoes and almost panicked until I remembered I was wearing them. I pulled my hair up into a loose bun and tossed some cat food George’s direction before running out the door. I instructed George not to destroy the furniture while I was gone. Like he would really listen.

    Sam was already jogging in place by the time I reached the park. “How’s the writing seminar?”

    “Good,” I said. I leaned against a tree to stretch my legs. “I want to take the trail that passes my old house.”

    “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Sam asked as we started walking.

    “I read a piece about the house and my family during the peer group session today. Am I obsessing about the house?” I increased my fast walk to a slow jog. Sam was a much better runner than I was, causing me to struggle to keep up with her.

    “It’s a house, Jenna,” Sam said, barely breaking a sweat as she ran. “Walls and a roof. The memories of your childhood will stay with you regardless of where you live.”
“It’s hard to let go,” I stopped running to catch my breath. “I always thought no matter where I went, I could always return to the house and find my parents there.”

“I have some Hill Valley gossip that might cheer you up,” Sam jogged in place. “The chair of the English department fell off a horse at a dude ranch and will miss part of the school year. Winston wanted to know if Al could think of a good substitute.”

“There’s a teacher at the seminar who doesn’t seem happy with her job.” I said, starting to run again. “Maybe she would be interested in changing schools.”

“It isn’t a permanent job.” Sam easily caught up with me. We reached the outer perimeter of the park and changed directions to head toward my childhood home. “You can’t fight this woman’s battles for her. If she’s not happy, ultimately she has to do something about it.”

“Are you trying to give me a hint about my life, too?” I ached with physical and mental exhaustion, but kept running.

“Maybe.” Sam laughed and slowed down to a jog as we neared the house. I blinked to confirm the reality of the sight in front of me. My father sat on a suitcase he had placed in the middle of the front porch. He tightly clutched his box of poker chips while staring off into space. This was not my life. It had to be someone else’s.

“Hi, Dad,” I said. “You remember my friend, Samantha.”

“Of course. How are you, Sam?”

“Fine, thanks. What are you doing here? Jenna told me you were in Indianapolis.”

“I don’t have a key to my own house,” my father said forlornly. “Jillian’s not home. Do you have a key, Jenna?”
“Not with me,” I said. “I can go get it for you.” I saw Sam’s warning look and remembered what she told me. “Another time. I actually have plans tonight. Why don’t you go visit your friend Norman? Jillian might be home by the time you get back.”

“Norman likes poker.” My father’s face brightened at the prospect of a card game. Sam took the opportunity to pull me away.

“Jenna and I have to keep running. Good seeing you again!” We both waved while my father wandered in the direction of his car. Sam put her arm around me. “Good girl. Keep standing up for yourself.” We finished our run and I returned home to prepare for my writing seminar presentation. Thoughts of my family crept into my mind and prevented me from concentrating. Needing to vent about them, I accessed my email.

To: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org
From: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu
Subject: My dysfunctional family

Hey Trev!

Hope you’re having fun working late. Have you sent out a search party for Vivian yet? My dad is back in town. He seems to care more about his stupid poker games than the house. I still have a key to the house. Is it horrible to take some of my mom’s things without telling the rest of my family? Jillian once told me she intends to live in the house until she dies and someone carries her out of there. I’m afraid she’ll have a garage sale and sell everything. I’m so conflicted!

I know I often tease you about acting like a saint sometimes, but did I do the right thing? Sometimes I don’t even know what is the right thing anymore other than what
feels right in each particular moment. I should also probably not shut my dad and my
sister out of my life so much, but they made the same choice. Sometimes I wish we could
all lean on each other, but that isn’t possible. See you tonight!

Love,
Jenna

To: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu

From: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org

Subject: Re: My dysfunctional family

Jenna Jean (sorry, I know you hate being called that),

Vivian will be back in the office tomorrow. Sam called her today and cussed her out for taking sick days when she didn’t really need them. Your family has added tons of additional stress to your life this year. You’re all living your own lives when you need each other the most.

Saint Trevor Dale Emerson. I’m not sure I like the sound of that. I don’t think taking your mom’s things without telling your family is wrong. Try not to get too attached to possessions. The lessons your mom taught you are what keeps her with you. Your mom is probably laughing at the idea of Jillian trying to organize a garage sale.

You asked what the right thing is – sometimes the answers aren’t obvious. Stay strong. I know it hurts you can’t turn to your dad and your sister for help. Just remember you can lean on me. Always. See you tonight.

Love,
Trevor
Chapter VI

I dragged myself away from my computer and to the shower so I could get ready for the evening. Shortly before six, I checked my appearance in the mirror. Short black dress, my mom's pearl necklace, hair up in one of those styles I read about in fashion magazines, enough make-up to make me look good, but not like a clown. The doorbell rang. George meowed.

“Okay pal, I’m going.” George sat impatiently by the front door. I picked him up, put him on the couch, brushed the cat hair off my dress, and opened the door. Trevor looked stunning in a navy blazer, tan pants, white shirt, and red and blue striped tie. The sight of him almost took my breath away. Judging by his expression, my dress caused the exact same reaction.

“Wow,” he said. “Nice dress. I would have brought you flowers but I know you hate them.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Are you ready to leave? I’m driving.”

“Meow,” commented George. He was sitting on the back of the couch staring at us. Trevor scratched the cat's head.

“You may not want to drive, Jenna,” Trevor finally said. “To get to the restaurant, we have to pass the intersection where, um, you know.”

“The accident?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m getting better about driving through the intersection,” I said, hooking my arm through Trevor’s as we walked outside. “But I still don’t want to drive the exact route Mom and I drove that day. Is that strange?”
“Your mom died less than a year ago,” Trevor said. “Sometimes people forget there’s no timeline on grieving.” He glanced at me. “You have been a little impulsive lately, but that’s why your friends are here. We’re trying to keep you from going over the edge.” As soon as Trevor started his green Civic, I constantly changed the radio station until I found a song I liked.

“Those are so many songs I can’t listen to,” I said. “Too many memories. I’m considering seeing a therapist.”

“Really?”

“Winston strongly encouraged it. Sam also thought it was a good idea.”

“That’s a big step for you,” Trevor said. “I know how much you hate asking for help.” He smiled.

“What?” I reached over to change the radio station again.

“I was thinking of the time sophomore year when you were with the cheerleading squad in the middle of a routine and the football team almost ran over you.”

“Correction. You were the one who almost ran over me. I remember you tripping on the grass and slamming into me.”

“It was my first varsity game and I was nervous. I remember trying to apologize, but you refused to interrupt your cheerleading routine.”

“I hate having my routine interrupted,” I said as I looked out of the window. I didn’t have the chance to make any additional insightful statements because we had arrived at the restaurant.

Pine Place Restaurant radiated sophistication. The dim lighting accented the dark greens and browns of the walls and furniture. Expensive paintings of nature scenes
adorned the walls. Soft classical music soothed customers while they pondered which expensive entrée to order. I hated the place. Trevor requested a table near the back of the restaurant. Our short, perky waitress skipped over to our table. I think she said her name was Sondra. She was way too happy. I ordered the lasagna. Trevor did the same.

“You have no originality when it comes to food,” I said, hoping Trevor would get the hint. He still didn’t have a clue. “I changed my mind,” I told Sondra. “I’ll have the cheese ravioli.”

“Why did you change your order?” Trevor asked after Sondra skipped away.

“You’re writing a restaurant review,” I reminded him. “Aren’t restaurant reviewers supposed to sample as many different menu items as possible? We’ll split our meals and you can try several different things.”

“I have a confession to make,” Trevor said after a moment of silence. “I’m not writing a restaurant review.”

“Why did you tell me you were?”

“I thought the only way you would go out in the middle of the week was if I pretended it had something to do with work.”

“As long as you give me some of your lasagna, I’ll forgive you,” I said, not wanting to admit he was right. “How’s your family?” I asked. “Is everything still perfect in suburbia?”

“Mom and Dad are fine,” Trevor smiled. “Right now they are on a cruise and enjoying retirement. They miss snow, but love living in Palm Beach. They said to say hi.”
“You have the perfect life,” I said, envy in my voice. “Your parents are always there when you need them and you don’t have any annoying siblings who suck the energy out of you. Can we trade lives?” I was serious. “I don’t want mine anymore. I want someone else’s life.”

“So how is Jillian, the energy vampire?” Trevor asked. “I assume she has a new hair color and a new boyfriend.”

“I don’t know at the moment because I refuse to speak to her.” I grabbed a piece of bread from the basket on the table and ripped it apart, wishing I could rip my sister apart as well. “It is unbelievable how fast she changes men. Just last week the hair color was black and the boyfriend was Sven.”

“Sven?” Trevor almost choked on the water he was drinking.

“They were planning to elope in Vegas before she dumped him.”

“She’s dated some, um, interesting men.”

“The week before the hair color was brown and the boyfriend was Dirk. We went to Kings Island with Dad, who was actually in town for once. Dirk had the personality of cardboard and even fewer interests. We left him riding the bumper cars in the morning and picked him up there in the evening.”

“You’re kidding.”

“It gets better. Before that the hair color was blond and the boyfriend was Lars. Lars had the vocabulary of a large ape. His only sentence when we went to the Reds game was, ‘I need another beer.’ At least the Reds won.”

“Where does she find these guys?”
“At clubs mostly. My favorite was when the hair color was red and the boyfriend was Wilbur. Wilbur didn’t have a job, so Jillian sent him over once when I was sick to see if I needed anything. He flopped on my couch and watched cartoons on television until I kicked him out of my apartment.” It felt good to laugh again. I reached across the table to hold Trevor’s hand. The Ohio Writing Project could wait until tomorrow.

Trevor and I were still laughing an hour later when Sondra, the hyper waitress, brought us our bill. I finished the last bite of my chocolate cake and also helped myself to the last bite of Trevor’s lemon pie when he looked away to pay the bill. Trevor didn’t seem to care I stole the remainder of his dessert. “I had a nice time,” he said.

“It was fun. I can’t remember the last time I laughed that much.” On the drive back to my apartment, I told Trevor about recent dreams I had involving my mom. “The entire experience seemed real,” I said, reaching over to change the radio station.

“Maybe it was,” Trevor suggested. “If you want to believe your mom was with you, believe it. Don’t let anyone tell you differently.” Trevor located a parking space close to my apartment. We walked up the creaky stairs, causing Trevor to crane his head at the annoying screechy guitar echoing from the apartment downstairs. “Who lives there?” Trevor asked.

“Members of a band who won’t be recording a hit album anytime soon,” I said, kneeling down while opening my door to catch the escaping George. I threw his catnip mouse across the room to occupy him.

“What did you think of the restaurant?” Trevor asked, sitting on the arm of the couch.

“I thought the food was good but too expensive. The atmosphere was very drab.”
“I thought it was romantic. You are the most unromantic person I know.”

“Not all of the time.” I grabbed him and kissed him. Judging by the way he was kissing me back, he didn’t object. He also didn’t object when I lost my balance and sent us both tumbling onto the couch. His lips never left mine the entire time. A crashing sound against my door and a loud wail ruined the moment. Either the downstairs band had migrated upstairs, or my sister had stopped by for a visit. “Pretend she’s not here,” I whispered. “Maybe she’ll disappear.”

“Jenna, there are lots of other evenings.” Trevor leaned his head back and looked upward, as if praying for strength to deal with my family. “Don’t leave your sister outside.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

“My family is boring. Yours is like a soap opera.”

“That’s one word for it.” I flung open the door and faced my sister. She was dripping wet, even though it wasn’t raining. Her hair was purple and she wore something that resembled a giant green trash bag.

“Jenna!” Jillian threw her arms around me, the trash bag making squishing sounds as she moved. Trevor hid his face to hide his laughter. I glared at my sister.

“What planet are you from tonight?” I demanded. George raced out of the room in search of a hiding place. I wished I could follow him.

“I have terrible news,” Jillian wailed. “I flooded the house!”

“What?” I shrieked, my voice becoming a tone I didn’t even recognize. “If anything happened to Mom’s things, I swear I will kill you!”
“I wanted to try new hair dye, but I think I clogged the sink with my hair.” Jillian sniffed, holding back tears. “I followed the instructions on the box. I even wore this smock over my clothes. Maybe the pipes burst. I don’t know. The next thing I knew water was all over the floor. Can I stay on your couch tonight?” So much for the rest of my romantic evening.

“What about your latest guy?” I asked.

“I’m not seeing anyone right now,” Jillian said, triggering tears. Trevor handed Jillian a towel.

“I’m calling the Chronicle. That’s front page news. Hi, Jillian.”

“Hi, Trevor.” Jillian blew her nose on the towel and proceeded to use it to dry her hair. I put my hands on her shoulders and steered her toward the bathroom.

“Go clean up,” I ordered. “You should be able to fit into one of my nightgowns.”

“Are you commenting about my weight? You look like you need to eat more!”

“Where’s Dad? Is he staying at the house or should I expect him to come barging through my door?”

“He went back to his friend Norman’s house. I guess poker is more important than spending time with his daughters!” Jillian stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door. I looked at Trevor.

“Can George and I stay at your place?” I asked.

“Life is never dull with you. You have to talk to her sometime.” Trevor grinned.

“At least I took some of my mom’s things before the flood.” I said. We kissed goodnight before the alien emerged from the bathroom. I trudged to bed, facing both imagined and real nightmares.
Chapter VII

Wednesday

I woke up early after another night tossing and turning. George slept contentedly next to Jillian on the couch. He liked whoever had food. Traitor. I scratched George’s head and brushed cat hair from my yellow and white print dress. I really needed to keep him out of my closet. Unable to resist, I leaned over my sister. “Earth to Jillian! Wake up!” She jolted awake, unaware of where she was for a moment.

“Lovely wake up call. I just fell asleep. Your downstairs neighbors are too loud, although I do like their music.”

“I’m going to Charlie’s Coffee Hut for breakfast before my presentation today. Do you want anything?”

“No. I’m not going to work today. Not with purple hair. It’s not like the computers will miss me. Can I raid your cupboards when I’m hungry?”

“Sure. Don’t let George mooch too much food. Lock the door when you leave.”

“Yes, Mom. Wait a minute. You’re not Mom. You’re the one who killed her.”

“How dare you say that? Get out. Now! I don’t trust you at my place or with my cat.” I opened the cupboard and removed a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread. “Here’s food. Keep the nightgown. Go!” After ridding my apartment of my sister, I needed my hot chocolate and lemon muffin nourishment. Despite my chaotic morning, I was still the first person to arrive at the writing seminar. I paced the empty classroom, reviewing the notes for my presentation. The other teachers trickled into the room individually or in groups, discussing their plans for the school year that would begin in a matter of days. When Trevor arrived, I removed my bag from the seat next to me.
“Hi,” Trevor said.

“Hi,” I said.

“How’s Jillian?”

“I threw her out of my apartment this morning.” Before I could elaborate, Evelyn announced it was time for the presentations. She wore an elegant print dress in honor of her afternoon dissertation defense. I found the presentations by each of my writing seminar colleagues informative and interesting. I planned to adapt some of the activities for use in my classroom. Trevor’s presentation occurred immediately before mine. He gave everyone a handout of a news article. Nancy looked puzzled as she read. I mentally reprimanded myself for forgetting to talk to her about teaching at Hill Valley.

“You wrote this?” Nancy asked Trevor.

“Yes,” Trevor confirmed. “My presentation deals with revising writing, a topic important to both journalists and teachers.” At least he attempted to connect his topic to education. Cole didn’t appear convinced.

“Wait a minute. Are you trying to prove you’re better than us because you got your writing published?” Everyone waited to see how Trevor would react to Cole’s challenge. Trevor seemed unfazed by the remark. I, on the other hand, would have preferred to hit Cole over the head with a copy of the article.

“Even the best writing can use revision,” Trevor explained. “If I were writing the same story today, I would probably write it differently. Look at the article and make corrections. How would you revise it?” It was a bold move, asking us to critique his writing. I had once used a similar technique in my classroom, when I asked my students to examine an essay I had written. Trevor received some helpful feedback and thanked
everyone for helping him with his writing. Evelyn looked at me, making me realize I was the last person to present.

“My presentation involves observation and poetry,” I said, giving everyone a copy of my handout. “Too often your students are used to staying in the classroom. This activity gives them a chance to focus on different things and spark creativity. Bring your notebooks and follow me into the hallway.” My classmates seemed confused by the request, but obliged. “Look around the hallway, find something to write about, and turn it into a poem,” I told them. I began to write; so did everyone else. We wrote for five minutes before I interrupted them. “We are all in the same hallway, but everyone probably saw something different. I would like everyone to please share at least one observation. Then we will discuss what you wrote.” Everyone started sharing. Evelyn soon motioned for me to end my presentation. She led the class in applause.

“Excellent work, Jenna!” Evelyn beamed with appreciation. “Sadly, tomorrow is the final day of the seminar. We will share writing as an entire class. Bring your favorite piece of work to read. I will include it in the class anthology. I have truly enjoyed spending time with all of you this week. Because my dissertation defense is this afternoon, we will rearrange the schedule today. You have a little time to complete individual writing before the day ends. I suggest you go to the computer lab without taking a lunch break and leave an hour early.” All of us in the seminar followed Evelyn’s advice and relocated to the computer lab except Cole, who simply chose to leave early without writing. I followed him into the hallway.

“What’s your problem?” I demanded. “We’re supposed to be writing!”
“Are you the writing police?” Cole looked at his watch. “I have to go pick up my daughter from the sitter. What do you want?”

“You’re not giving the Ohio Writing Project a chance,” I said.

“I don’t write. I worry about standards. Does that make me a bad English teacher? I don’t think it does, but I don’t feel any of you are listening to me. Can you please tell your sister to call me? She broke my heart, but I can forgive her if she’ll give me another chance.”

“I have no control over what Jillian does,” I said. “I also refuse to play matchmaker to get the two of you back together.”

“You and your sister act like you’re the only ones who ever grieved. Your sister was the first woman I dated after my wife died, but all she wanted to do was talk about her loss. At least the two of you got to grow up with your mom. Hailey will never have that opportunity. Both of you need to get over yourselves. Do I tell you how to run your classroom? Don’t tell me how to run mine.” Cole walked away, leaving me to confront my anger. Trevor found me sulking in the hallway.

“What was that about?”

“He’s treating this seminar as a joke!”

“Why does it matter to you? Let Evelyn deal with him. I meant to ask you, can I observe one of your classes this fall?”

“What? Why do you want to watch me teach?”

“I want to see how teachers apply the Ohio Writing Project once they leave the summer seminar. This place is a writer’s paradise, which is great, but I know from talking to you and Al that sometimes applying what you learn in a real classroom is
difficult.”  Trevor must have decided to include a class observation in his feature article. I had no desire to see a description of my classroom appear in the newspaper. I had no desire for yet another person to annoy me.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I said.

“Why not?”  Trevor seemed confused. He had no idea how it felt to be a teacher.

“Because it’s my classroom and I don’t want people reading about it in the newspaper!”  I yelled. I started to walk back into the computer lab.

“Wait a minute, Jenna.”  Trevor put his hand on my arm and turned me around to face him. “I’ve been there for you through everything with your mom. Now I’m asking for help and you’re acting like it’s no big deal.”

“I have a problem with you observing my class!”

“For once can we not talk about your problems?”

“We’re not talking about my problems!”

“Right. We’re just not talking.”

“I don’t need one more person critiquing my ideas about teaching writing!”

“You’re really difficult to talk to sometimes.”  Trevor’s expression was difficult to read. “Everyone who knows you is hurting for you, yet you don’t know it because you won’t give people a chance.”  He returned to the lab without looking at me. I closed my eyes, wondering if I had ruined our relationship for good this time. Nancy and the other seven teachers averted their eyes when I returned to my computer. So much for them not knowing Trevor and I were a couple. I shouldn’t have taken my anger out on him.

Obviously, I couldn’t explain everything in front of all the other teachers. The only thing
left to do was write. I began composing a letter to Winston, my principal, about my Ohio Writing Project experiences.

Dear Dr. Wilson,

Each time I attend an Ohio Writing Project seminar, I learn something new. I learned from my classmates, who are excellent teachers at other high schools, when we shared teaching ideas with each other. I gained new insights about the curriculum of teaching writing that I will share with you and other teachers at Hill Valley High School. I completed some of my own writing, which has helped me deal with some of the issues in my life. Other teachers in the seminar have said the same thing, that completing personal writing has been very therapeutic for them. Learning informs teaching and creates a direct impact on instruction.

I feel grateful to be part of such a wonderful community of writers. I hope to create the same type of writing community in my classroom next year. It is important for teachers to be writers in order to share the feelings of discovery, struggle, and the rest of the writing process with students. Other teachers may disagree, but I have found my identity as a writer, as a teacher, and as a person through putting my thoughts on paper. I want my students to have the same sense of accomplishment.

I look forward to discussing my ideas with you.

Sincerely,

Jenna Kepler
When I emailed my letter to Winston, I saw an email waiting for me from Trevor. I looked across the room, but he and all the other teachers had already left. An hour had passed. Most days I loved getting into a writing zone, where the rest of the world faded away except for my thoughts and my words. Today, however, wasn’t one of those days.

To: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu
From: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org
Subject: Us

Jenna,

Sorry about the way we left things. I know we have a lot to talk about, but I don’t want to discuss our relationship over email. I’ll be at the newspaper offices.

Love,

Trevor

To: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org
From: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu
Subject: Re: Us

Trevor,

I feel terrible. Thank you for being there for me. Thank you for being understanding. I never meant to take you for granted. Don’t leave your office. I’m on my way there.

Love,

Jenna
By the time I arrived at the newspaper’s offices, it had started raining. I reached under the seat of my car for my umbrella, only to discover it wasn’t there. Infuriated, I sloshed through the drenching rain. I would still be wet if I ran and knowing my luck, I would probably slip and fall in a puddle. I looked for the Cincinnati Bengals football poster in the window that identified Trevor’s office on the second floor. Looking up, I couldn’t see anyone in the office. Rain hit me in the eyes. There was no way Trevor would hear me if I yelled because of the nasty storm. I noticed an empty soda can some litterbug had left on the ground and heaved it at the window. Seconds later, Vivian Martin flung open the office window. Amused, she looked down at me.

“Interesting fashion statement,” Vivian commented as she shoved a strand of blond hair out of her eyes. “I think the drenched look is in this year.”

“Vivian, why are you in Trevor’s office?” I wasn’t in the mood for small talk.

“You should know Trevor and I are having an affair. He got bored with your little depressed attitude.” For a heartbreaking moment, I thought she might be telling the truth.

“You picked the wrong day to mess with me.” Something in my voice caused Vivian to recoil.

“I-I was only kidding. You can’t take a joke, can you? Trevor’s on his way downstairs. I was taking a break and his computer has the best solitaire game.” The front door to the office required a numerical security code I didn’t know, leaving me standing in the rain until the door eventually opened. I stomped into the office lobby. Trevor attempted to hide his smile, which only made me madder.
“How does this paper ever get published? Does anybody actually work around here?” I couldn’t read Trevor’s expression. “Look,” I said. “I started the day wanting to strangle my sister. Cole’s obnoxious attitude has annoyed me all week. Winston’s obsession with standards bothers me. I wanted the seminar to be a fun break before the start of school, but it hasn’t worked out like I wanted. I don’t know why I even make plans anymore. In case you missed it, this is my pathetic attempt at an apology.” I waited for Trevor to say something. Instead, he took my face in his hands and kissed me. I decided I should fight with him more often. It took a minute for me to realize Vivian was talking to us.

“Emerson, you have a phone call.”

“You answered my phone?” Trevor stared at her in disbelief.

“I thought it might be Sam. I need to talk to her. It’s Jenna’s dad.” Remembering I was there, she addressed me. “He’s trying to find you. Your sister’s in the hospital.” Maybe she said something else, but I was already running to my car.

Chapter VIII

I pushed the speed limit, unconcerned a police officer might pull me over and reprimand me. No officers halted my drive to the dreaded hospital. I hadn’t been back there since the night my mom died. I parked my car in something that resembled a parking space and burst through the doors of the emergency room. I felt more dread and fear with each step. The nearest nurse happened to be my nemesis. Maybe she wouldn’t remember me.
“Miss Kepler!” Or maybe she would. I was prepared to slap her again if I had to in order to get information. The nurse took my hand. “Let’s go to the family room.”

“No! Tell me. Right here. Right now.” Wordlessly, the nurse dragged me toward a small room.

“Your sister tried to kill herself,” the nurse informed me.

“Tried?” The voice sounded vaguely like mine. I sank into the nearest chair. This couldn’t be happening. Not again. Not another crisis. Not when I wasn’t over the first. “Is she still alive?”

“Barely. The doctors are working on her now. They’re doing everything they can for her. Your father found her on the bathroom floor this afternoon when he returned home from his friend’s house. Jillian overdosed on your father’s prescription sleeping pills. She left a suicide note in the sink. Your dad was understandably distraught. We had to check him in to monitor his health. He’s sedated and sleeping in a room upstairs. His friend Norman is with him. A cousin named Irma is on her way here.”

“Why did this happen?” I whispered. I slumped against the nurse and started crying, releasing all the emotion I had tried to hold inside the past week. The nurse held me while I sobbed.

“Honey, lots of people asked me the same question while sitting in this room. I don’t have the answer. No one does, except God.” She brushed a loose strand of hair away from my face.

“Where is God now? Where was God when my mom died? I’ve lived my entire life as a kind person. This isn’t fair!” Saying anything else required more energy than I currently possessed.
“God is hurting as much as you are right now,” the nurse murmured. “I hurt for you last winter. I wondered why such a nice young woman had to endure so much pain. I see a lot of tragedies here, but your case really touched me. Now here you are again. I wish there was something I could say to take away your pain, but there are no words. Stay here. I’ll get you some hospital scrubs to wear instead of your wet clothes.” The instant she left the room, I left as well.

Even though the night my mom died was mostly a blur, I remembered the way to the trauma room. I knew I shouldn’t be there, but I had to see my sister. Doctors and nurses were too busy working on Jillian to notice me peeking through the small window on the trauma room door. Jillian’s hair was still purple. I found it odd I noticed that particular detail first. There was a tube shoved down her throat. I had seen enough. My sister was going to die. When Jillian set her mind to something, whether it was making my life miserable or reeling in her latest man, she accomplished it. If she wanted to kill herself, she wouldn’t have done it halfheartedly. I took a white blanket from a nearby hospital cart, wrapped it around me, and wandered though a long corridor connecting the emergency room with the rest of the hospital. The air conditioning, combined with my wet clothes, caused me to shiver and crave warmth. I passed a fish tank, captivated by a bright yellow fish. It was swimming around without a care in the world. I wished I could be a fish. I opened the door to a small chapel located next to the fish tank. No one else was there. I was alone. I stretched out on the nearest pew, staring at the ceiling and an uncertain future.
Ironically, no nightmares haunted my sleep. I woke up, at first unsure of where I was or what had happened. I glanced at my wrist, forgetting I wasn’t wearing a watch. I was still alone. Still clutching the blanket, I emerged from the chapel. A glance at the clock in the corridor revealed the time to be shortly after midnight. I gasped, startled by the sight of Trevor sitting on the floor next to the fish tank and typing something on a laptop computer.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, unable to coherently think of something more intelligent. Trevor looked up at me.

“I didn’t think it was appropriate to type my essay for OWP in a chapel.”

“Jillian’s dead, right?”

“No.”

“What?” I leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. Trevor saved his writing and turned off the computer.

“She’s not doing well, but she’s alive,” Trevor said. “The doctors don’t know the extent of the damage. They are running a ton of tests and are going to keep her here for a few days, even if she regains consciousness.”

“If?”

“The doctors are cautiously optimistic. Assuming Jillian wakes up, she’ll need psychiatric evaluations and more medical tests.”

“So there are a lot of unknowns at this point.”
“That’s why we didn’t wake you up. Sam and Al were here, too. They’ll be back after they stop by the newspaper offices. Sam temporarily put Vivian in charge of the *Chronicle* and wanted to make sure the paper turned out okay.”

“I made Jillian leave this morning. She needed me and I made her leave.” I tried to stand up, tripped over the edge of the blanket, and fell to the floor, barely missing Trevor’s laptop. Trevor helped me up as I untangled myself from the blanket. My fall attracted the attention of the nurse. “This is yours,” I said, handing her the blanket.

“You gave me quite a scare when you ran away,” the nurse reprimanded. “Your father is still asleep. His cousin is with him. Jillian’s vitals are good, but she’s still unconscious. I have to check on other patients. I’ll keep you updated.” Off on another mission, the nurse bustled by us. Trevor handed me a piece of paper.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Read it,” Trevor said. “It’s the note Jillian wrote. I’ve seen you live with guilt for almost a year. You don’t need more of it.”

_No more pain!! I can’t take it!! I need to be with my mom. I need the hurt to end. There is nothing left here. Please don’t blame yourselves. Maybe the next life will be better._

I crumpled up the note. “I’m hurting just as much, if not more. You don’t see me ending everything!”

“You’re stronger than you think,” Trevor said. “You have your mom’s strength. Jillian’s more like your dad. Neither one of them can deal with grief. They run from everything.”
“I’m not much better. I push people away from me. I don’t appreciate all the people who love me and want to help.”

“It keeps life interesting for all of us.”

“I’m going home to feed George, take a shower, and change clothes. I’m staying here all night in case there is any news.” I realized I had once again changed the subject when I felt uncomfortable. Trevor was already on his way back to the hospital waiting room. “Hey, Emerson!” I yelled. He turned around.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I’ll be back in an hour!” I was. I smoothed a wrinkle out of my black skirt, rolled up the sleeves of my purple blouse, and hoped I wasn’t too covered in cat hair. Seeking revenge for my extended absence, George had taken a nap on my clothes while I had been in the shower. Sam met me in the hospital waiting room and hugged me.

“You’ll get through this,” Sam said. “I sent Trevor home. He’s been awake all night. He left his laptop here so you can finish your portfolio. Check your email. He left you a message. Al’s at Charlie’s Coffee Hut getting your signature hot chocolate and lemon muffin. I told Vivian if she still wanted a job she better pull together the next issue of the Chronicle. There’s no new news about Jillian. Yes, your outfit looks fine for the opening faculty meeting. Anything else you need to know?” Sam had anticipated all my questions except one.

“How did Trevor know I went to the chapel when I wasn’t in the waiting room?”

“You question why things happen, but you haven’t walked away from your faith.”
“Sometimes I think all of you know me better than I know myself right now.” I spent the next several hours compiling my writing for my portfolio. I included the essay Evelyn helped me outline, a revision of the piece about my childhood home, and a new composition I intended to include in the class anthology. I emailed Evelyn to tell her about Jillian and then read Trevor’s email.

To: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu
From: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org
Subject: Back home

I hated to leave, but Sam convinced me I wouldn’t be much help to you if I don’t take care of myself by getting some sleep. I’m writing up my OWP story. I can’t write about what it’s like to be a teacher because I’ve never taught. I know how possessive you can be about your classroom, so I don’t have to observe. Sorry if I added to your stress. See you in a few hours. Remember you’re not responsible for what happened to Jillian or your mom.

Love,
Trevor

To: Trevor.Emerson@CincyChronicle.org
From: J.J.Kepler@HillValleyHigh.edu
Subject: Re: Back home

I know you’re worried how I’ll react to the OWP story, but write the story you need to write. Not everyone feels the same way I do about OWP. Cole is a perfect
example. Even though you aren’t a teacher, you experienced the seminar with all of us. Teachers need to learn different perspectives, which is part of why we attend OWP seminars. Evelyn always says, “no one else has your life story.” I wish I didn’t have my life story, but I don’t have a choice. The only choice I have is to check out of everything, like Jillian did. She regained consciousness, but the nurse won’t allow anyone to visit her for awhile. There’s nothing like the first day of school, which happens to be tomorrow. Why don’t you see if you can observe Al’s newspaper class? Yes, you can even observe one of my classes. It helped me to help Nancy, if that makes sense. It’s hard to believe I’m a veteran teacher, but I should be helping new teachers and other people learn what really goes on in schools. At least I can control that part of my life.

See you in a few hours.

Love,

Jenna

Chapter X

It was time for the seminar to end and the school year to begin. I arrived on campus early in order to print my writing for my portfolio. “You better work,” I told the computer. Luck was on my side; I encountered no technical difficulties when finishing my project. Evelyn danced into the computer lab.

“Tid it! I did it!” Evelyn cheered. “I am now Dr. Harris! No more dissertation! I’m going to transform education!”

“Congratulations!” I said. “Finishing your Ph.D. is a great accomplishment. I loved the seminar. You made it interesting.”
“Thank you.” Evelyn smiled. “How is your sister?”

“She’s conscious, but may have some permanent damage.” I promised myself I wouldn’t cry, but I felt like I might break down any minute.

“I know we don’t know each other very well, but let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“Call me sometime. When I get in a bad mood I need to talk to people. Sometimes it’s too much effort to pick up the phone.”

“Absolutely, girl. I’m there for you.” The sound of the printer startled us. I hadn’t realized someone else was in the lab. Cole retrieved his document. For once, he seemed to be at a loss for words. Evelyn broke the silence.

“I need to make sure the pizzas will be delivered on time,” Evelyn said, leaving me with the person I least wanted to see. I attempted an escape.

“I have nothing to say to you,” I told Cole.

“Evelyn told me about Jillian,” Cole said. “I want to help.”

“She needs friends, not a lecture about how she broke your heart.”

“I want to be her friend. I won’t expect anything more. I thought she was cruel and heartless, when really she was crying for help. I didn’t see it.”

“No one did,” I said. “Look. I’m too tired to fight with anyone today. From what I hear, you’re a good teacher. I know we have different approaches to teaching English, but I think English teachers should learn from each other, not argue about teaching methods.”

“Exactly,” Cole agreed. “I respect you for standing up for your beliefs about teaching writing. It wouldn’t hurt me to be open to new approaches even if I don’t agree
with them. Would you be interested being part of a panel at the National Council of Teachers of English conference? I was planning on critiquing writing workshops, but maybe we could have an interesting debate.”

“Ask Nancy, too,” I said. “In fact, why don’t you make the announcement to the seminar? Maybe other teachers will want to participate.” I laughed. “This seems surreal. Are we actually agreeing on something related to teaching writing?”

“Seems that way. Scary, isn’t it?” The computer lab door creaked open. Nancy’s eyes widened when she saw us.

“I never thought I’d find you two together. Evelyn’s looking for you. The seminar’s about to start.” Nancy nudged me, expecting an explanation. When we returned to the classroom, Cole launched into the proposal for a conference panel. Evelyn thought the idea had potential.

“It’s wonderful to see the lessons learned at OWP last beyond the summer,” Evelyn said. Sadly, this is our last day together. We will have a pizza lunch to celebrate our accomplishments. Remember to turn in your final portfolio of all your work from the week to me before you leave today. Indicate which piece of writing you would like included in the class anthology. I will compile the anthologies and mail each of you a copy next week. It will be a permanent souvenir of the seminar. Let’s get started with sharing! Please applaud after each person reads. Who wants to go first? Cole! Thank you for volunteering!”

“Might as well get this over with,” Cole said. “My poem isn’t very good.”
Everyone applauded. Cole shrugged. “I don’t like to write.”

“Keep working on it,” Evelyn encouraged. From the look on Cole’s face, I seriously doubted he had any intention of revising his poem. Nancy volunteered next.

Indulging the Addiction

Shopping fills a void. I walk into the mall, feeling like an alcoholic slinking into a bar. I have an addiction, too.

I have food in my refrigerator and clothes to wear. I do not need the gourmet cookie or the strappy silver shoes. Emotion trumps logic as I hand over my credit card.

I am not a rich woman; I live on a teacher’s salary. Why do the athletes and actors of the world earn more than those of us who help people for a living? I look at pictures of celebrities in magazines. They have millions of dollars and closets of shoes. Is it wrong to want more than I have?

Shopping provides a temporary high, only minor relief. At the end of the day, I still confront my demons. We all have events in our lives which cause us to recoil in
horror. I bought into the fantasy of an ideal romance. One person, one love could make my life complete. I sacrificed my dreams for dreams dictated to me by romance novels. Where’s my fairy tale? Where’s my happy ending?

I love teaching, but it’s more sacrifice. Are my students’ lives more important than mine?

I should have wounded him with words. I should have cut him with cruel comments. I should have hurt him like he hurt me. At least I left. Some women never do.

I have no time, no life outside my classroom. Except for Saturdays at the mall. For one brief afternoon a week, I indulge my addiction.

Nancy smiled when everyone applauded. “Thank you,” she said. “This week has meant so much to me. I appreciate all your support. I really feel like a writer now. I’m going to keep writing. I’m going to make sure my students keep writing. I love OWP!” Nancy’s writing had greatly improved since she shared her original draft. She took a risk by sharing a sensitive topic with the class. Evelyn noticed.

“Thank you for your enthusiasm, Nancy,” Evelyn said. “I’m proud of you for tackling a difficult topic. Let’s continue. Trevor, why don’t we hear from you?”

“Okay,” Trevor said. “The first few things I wrote this week were a little impersonal. It’s the kind of writing I need for my newspaper articles, but all of you have encouraged me to include more feeling in my writing.” Trevor glanced at me before reading.
The Club

She sits behind a counter, working a job no one else wants. Most people do not choose to visit the coroner’s office. The woman’s nametag reads Gladys. She wears a plain white blouse and brightly colored bracelets. Pictures of her children watch over her while she searches through a cabinet for an accident victim’s belongings.

Gladys produces a clear plastic envelope. A small white sheet of paper lists the envelope’s contents: One pair of earrings, three rings (one diamond, one wedding band, one onyx). All that is left for a grieving family. The clothes could not be saved, nor does the family want them. Gladys hands the clear plastic envelope to the woman across the counter. “You need to sign for it,” she instructs. “I also need to see your driver’s license.” The signature form contains two columns. People who claim belongings must list their name and their relationship to the deceased.

Gladys observes the woman fill out the last column with the word “daughter.” The expression on her face instantly changes. The woman signing the form is no longer simply another customer, but a new member of “The Club.” Gladys wipes away tears.

“My mother died, too.”

“How old were you?”

“About the same age you are now. Were you close to your mom?”

“Yes.”

“So was I. I kept wondering why I had to be the one to lose my mom, why it couldn’t have been one of my friends who hated her mother.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”
“You seem like such a nice person. Let me walk around the counter and give you a hug.” They cling to each other in the lobby of the coroner’s office. They are members of “The Club.” People don’t know about “The Club” until they become members; no one ever chooses to join. Outsiders may offer helpful words of sympathy, but only members of “The Club” know how it feels to lose a family member too young, too soon.

Again the class applauded. Evelyn smiled, indicating her approval. “Good description,” she said. “I can picture the scene.” Evelyn looked like she wanted to make another comment. She paused, as if carefully choosing her words. I raised my hand, the first time anyone had done so the entire seminar. “Yes, Jenna?” Evelyn asked.

“I’ll read next. Yes, Trevor’s essay was about me. Is that what you wanted to know?” She didn’t need to say anything: I knew I was right. “As some of you may know, I like to change the subject when I get too uncomfortable in a conversation. With this piece of writing, I deliberately made myself uncomfortable.” I took a deep breath for courage and began to read.

Organ Donation

It looked like an ordinary letter. No reason not to open it. “Thank you for saving the lives of others,” the text began. “We are sorry for your loss. Please know people will benefit from the donation of....”
Then came the list. Black magic marker scrawled on a white piece of paper listed the tissues harvested from my mother’s body. I will now and forever hate the word “harvested.” My mom was a person, not a cornfield.

I am simultaneously intrigued and revolted by the list. Curiosity wins.

Corneas.

Skin.

Leg bones.

I throw the letter to the ground and sprint for the bathroom. I curl up as tight as I can on the green bathroom rug. Nausea engulfs me.

Somewhere people’s lives are saved or enhanced because of my mom’s generous final gift. Screw them. I want my mom back.

For a moment, there was silence. Then the classroom erupted into applause. Evelyn wiped her eyes. “Beautiful writing, Jenna,” she said. I knew it was, but I still enjoyed the praise. The sharing of writing continued. Molly, Henriann, Chris, Alyssa, Frank, Robert, and Brad shared poems, short stories, personal narratives, and professional writing. Evelyn had something positive to say about every piece. I thought she could be more critical, but her purpose was to make all of us want to continue writing. All too soon, our time together ended. We handed our final writing portfolios to Evelyn. “I’m very proud to be in the company of such wonderful writers!” Evelyn picked up a guitar she had hidden behind her desk. “To finish the seminar, I will perform my song, ‘No Longer Got the Dissertation Blues’ in honor of completing my dissertation defense! Let’s go to the courtyard and eat pizza!”
It was a beautiful day. The other teachers laughed and talked about everything except writing; they had been discussing teaching and writing for almost a week and needed a break. I managed to converse with them long enough to eat two slices of pizza. Since the seminar ended early, I would be able to attend the end of Hill Valley’s opening faculty meeting. Trevor was discussing his news article with several teachers. I caught his attention, mouthed the words, “see you tomorrow,” and was on my way to the high school. My school year had officially started.

**Chapter XI**

Dr. Winston Wilson’s opening faculty meetings followed a predictable pattern. We would meet the new teachers, receive our student rosters, and learn of any rule changes since the previous year. Teachers savored one more weekday of freedom before students arrived. When asked, however, most of the faculty could not hide their enthusiasm for the school year ahead. We loved our subject areas; we certainly didn’t do this job for the money. I raced into the warm auditorium and scanned the crowd until I saw Al. As soon as I sat down next to him, he handed me a legal pad with notes. I forced myself to pay attention to Winston’s speech. “I want this to be a good year, for the students and the faculty,” Winston said. “As we do every year, my wife Wanda and I will host a series of focus groups at our house. I want to provide an atmosphere for you to discuss any concerns you may have outside of the school environment. You will receive a detailed schedule in a couple of weeks, once the school year gets underway. I want to keep faculty morale high and continue to make Hill Valley a welcome place to
teach and learn.” The speech continued, mostly for the benefit of the new teachers. I used the opportunity to read Al’s notes.

Hi Jenna!

Hope you enjoyed the end of OWP (and escaping the morning session of the faculty meeting). Here’s what you missed.

8:00 Scheduled starting time for meeting.

8:05 A loud cheer from the assembled teachers welcomes the teacher carrying a fan into the auditorium.

8:10 An even louder cheer welcomes the teachers setting up a table with free donuts and coffee for the faculty.

8:15 Meeting finally starts. New teachers introduced.

8:30 Winston discusses Ohio Graduation Test. Gus and I play “Dr. Wilson Bingo.” I lose – Winston hardly used the word “standardization” in his lecture.

9:00 Presentation by the athletic department – teachers who attend tomorrow’s football game should make sure students do not change the words of the Wildcat Fight Song to something vulgar.

9:30 Annual Rule Change Speech. A few minor changes – you’re great with classroom management so the changes shouldn’t be an issue for you. Consult pages 55-57 of the Faculty Handbook if you have questions.

10:30 Tech department discusses enhancements for email accounts. The new smiley faces look kind of cool.
11:00 Lunch break begins. You missed the catered lunch – the only time we have longer than twenty minutes to eat....

12:00 Scheduled end of break.

12:10 Actual end of break.

12:15 Major uproar!! There is going to be a schedule change on the first day of school!! Teachers are furious.

First Day of School Schedule

8:00 – 9:25 Freshman/Sophomore Assembly, Juniors and Seniors – period 1
9:30 – 10:55 Junior/Senior Assembly, Freshmen and Sophomores – period 1
11:00 – 12:00 All school picnic (everyone eats lunch together)
12:00 – 12:30 period 2
12:35 – 1:05 period 3
1:10 – 1:40 period 4
1:45 – 2:15 period 5
2:20 – 2:50 period 6
2:50 – 3:00 Remain in period 6 so Dr. Wilson can give announcements over PA

Yes, we have almost an hour and a half with our first period class and only a half hour with the rest of the classes. I lucked out – I’ve got my newspaper class first period and Trevor is going to be here. I asked him to guest lecture. Guess what the assembly is? Mingo the Mime! He wants kids to stay away from drugs! Okay, that’s not the exact presentation. Tomorrow is the only opening in the guest lecturer’s schedule until February.
I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Winston wrapped up his focus group speech and dismissed us to get our classrooms ready. Having postponed putting up my new posters, I had several hours of work ahead of me. “Al, thanks for the notes,” I said. “They entertained me.”

“No problem,” Al said. “Guess what? Irvin’s back already. His doctors told him to rest after falling off the horse at the dude ranch, but you know our department chair. Can’t trust a substitute to take his classes. He asked where you were and said he can’t believe it’s been twenty years since he took his first OWP seminar.”

“It would be interesting to discuss how OWP has changed over the years,” I said. “We could make it part of an English department meeting.” I waved to Winston, wanting him to know I hadn’t skipped the entire faculty meeting.

“Hello, Jenna.” Winston said. “That was an impressive letter you sent me about your experiences at the Ohio Writing Project.”

“I know I have been dealing with a lot this year, but I’m ready to teach,” I said. “In fact, I would like you to observe one of my classes tomorrow. I’ll be applying what I learned at OWP to my teaching.” It was unconventional for a principal to complete a classroom observation on the first day of school, but I wanted to catch Winston off guard. Being at OWP each summer gave me renewed confidence in my teaching and writing abilities. Winston might still be concerned with standards, but I wanted him to see other possibilities involving writing.

I spent the afternoon studying my student rosters, preparing my lesson plans, and cleaning my classroom. Frequent calls to my father at the hospital revealed Jillian’s condition hadn’t changed. I would have given anything to hear her voice, even if it was
to fight with her. This would also be the first year my mom wouldn’t call me the night before school started to wish me luck. Emotionally and physically drained, I went home, fed George, and tried to sleep. I was too tired for nightmares.

Chapter XII

Friday

Over an hour before the start of school, I finished writing my notes for the day on the board. I checked for chalk remnants on my pink dress and white cardigan. Every year I bought a new outfit in honor of the first day of school. I reclined in my desk chair for what I knew would be the only time all day, kicked off my pink flats, and finished my hot chocolate and lemon muffin. I skimmed my class rosters one more time; I already knew most of my seniors, having taught them as juniors the previous year. I had assigned the students the play *A Doll's House* over the summer and felt excited to start the year with an interesting discussion. Since first period would be longer due to the assembly, I created several extra writing prompts related to the play. The sound of the ringing bell mixed with student voices signaled the end of my reflection and the beginning of school.

Halfway through first period, Winston knocked on my classroom door. “I’m here to observe,” he announced. My senior students watched Winston sit in my desk chair and remove a legal pad from his briefcase. Even though he watched my every move, I had to continue teaching.

“We’re going to continue our discussion of *A Doll's House* and read the end of the play. I know you read it over the summer, well, I’m hoping you did,” I said, seeing some of my students smile. “I believe some scenes have greater impact when read aloud. The
ending of this play is a perfect example. Take five minutes and write your reaction to the ending. What do you think of the characters’ decisions? I will write with you.” Trying not to look at Winston, I opened my notebook to a new page and began writing. I continually glanced up from my writing to make sure my students stayed on task. The room remained silent except for the sound of notebook pages turning. The play didn’t have a traditional happy ending with all of the characters obtaining their deepest desires, but was the ending still happy? Suddenly, I had a brilliant idea. “Finish the sentence you’re writing,” I told the class. “As you have noticed, we have a visitor today. As a former high school English teacher, I’m sure Dr. Wilson would love to join us in reading the ending of the play.” All of my students turned to look at Winston. From the look on his face, my request stunned him. Teachers never asked him to participate in their lessons. Instead, they frequently watched the clock, silently counting the minutes until he left.

“I would be honored,” Winston declared. I originally intended to have students read the parts, but my new idea would work even better. I handed Winston a copy of the play. The final scene takes place between a married couple who confronts all the deceit surrounding their relationship. They scream and yell at each other a lot.

“Watch carefully,” I told the class. “Dr. Wilson and I will read the two parts.” Winston joined me at the front of the class and started reading the part of the husband. I read the wife’s lines with passion and intensity. I called Winston all kinds of interesting names; he couldn't object because I was only reading the lines in the play. I thought of Cole, Jillian, standardized tests, my mom’s death, and everything else that evoked anger
in order to give a spectacular performance. Winston and my students had no idea what inspired me. They simply thought I was a great actress.

Our scene ended with a slamming door. I happily obliged by stomping out of the room and slamming the door behind me. When I walked back into the room, the class applauded and cheered. “All right,” I said. “Let’s discuss what you just saw. Should the husband and wife have split up or stayed together? You may also quote from your written responses during the discussion.”

My students took different sides of the issue, leading to an intense debate.

“They should stay together. They had kids!”

“She was right to leave. He was too controlling and never listened to her.”

“I think they should have at least discussed things rationally instead of yelling.”

“She lied to him. He had a right to yell.”

“He didn’t have the right to treat her like a child.”

“It seems to me like they didn’t communicate with each other at all.”

I loved a wonderful discussion. The bell soon rang, signaling the end of class. “Have a nice weekend!” I told my students. Winston was the last person to leave the room.

“Interesting lesson, Jenna. Not bad at all. You will find my detailed observation notes in your faculty mailbox next week. Thank you for involving me in your teaching. You will receive high marks for that.”

“Thank you,” I said, proud of both myself and my students. “I’m surprised you were able to observe a class on the first day of school, especially with the assembly.”
“Can you keep a secret? I got bored at the assembly. We have a similar one every year. There were enough teachers in the auditorium to monitor the students. I know sneaking out probably wasn’t very professional of me, but I miss teaching on the first day of school, even after all these years.” Winston smiled. “Maybe I’ll teach a class next semester. You helped inspire me.”

“Are you serious?” I couldn’t believe this was the same principal who had given me a lecture earlier in the week.

“Jenna, we have different philosophies about the way writing should be taught. I still admire you for trying new activities with your classes and taking risks. Your students always perform well on standardized tests, so what you have been doing seems to be working. Keep it up.” Winston checked his watch. “Time for the rerun of the assembly. The joys of being an administrator.” Silently cheering my accomplishment, I walked to the faculty workroom. I was supposed to be at the assembly, but if Winston could escape for awhile, so could I.

Hill Valley High School’s faculty workroom provided a space for discussion, where teachers mingled and shared their teaching stories of the day. Al was in the process of kicking the copy machine to make it work. He smiled when he saw me.

“You look happy. Good day so far?”

“Winston observed my class and said I did a nice job!”

“That’s great news!” Al pounded his fist on the side of the copy machine. It sprang to life. “Before I forget, the first curriculum committee meeting is Tuesday after school. I could really use an ally.”

“I’ll try to be there,” I said. “It depends on how Jillian is doing.”
“Tell me what you think of this idea,” Al said. “I want teachers to design a curriculum wish list to reflect on what works in the curriculum and what doesn’t. I’ll tape the responses to the wall of the faculty lunchroom in order to generate discussion.” Al removed his copies from the machine. “The committee should involve all teachers in the curriculum planning process. We could make suggestions, but not exclude teachers from the curriculum conversation.”

“I think your idea would work,” I said. “If it doesn’t, it’s not your fault. Sometimes we don’t know the results of curriculum planning right away.” I decided I probably should make an appearance at the assembly. If I needed to argue with Winston, I wanted it to be because of my teaching, not attendance at an assembly.

Rain forced the school picnic to be held in the gym. I overheard students complaining about the possible cancellation of the football game. It sounded so trivial. I wished I could go back to the days when worrying about a football game was my biggest problem. I hadn’t seen Trevor all day, but he managed to find me in the crowded gym. The shirttail of his blue shirt hung loose over his khaki pants and his purple tie had an ink stain on it.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

“Teaching!” Trevor looked exasperated. “Was the school always this hot in August? I enjoyed guest lecturing to Al’s journalism students, but I can’t imagine doing it every day. I have new respect for teachers.”

“Welcome to my world,” I laughed.
“I shared one of my newspaper articles with the class,” Trevor said. “It made me feel vulnerable. I can see why you love sharing writing with your students. It helps you make a connection because you know what they experience.”

“I meet with the students in charge of the yearbook next period if you want to stop by,” I said. “Then I have three more classes of seniors. Wait! I have a great idea! You can reenact the end of *A Doll’s House* with me! Winston helped me this morning, but he won’t be observing my afternoon classes. Our characters get into a shouting match and I slam the door in your face.”

“Is this a play or real life?” Trevor grinned. “That would make an interesting lead for my article about OWP. I’m thinking about becoming the *Chronicle’s* education reporter. Writing about schools is a lot more intriguing than working for the national news division.”

“The bell’s about to ring,” I said. “I need to go back to my classroom, unless you want to be trampled by several hundred teenagers.” I discovered a note slid under my classroom door upon our return.

“What is it?” Trevor asked.

“I have to send one of my students to the guidance office as soon as she gets here,” I said. “There’s been a death in her family. I can’t believe this note was under the door. The counselors need to tell their student workers about confidentiality. This poor girl. Her life will be shattered in a matter of minutes and she doesn’t know it.” Perhaps my experiences might be of help to someone else.

“I could watch your class for a few minutes if you want to walk her to the office,” Trevor said, guessing what I was thinking. “Maybe I’ll read them my news article.”
Students filed into the classroom. Most of them would have ordinary forgettable days; one would never be able to forget this day no matter how hard she tried. I told her we needed to talk to her guidance counselor and identified with the stricken look on her face.

I returned to my classroom several minutes before the end of class. My student chose to remain in the guidance office to cry on the shoulder of her counselor. The class was in the process of analyzing the positive and negative aspects of Trevor’s news article. I took over the class and told my yearbook students to start thinking of a theme for this year’s memories. The bell rang, signaling the end of one class period and the beginning of another. I removed my copy of *A Doll’s House* from my desk, ready for another round of discussion. “Thanks,” I told Trevor. “I wouldn’t have left my class that long if you hadn’t been here. I don’t have guest speakers very often and thought they might enjoy talking with you about journalism. They can listen to me every other day.”

“No problem,” Trevor said. “You didn’t tell me you had old yearbooks in your classroom. The kids found my hideous freshman year picture. How’s your student?”

“Her brother was killed. He was away at college and someone shot him. I can’t talk about this now,” I said. “I have to get ready to teach.” Because of the day’s crazy schedule, my last three classes of seniors were shorter than the first one. I shortened the writing prompts in order to have time to read the final scene of the play. Trevor and I reenacted the final argument for three straight class periods. I enjoyed watching my students’ reactions each time I slammed the classroom door in Trevor’s face. Soon, my teaching day was finished.
“That was fun,” Trevor handed me his copy of the play. “I was amazed at the sense of community in each of your classes. I know you said you taught most of these kids last year, but even the ones who were new to your class bonded with the others.”

“I work at it,” I said. “Some days are better than others, but my students see I care about them and about teaching.”

“It shows. You know, I was thinking your class seemed like a high school version of our Ohio Writing Project seminar.”

“Thanks. I’m going to like having the last class period free. It will give me a chance to reflect on my day.”

“Like how you read your part in the play with more intensity each time?”

“Quit talking, Emerson.” I pulled him toward me and kissed him. We reluctantly broke apart when the fire alarm sounded.

“False alarm?” Trevor asked.

“Someone probably pulled the fire alarm,” I said. “We still need to leave.” I picked up my grade book and locked my classroom door. Trevor and I joined the teachers and students filing outside into the rain. Bullhorn in hard, Winston stood outside the main office and barked orders.

“This drill was not planned! Quit talking and get out of the building!” Additional alarms sounded as fire trucks arrived on the scene in case of a real fire. I tucked my grade book between my dress and my cardigan, not wanting to ruin it on the first day of school. Even if it did get ruined, life would continue. Somehow, it always did.

The End (for now)
Act II: Fact vs. Fiction at OWP

After reading the fiction, you are probably curious about the facts. How much is Jenny the author like Jenna the character? What really happened at the Ohio Writing Project and what did she change in order to write a more creative story? What is her rationale for making certain changes? What are the facts and what is fiction?

I illuminate my revision process in the following end notes section, kind of like a behind the scenes commentary. I organize the end notes by chapter and explain how my life and my research influenced my writing. I include an analysis of the story’s different drafts as it evolved. Any incident in the fiction not alluded to in the end notes is a product of my imagination. Still, I think all fiction is based on life experience, whether the story is mine or someone else’s.

End Notes for Chapter I

- Jenna’s last name is my mom’s maiden name; it is the only name in the story that has personal significance to me. The names of the other characters have no significance, except their last names are all names of buildings at Miami University.
- The theme of escape is prevalent throughout the entire story. Jenna discusses her reoccurring feelings of wanting to escape her life and live someone else’s. Ultimately, however, she faces her problems. I later add the plot twist of Jillian attempting to escape her life by killing herself. Jenna acts like her life is spiraling out of control but she is actually effectively grieving; conversely, Jillian seems
like she is coping with everything better than Jenna but is actually struggling more.

- In order to introduce the characters and illustrate how the festivity of the party contrasts with Jenna’s mood, I decided to begin with a large party scene. Sam and Al hosted several parties in other drafts of the story, but I ultimately decided to place more of the story’s focus on the school.

- Trevor, Sam, and Al are composites of all the people who supported me during the most difficult time of my life. I hated feeling helpless and it helped me to lean on my friends.

- I was single at the time of my mom’s death, but I created a love story for Jenna and Trevor. I thought it would be really fun to write and wanted to give Jenna some happiness instead of making her life completely miserable.

- Jenna feels upset when seeing a mother and daughter shopping together. I still feel this way, jealous of the fact other mothers and daughters get to experience things my mom and I can’t.

- Jenna mentions to Sam that she got distracted, drove on the wrong side of a two lane road, and didn’t really care. This happened to me one night, causing my friends to give me a lecture. They worried I might hate them, but I will be forever grateful to them from preventing me, literally and figuratively, from going down a road of destructive behavior.

- Jenna picks her fingernails throughout the story. I knew how to write about the physical manifestation of stress because I did the same thing. Now I have
fingernails again, which probably says something about my stress level, my coping skills, or both.

- Jenna feels extreme guilt over her mom’s death. After my mom died, I couldn’t get the thought out of my head that if only I had walked outside five minutes earlier, I could have saved her life. Numerous doctors convinced me there was nothing I could have done to prevent the heart aneurism. For dramatic tension, I made Jenna’s mom die in a car accident, under circumstances where Jenna could possibly have saved her mom’s life had she done something different. I know how much hurt and guilt I felt; I imagined Jenna would be feeling even worse.

**End Notes for Chapter II**

- The cars I mention in the story, Jenna’s gold Monte Carlo, Jenna’s blue New Yorker, and Trevor’s green Civic, are all cars I have owned at one point or another in my life.
- Like Jenna’s mom, my mom liked to send cards. When Jenna opens her mailbox and finds only bills and ads, I illustrate the constant reminder that something and someone in her life is missing.
- Jenna’s cat George is loosely based on my cats Lucy and Andy. Cat owners, although they may not admit it, do have conversations with their cats. Jenna feels like someone is listening to her and she does not simply talk to herself.
- I am an only child, but I gave Jenna an annoying older sister to create additional conflict in her life. Jillian’s remark about the happiest years of her life occurring
before Jenna was born is an actual comment one of my friends said to her younger sister. I thought it was a little harsh, but then again, I don’t have siblings.

- I spent my first year of teaching at Kettering Fairmont High School, where I had also been a student. I love the school, but it was too strange for me to teach there. Jenna, on the other hand, loves being a teacher at the same school where she was a student.

- Like Jenna, I constantly had nightmares of my mom’s death. Unlike Jenna, I immediately sought therapy to deal with them.

- In the fall of 1999, I was in a car accident, which up until my mom died was the worst experience of my life. On a rainy day, a car ran a red light and I smashed into the side of it. My car was totaled, but everyone involved in the accident, including me, walked away without injury. The description of the car accident that killed Jenna’s mom is a worse version of my accident.

- The conversation between Jenna and the nurse about organ donation sounds bizarre, but a variation of it took place the night my mom died. All I could think about was how much I wanted to hit the nurse. Jenna does hit the nurse, causing me to smile when I wrote the scene.

**End Notes for Chapter III**

- My dad has remained very involved in my life, so in contrast I gave Jenna an absent father who prefers traveling and poker to being with his family. My dad did move to another city right before I began my dissertation research, creating an
additional sense of loss for me. I used how I was feeling and intensified it to create Jenna’s resentment of her father’s actions.

- In previous drafts of the story, I included a scene at the mall where Jenna and Sam shopped at a store called Charlie’s Card Hut. I deleted the scene, but loved the name of my fictional business. I changed the name to Charlie’s Coffee Hut and gave Sam a news story to cover there so she would have the chance to talk to Jenna about her nightmares. The coffee house scene worked better than the card shop scene and was inspired by all of the trips other doctoral students and I took to the Oxford Starbucks.

- Like Jenna, I have also asked questions about the greater meaning of my mom’s death that no one can answer.

- All of the OWP participants received a letter introducing the seminar, similar to the letter written by Evelyn.

**End Notes for Chapter IV**

- Trevor participates in the Ohio Writing Project seminar as a participant observer. He is planning to write a news article instead of a dissertation, but he experiences the same tensions I did when conducting my research. I found it challenging to attend the seminar as both a participant and an observer. I present both points of view by using two different characters. The discussions between Trevor and Jenna are based on various thoughts I had while experiencing OWP.
While the OWP setting remained the same, I changed because of my life experiences. I incorporate my reaction into Jenna’s thoughts when she arrives on campus.

Evelyn Harris, the instructor of Jenna’s OWP seminar, is a black female. The two instructors of my OWP seminar were white males. The change gives Evelyn and Jenna a reason to discuss race and gender at OWP.

Evelyn shares my desire to complete a creative dissertation among the tensions between the practical world of teaching and the theoretical world of academia.

I only write a few love scenes between Trevor and Jenna, with nothing beyond kissing. Writing anything more would make me uncomfortable; I didn’t really want to put a sex scene in a dissertation. Instead, I trust my readers to use their imaginations. A lot can be inferred from Trevor and Jenna’s conversation about lack of sleep.

In OWP seminars, participants receive class time to complete personal writing. Providing teachers with writing time is probably what I love the most about OWP.

Jenna’s frustration with her computer mirrors the frustration of the OWP teachers when computers in the lab constantly malfunctioned.

Evelyn writes an outline of the story Jenna tells. A variation of this activity occurred at several OWP seminars I have taken over the years. The purpose, like Evelyn tells Jenna, is to encourage writers to elaborate. Sometimes people include more details when telling a story instead of writing it. I illustrate the concept with background information about Trevor and Jenna.
During personal writing time, the seminar participants had individual conferences with the instructors like the conference Jenna has with Evelyn.

The fictional lunch scene also parallels actual events, since lunch become a social event instead of time to accomplish work. I originally intended to conduct interviews during lunch. Because peer writing groups occurred right before lunch, however, numerous groups opted to continue their writing conversations while eating. It was a difficult decision, but my lunch conversations were mostly social. When people that did not want to participate in my study joined me to eat, it didn’t seem right to ask them to leave. I also had been working constantly all morning and lunch turned into a nice break where I got to know some of the teachers better on a personal level.

Inventing the OWP discussion was one of the more creative ways I combined fact and fiction. The discussion as described never took place. The class had numerous discussions during the seminar, but they revolved around the required reading or teaching ideas. The questions Evelyn asks during the discussion are my interview questions. My interviews and participants’ written responses were individual. No one knew how anyone else responded to a question. The circular discussion format is one I have used successfully in my own classroom.

The responses from Henriann, Molly, Alyssa, Chris, Brad, Frank, and Robert are direct quotations; I did not change what anyone said. This was challenging because sometimes good research does not equal good fiction. I solved this problem by intertwining the words of the seven teachers I interviewed with my created responses from Cole, Nancy, Trevor, Jenna, and Evelyn.
Cole and Nancy represent groups of people instead of specific individuals. During the OWP seminar, I heard numerous informal comments about teaching writing. Most of the comments came from teachers who did not consent to participate in my dissertation. I still wanted to use the comments, so I summarized the statements and did not attribute them to any specific individual. Cole and Nancy introduce these additional perspectives during the discussion. Although very few Ohio Writing Project participants share Cole’s point of view, there are teachers who attend the seminars simply for course credit. Cole represents this group of teachers and is very vocal in his criticism of personal writing. At least half of the teachers in the Ohio Writing Project seminar were new to the field, having recently completed their first or second year of teaching. Nancy represents this group of teachers. When I attended the Ohio Writing Project after my first year of teaching, I felt excited to learn new concepts about writing while still gaining confidence in my abilities as a teacher.

Jenna’s responses represent my own thoughts on the topics I introduce in my research questions. Trevor’s comments are additional ideas I thought of during the seminar when I discovered it felt strange to be the only person in the room who would not be teaching during the upcoming academic year.

I introduce the conflict between the type of writing encouraged by the Ohio Writing Project and the type of writing required for state standardized tests, such as the Ohio Graduation Test, during Jenna’s meeting with Winston. Throughout my OWP experience, I overheard teachers discussing their concerns about the potential ways administrators might react to curriculum changes that incorporate
more writing, especially the idea of teachers writing with students. The teachers believed their administrators focused on standardized tests and permitted a curriculum which allowed for little creativity. I share Jenna’s belief that there is space in classrooms for more than one type of writing.

- On a lighter note, Jenna’s outrage at possibly getting engaged pokes fun of the fact that in a large number of novels, a woman in the story desires little more than an engagement to a man.
- Jenna also struggles with writing when she returns home for the evening. Her dilemmas represent all of us who discover the first draft of writing needs revision.
- Jenna’s mother appears only in Jenna’s dreams, but her absence is a central part of the story. Jenna has moments where she swears her mother is really in the room with her instead of the experience being only a dream. I have had similar experiences. People tell stories of seeing visions of loved ones after death, so Jenna’s experiences may be more than dreams.

End Notes for Chapter V

- Evelyn’s guidelines for peer groups are based on actual comments by OWP instructors.
- The account of the peer group meeting with Jenna, Trevor, Nancy, and Cole is a composite of all the OWP peer group sessions in which I participated over the years. Peer groups involve the sharing of personal writing; for this reason I did not want to recount my exact peer group experience and potentially reveal the identity of my peer group members. Jenna and Trevor have a similar discussion.
about why he shouldn’t use his peer group description when writing his newspaper article.

- Each piece I created for the peer group session represents a different type of writing typically shared at OWP. All of the pieces are intended to be works in progress, which is why none of them is extremely spectacular.

- For Cole’s story, “The Adventures of Glorp,” I deliberately wrote something silly. Very rarely, someone will not take the seminar seriously. Even though OWP promotes creativity, an “anything goes” attitude does not exist.

- Nancy’s essay, “My Silver Shoes,” started when I saw a pair of silver shoes in a store. I didn’t like the shoes and didn’t buy them, but I used the idea for an essay. This is the type of essay most OWP participants read. It includes a personal experience, but is not overly emotional.

- Jenna’s narrative, “An Ongoing Journey” is typical of writers who share something more personal. Jenna’s reflections about her childhood home represent my feelings when my dad prepared to sell the house where I grew up.

- Trevor’s narrative, “Falling,” represents the equally powerful stories writers tell about others instead of themselves. Trevor’s thoughts about not knowing how to help Jenna are based on comments several of my friends said to me. They didn’t know exactly how to help me, but they would always be there.

- Jenna mentions to Trevor that he doesn’t have a classroom and cannot make assumptions about the teachers. I had to remind myself of this constantly. Even though I once taught, I could not assume anything about the classrooms or schools of other teachers.
Nancy refers to Jenna as a role model. New OWP teachers frequently seek and appreciate advice from veterans. I once participated in an OWP mentoring program where a new teacher emailed me questions and I emailed her advice and suggestions.

Sister Stella’s cameo appearance illustrates both the value of professional journals and the feeling new teachers have of being overwhelmed by everything.

As part of the seminar, members of each peer group provided several writing prompts to share with the class. After the reading of prompts, we wrote. I give an example of this when Evelyn reads a poem to the class and asks them to respond in writing.

Running for fun does not appeal to me, so I used the expertise of my doctoral student colleagues who love running to create the scene where Sam and Jenna run in the park.

I share Jenna’s feelings of thinking no matter where I went, I could always return to a certain house and find my parents there.

End Notes for Chapter VI

This chapter is a fun break in the midst of all the events at the OWP seminar. I didn’t want Jenna’s life to revolve around work, so I sent her and Trevor to a nice restaurant for a date.

My life each evening during OWP wasn’t as exciting. I returned home to play with my cat, type up my notes, and rest. Of all times to be sick, I happened to have a variation of the flu while I attended the writing seminar. Refusing to let
illness get in the way of my research, I persevered, attended every session, and of course, ended up back at the doctor’s office as soon as the seminar ended.

- There are some songs I still can’t listen to because they remind me of certain memories. Jenna has the same experience, which causes her to constantly change the radio station. Trevor reminds her there is no timeline on grief, which I think is an important point people sometimes forget.

- Jenna resists seeing a therapist, thinking she can handle everything herself. I felt that way briefly before realizing I needed professional help. Jenna’s realization she needs to take care of herself is part of her ongoing journey through grief.

- I once felt obsessed with my mom’s possessions; I couldn’t let go of anything she had touched. Jenna experiences a similar feeling during her fight with Jillian. Eventually I realized it is memories instead of things that keep a person alive.

End Notes for Chapter VII

- Jenna’s seminar presentation is a short version of the presentation I gave during my first summer at OWP in 2000. I took teachers around the building and asked them to write about their observations, just like Jenna does. My presentation for the 2004 seminar also included a variation of the “in-school field trip.” Jenna asks the seminar participants to write a poem. I used an idea I received when observing a ninth grade honors English class taught by an OWP teacher.

- Trevor’s presentation is based on the OWP philosophy that teachers become part of a classroom community when sharing their writing and asking for feedback.
Jenna and Trevor’s fight over Trevor wanting to observe Jenna’s classroom illuminates my frustration of not being allowed into more classrooms. Just like Jenna didn’t want Trevor to interpret the events in her classroom for his newspaper article, several teachers did not want me interpreting the events in their classrooms for my dissertation. It is understandable. You never know who might read a piece of writing. My mom, also a writer, once told me not to put anything in print that I didn’t want lots of people to read. Hopefully, more than a few people will ultimately read my dissertation.

Jenna’s letter to Winston represents how excited teachers feel during the Ohio Writing Project when learning new ways of teaching writing. During all the summers that I have been part of OWP, teachers constantly say how much they enjoy being able to complete some of their own writing. They also enjoy the teaching ideas they can take with them. Jenna’s sentiments represent how excited teachers in the seminar feel when learning new ways of teaching writing.

End Notes for Chapter VIII

In earlier versions of the story, Jenna escapes her life by packing a suitcase, giving George to Sam and Al, and running away to a new city. Trevor meets Jenna at the airport and convinces her to return. Also while in the airport, Jenna contemplates taking pills and ends up changing her mind. As I developed the characters, I realized Jenna was too strong of a person to escape her life. She talks about it, but wouldn’t actually do it. Jillian, however, would. In the end, the person with the suicide attempt became Jillian instead of Jenna.
I became an expert on suicide during my undergraduate years as a resident assistant. Each staff member was required to focus on a certain counseling area. No one else volunteered to attend the suicide prevention seminars because the topic was extremely dark, so I decided to attend. I learned a lot of detailed information that helped a large number of college students and later the high school students I taught. If students who lived in my residence hall were suffering from depression, I was usually the one to counsel them. Jillian’s suicide note is based on actual notes I have seen. I still remember the look on the librarian’s face when I checked out a stack of books related to suicide. I used my knowledge of suicide to create the scene where Jillian took pills and tried to kill herself.

You may have thought of this next question, so I’m going to answer it: I would be lying if I said I never thought about ending everything. My occasional thoughts didn’t turn into actions because my mom raised a strong woman, I have lots of people who love me, and I knew from my counseling experiences that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary situation.

End Notes for Chapter IX

Jenna goes to the hospital chapel when she learns about Jillian to meditate. There are several references to God and religion throughout the story, as Jenna tries to understand everything that is happening to her.

During the seminar, each person wrote a piece to include in the class anthology. Teachers submitted up to three pages of writing that the instructors compiled into
our own souvenir collection. We also each submitted a final portfolio of our
writing at the end of the seminar. While she waits in the hospital for an update on
Jillian’s condition, Jenna works on her piece for the class anthology and compiles
her portfolio.

End Notes for Chapter X

- I give Evelyn the satisfaction of completing and successfully defending her
dissertation, a milestone I soon hope to reach.
- Jillian and Cole have different opinions about teaching writing, but they are both
good teachers. OWP does not intend to create an “us vs. them” mentality between
teachers who write and teachers who don’t, but it sometimes happens. I wanted to
show that, despite philosophical differences, teachers can still respect each other.
- We had a pizza lunch on the last day of the writing seminar. Before we ate pizza
as a group in the building’s courtyard, each person shared a piece of writing. We
spent the lunch discussing everything except teaching and writing. I develop the
same setting when Evelyn asks everyone in her seminar to share writing with the
large group.
- Jenna mentions that Evelyn says something positive about every piece. OWP
instructors could offer tougher critiques of writing, but doing so might discourage
some teachers from writing and thus defeat the purpose of OWP seminars.
Instructors walk a fine line between being critical and being sensitive.
For the final pieces of writing the characters share in the large group session, I add more tension and emotion than in the original draft pieces shared during the peer group session.

Several people I know have died from or survived cancer. Cole’s poem uses words I have heard to describe the disease.

I have never been in an abusive relationship, so I relied on stories from friends to write Nancy’s essay. The comic shopping references turn into the tragic account of fantasy opposing reality in a relationship.

I have no idea what her name was, but there was a woman at the coroner’s office who told me about her mother’s death and hugged me when I went to pick up my mom’s belongings. I used Trevor’s essay to tell the story from how an observer might witness it.

I felt sick when writing Jenna’s essay about organ donation, so I guess that is a sign of good writing. Unlike the other essays, I didn’t fictionalize anything with this one. I returned to the moment when I received the letter and wrote exactly how I felt without holding anything back. When I renewed my driver’s license, the clerk asked if I wanted to be an organ donor. I told her yes because my mom was one and saved a lot of lives. The look on the clerk’s face was priceless.

End Notes for Chapter XI

No school year feels complete without the opening faculty meeting. Al’s journal account is a humorous account of the presentation. I combined my experience at
faculty meetings with stories told by friends who teach at other schools. Most faculty meetings are not as humorous, although some teachers might disagree.

❖ One year while I was teaching, I had the opportunity to witness a scheduling meeting. Teachers often don’t realize how much administrators struggle to put together a school schedule that is fair to everyone. The results are likely to make at least one person unhappy. If there really is a mime named Mingo who tells kids to stay away from drugs, the connection is entirely a coincidence.

❖ Over the years, the Ohio Writing Project has changed. When I took my first OWP seminar, most of the participants were enthusiastic about being enrolled. Four years later, the enthusiasm level was noticeably lower. Granted, there were different people involved, but a change was evident. Several longtime OWP members who spoke under the condition of anonymity suspected the change was related to the new master’s degree program offered through OWP. They felt more teachers were concerned with the quantity of classes they took instead of the quality. The continued pressure for students to produce standardized writing also drained teachers’ energy. Other OWP veterans, like the real life counterparts of Jenna and Al’s department chair, would no doubt have different opinions.

❖ Jenna speaks of feeling confident in her teaching after the OWP seminar. Numerous writing project participants over the years have mentioned gaining confidence and finding identity as a result of their OWP experiences.
End Notes for Chapter XII

- Jenna buys a new outfit in honor of the first day of school. I, on the other hand, preferred to wear one of my favorite outfits I knew was comfortable, yet dressy.

- My classes never had summer reading, but some of my colleagues asked students to read books over the summer. I don’t think either approach is right or wrong, but summer reading worked best for my story and allowed me to begin immediately with a class discussion.

- I also had Jenna teach juniors the previous year so she would know and feel comfortable with the seniors she taught. This is a great feeling. I taught juniors one year and seniors the next, making the first day of school seem like it was really the middle of the year because we all knew each other.

- Jenna’s class discussion provides an example of how teachers take what they learn at OWP into their classrooms. I thought it would be funny to have Jenna slam the door of her classroom and make a dramatic exit during the end of *A Doll’s House* because I have performed the same scene in my classroom, much to the amusement of my students. Jenna’s conversation with Winston after his observation highlights differing opinions that frequently occur with teachers and administrators over the issue of teaching writing.

- I chose to use *A Doll’s House* as the text before I completed a classroom observation of an Ohio Writing Project teacher. By coincidence, seniors in the class discussed the same play. The comments by Jenna’s students are based on actual student comments during the class discussion.
There are a lot of potential curriculum connections with the teaching of writing. Al and Jenna discuss this when Al invites Jenna to be part of a curriculum committee. Another goal of OWP is that even though the seminars eventually end, the learning and collaboration that takes place during the seminar continues. OWP participants are encouraged to share presentation handouts with colleagues who did not participate in OWP. I have done this in the past, since not all teachers have the opportunity to attend an OWP seminar.

My former colleagues at Chaminade-Julienne High School were completing curriculum revision during the time I was there. I created a curriculum committee to share some of my curriculum research.

During their curriculum discussion, Al and Jenna conclude that they have no idea if their ideas will be successful. All they can do is offer suggestions. I ended my research before I will know if my curriculum ideas have any lasting impact on the school. Since I no longer teach there, I have no direct stake in the outcome, other than my desire to improve education for teachers and students.

I deliberately left Jillian’s medical condition unresolved. To have her fully recover would mean that, unlike life, things worked out in the end. To have her die would create another horrific event for Jenna and take the focus away from the first day of school. I hint that Jillian will probably live, but possibly suffer permanent physical or mental damage because of her actions.

My mom and I always used to argue over the endings of books and movies. The story’s end in the middle of a school day is symbolic of qualitative research. The researcher leaves the setting, but life continues.
**Chronology of a Story**

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<td>#10</td>
<td>Spring 2005</td>
<td><em>Returning to Writing, Teaching, and Living</em></td>
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Detailed information about each draft follows. It provides insight into a writer’s mind.
Draft I

When I started this story almost five years ago, I had no idea it would become part of my dissertation. At the time, I wasn’t even thinking about earning a Ph.D. I enrolled in my first Ohio Writing Project seminar and completed a short story for one of the assignments. I originally entitled my story *The Lives of the Guests*. It featured Samantha Morris, a woman who loved to host parties. Her husband, Al, worked for a law firm and received death threats. Sam’s friend Stella and Stella’s love interest, Cole, stopped by the house during various parties to offer advice and comfort until Al’s enemies kidnapped Cole and threatened to kill everyone else. Stella eventually solved the mystery thanks to a pearl necklace left to her by her Aunt Louisa.

Interestingly, people liked my story. Several OWP participants asked to read it and told me I was a great writer. I sent the story to three publishers, received three rejection letters, and put my writing aside for awhile. Teaching and the curriculum work of designing a new class left me little time to write. In fact, most of my writing took place in the classroom, when I modeled concepts for students.

Draft II

In the summer of 2001, I attended another OWP seminar and picked up the story again. I changed the title to *Twenty-Two Days in May*, changed the names of some of the characters, and made Stella a nun. Since nuns couldn’t have love interests (or potentially could, but I wasn’t going to go there), I added a character named Trevor. He was Stella’s nephew and an actor. I didn’t really like the revision; my mom read it and told me I could write much better. I was mad at her, but she was right.
Draft III

I wrote other things during the school year, including a successful presentation for the National Council of Teachers of English Conference. When I returned to OWP in the summer of 2002, one of the computer lab’s malfunctioning computers lost the file and forced me to rebuild. I honestly wasn’t too upset; I was sick of my story. I used the same outline, but switched to a different time period. I called the new version *Quest for Home*. The story took place during World War II, but the characters once again all gathered at a house for a big party.

Draft IV

Because the summer of 2003 occupied my life with doctoral classes, I did not enroll in any OWP seminars. I felt tired of writing fiction and didn’t think I was any good at it, even though I received encouragement from OWP instructors and my family. I returned to fiction in the spring of 2004 because I didn’t want to write another personal narrative about my life or my classroom experiences. Everything eventually returned to the death of my mom. Each of us enrolled in a doctoral seminar contributed a chapter for a book (Bird, 2005). I knew my writing would read something like, “I’m a former English teacher, my mom died, and here is what I think of No Child Left Behind.”

I found the Sister Stella version of my story and played around with it. The revision took place almost entirely in a school, giving me a forum to critique No Child Left Behind. Sister Stella became an educational advocate and the book chapter became a new way for me to present research.
I returned to the Ohio Writing Project in the summer of 2004 to complete my dissertation research. By this time, I had started exploring the idea of combining fiction and research. My new computer opened the short story file no other computer had been able to open for two years. For one of the class assignments, I thought it might be fun to take the first OWP story I ever wrote and revise it.

I renamed the story *Jenna’s Journey*. Samantha Morris still hosted large parties and her husband Al still worked at a law firm. Since I told Sister Stella’s story in my book chapter, I needed a new name for the main character. I decided to name her Jenna, a variation of my name, so I could work through some of the issues in my personal life while I wrote. I gave Jenna two love interests, Cole and Trevor. When I created a spin-off for Sister Stella, I didn’t want to lose Trevor as a character. I changed his profession from actor to journalist. Cole cheated on Jenna with Jillian, Jenna’s sister, and Jenna ended up with Trevor. Samantha, Trevor, and several other people worked at a fictitious newspaper, the *Cincinnati Chronicle*, and remained committed to solving whatever mystery I thought occurred at Al’s law firm. I later learned the *Cincinnati Chronicle* was the name of a Cincinnati newspaper in the 1800s, although I do not mention the connection in my story.

Once the OWP seminar ended, I started writing my dissertation. I faced several research dilemmas. I needed to change identifying details when reporting information about peer groups, discussions, and the sharing of writing because teachers frequently

Draft VI

Once the OWP seminar ended, I started writing my dissertation. I faced several research dilemmas. I needed to change identifying details when reporting information about peer groups, discussions, and the sharing of writing because teachers frequently
revealed very personal incidents during the sessions. Some teachers at OWP did not choose to participate in my project for various reasons. Other teachers agreed to participate, but including their exact writing in my dissertation would clearly identify them and defeat the purpose of protecting them with pseudonyms.

I decided to incorporate my factual research into my fictional short story as a creative way to solve my research dilemmas. I explain my theoretical rationale for taking this writing risk elsewhere in my dissertation; nevertheless, the decision to include research about OWP into a story originally written for OWP led to yet another story draft. Even though I only made one plot change for this draft, it was significant. Jenna enrolled in an OWP seminar and discussed writing with other teachers, thus providing a space for illuminating issues related to the teaching of writing.

**Draft VII**

I realized writing about law firms doesn’t interest me very much, so I gave Al and everyone else who previously worked at the law firm jobs at the fictitious Hill Valley High School. The name Hill Valley High School is the same name as the high school in the movie *Back to the Future*, although I am not writing about the same school. Cole and Trevor fighting over Jenna made my story sound too much like a bad romance novel. I had Cole cheat on Jenna during their first date, leaving Jenna free to realize she liked Trevor. I also set up a murder plot involving the editor of the newspaper. I wrote the crime as a random act of violence, but realized later it read like a random act of fiction with no real point. The devoted reporters at the *Cincinnati Chronicle* remained committed to exposing wrongdoings, this time at the high school.
I knew my story needed work, but I was thinking too much about it. An award hangs on my wall from the first (and only) fiction writing contest I won in the fifth grade. I remember how much I enjoyed writing. I still do, but now I tend to worry too much what other people think of it. I decided to not dwell on my audience, complete another revision, and have fun in the process.

I entirely eliminated some of the characters. If I wanted to kill them, I didn’t want them around anyway. Elbert Flimbach originally ran the law firm where Al worked. When I changed the setting to a school, he became the assistant principal. Teachers hated Elbert, the reporters at the *Cincinnati Chronicle* investigated Elbert for vague reasons, and Elbert himself only cared about eating. Eventually, I decided Elbert didn’t need to be in the story, since most of the other characters (and readers of my story) didn’t seem to know why he was there. I expanded Dr. Winston Wilson’s role and gave Hill Valley High School only one administrator.

Gertrude Gertz dated Elbert and worked for the newspaper. I had too many reporters as characters, so it made sense to eliminate Gertrude when I eliminated Elbert. I gave her best scenes to Vivian Martin and created one interesting character instead of two boring ones.

Louis Porter served as the editor of the *Cincinnati Chronicle*. He yelled a lot, wore ugly ties, and was murdered by a street thug. Louis became more of a caricature than a character, causing me to promote Samantha to editor of the paper and remove Louis from the story.
I thought the elaborate description of a prankster placing a snake in a pizza box was completely hysterical; I reread it and couldn’t figure out what was supposed to be funny about the incident. Vivian was a lesbian, but I never discussed her personal life or explained how the other characters reacted to her. I deleted several such scenes, even though it was difficult to see hours of effort vanish with one push of the delete key.

It was obvious from the beginning that Trevor and Jenna were going to end up together. I skipped the predictable ending and made them a couple from the beginning. I broke up Cole and Jillian early in the story, giving Jenna a reason to immediately reject Cole. I also got rid of the vague crimes at the school and switched the focus of the story to Jenna’s doubts about her teaching and her life.

I felt like I had written a very good screenplay, but I needed more description. I remembered a line I constantly told the high school students I taught: “You can always add more details in your writing.” I decided to take my own advice and revise everything one more time.

**Draft IX**

I intended for this draft to be the final one. I added detail to make the characters come alive. I saw an opportunity for conflict between Jenna and Trevor as they try to redefine their relationship during a crisis. Originally, Trevor wasn’t involved in the Ohio Writing Project seminar. I decided to enroll him in order to focus more of the story on the writing seminar, allow me to express some of my frustrations of being both a participant and an observer during the research process, and add additional tension between Trevor and Jenna. I gave Sam a substitute teaching job at Hill Valley High
School so she could question English teachers Al and Jenna about issues relevant to the field of English education, including the topic of why teachers should be writers. Since Jenna is not a new teacher, I added a new character, Nancy, to ask questions relevant to beginning teachers.

I added an additional crisis where Jenna falls down a flight of stairs and ends up in the hospital. Jillian brings her a change of clothes, which happens to be a princess costume. The two of them encounter a little girl whose mother is dying of cancer, setting up an entire fairy tale motif that, to be honest, didn’t work at all with the rest of the story.

As much as I liked this draft, something annoyed me. There were little things, such as constantly referring to the high school principal using his complete title of Dr. Winston Wilson. There were also the comments by my dissertation committee that my nonfiction writing conveyed more emotion than my fiction writing. They were right, but I couldn’t figure out the reason why.

I found the answer when rereading one sentence: “It is my hope that the reader will view Jenna as a separate character and not think her story is my autobiography.” Even though Jenna has a different personality and physical description, I was worried readers would think I was writing too much about myself. In a way, however, I am.

While Jenna is a fictional character, her story wouldn’t exist if my life had been different when I wrote about her. Jenna struggles with some of the same issues and emotions that have haunted me throughout the last year. Even though Jenna’s mom dies under different circumstances than mine did, the emotions of guilt and helplessness are exactly what I expressed to my friends, my family, my therapist, and just about everyone else I talked to about what happened. I wanted to write fiction in order to put some
distance between me and my experiences; I ended up including too much distance and
writing some emotionless scenes. I needed to put emotion back into my writing, but I
was running out of time.

Draft X

Most of my changes to the story increased the tension. Instead of causing a fall to
send Jenna to the hospital, I sent Jillian to the hospital with a suicide attempt. Jillian now
believed Jenna was responsible for their mom’s death, causing the sisters to fight more
and also explaining the depth of Jenna’s guilt. Jillian’s constant changing of men first
seemed like a bit of trivia, but the addition of an abusive ex made the situation a little
more serious. As another victim of abuse, Nancy helped Jenna understand Jillian’s
behavior. Cole had evolved into an extremely unlikable person, but his wife’s death from
cancer provided some rationalization for his behavior. Jenna’s explanation to her
principal about teaching methods created more conflict and also eliminated the need for
Sam to become a substitute teacher. Sam’s love of hosting parties and my diverse cast of
characters are probably the only things left unchanged from the very first draft.

At the last minute, I changed the title. A web search revealed Jenna’s Journey
was the subtitle for a very steamy romance novel. I was thinking about changing the title
anyway, and switched to Returning to Writing, Teaching, and Living.

When starting my final revision, I didn’t think I had enough time or energy for
one more draft. Certain changes made other parts of the story tumble like dominos, but
in a positive way. I truly liked my writing; it is a story I would read even if I hadn’t
written it.
Act III: Snapshots of Jenny Bird’s Life

Based on how crazy my life has been recently, I would not have been surprised if the paper shredder had indeed electrocuted me. I was in the process of shredding documents with my social security number on them so I could avoid anyone stealing my identity. (Memo to potential identity thieves: I am a teacher who doesn’t make much money. Go find a computer consultant). The paper got stuck and I realized that it would be a good idea to unplug it before attempting to remove the paper remnants with tweezers. At this point, I would have called my parents for help. At the age of 29, I consider myself a confident and independent woman, but my parents have always been good with things like paper shredders.

It is in that moment I realize I can’t call my parents.

Had I not unplugged the paper shredder and suffered an untimely death, I would have seen my mom. Upon greeting me, she would have questioned why a Ph.D. candidate didn’t know any better than to unplug electrical appliances before tampering with them. The thought of this makes me smile, but it also hurts like hell.

My dad packed his car and his dog and set out for a new life in Dublin (Ohio, not Ireland). Sometimes it does feel like he is in another country since he now lives halfway across the state instead of just an hour’s drive away. He definitely lives too far away to fix my paper shredder or to see very often. This also hurts like hell.

Attempting to fix the problem, I fall over and send little pieces of paper flying all over the room. I am now in the middle of a July snowstorm. I also manage to knock my copy of *Bird by Bird* into the litter box, much to the anger of my cat Lucy.

Welcome to my life these days.
In the past, I have written numerous voiceless essays and don’t remember any of them. More stories have occurred since I originally wrote this piece. I now have Andy, a second cat in addition to Lucy, but I still haven’t fixed the paper shredder. When I enrolled in the Ohio Writing Project seminar to begin my dissertation research, the two instructors asked each participant to write an introductory letter for the first day of class. This piece served as my introduction.

Murray (1996) explains, “we forge communities when we share who we are, what we feel, what we think; and writing allows a sharing beyond the room, even beyond our lifetime” (p. 7). Throughout my years as a high school teacher and an OWP participant, I learned that sharing personal writing builds communities. It sometimes feels scary to let my writing voice shine through, but it becomes very rewarding when others appreciate my writing. Even if they don’t, at least I haven’t hid behind the disguise of sterile, voiceless prose. Wanner (1994) believes, “Narrative erupts at the intersection of experience, emotion, and language” (p. 15). I like to think my writing voice is unique, so why deprive the academic community of my individuality?

I didn’t always feel this way about sharing what I had to say. I felt honored when Tom Romano asked permission to use my writing in his latest book. Romano (2004) writes, “another student, Jenny Bird, picks a bone with the contradictory dictums that her high school teachers laid down about writing: ‘my teachers twisted my writing around like a windsock in a storm’” (p. 177). In high school, I played the academic game well. I knew what it took to get a good grade on every paper. I learned a significant amount about writing, yet I rarely let voice creep into my papers. What if a teacher didn’t like
my writing? Worse, what if I got a bad grade? My perfect grade point average would be ruined. I cannot simply blame my teachers; I admit I often silenced my writing voice.

Psychologists Wade and Tavris (1993) argue, “the experiences and circumstances of people’s lives shape their stories, and stories in turn affect the possibility of changing those conditions” (p. 613). Stories from my personal and professional past shaped my life as a teacher and a writer, causing my life as a student to influence my life as a teacher. I remembered what I loved and hated about my school experiences and used this knowledge to make my classroom a comfortable and enjoyable environment for students to learn. Vinz (1996) writes of autobiographical inquiry, “when past and present were considered as dimensions of the whole experience, these teachers authored new stories that transgressed particular moments, beliefs, or actions” (p. 92). My moments of reflection, what went right or wrong during any given school day, frequently led to the creation of innovative activities as I continued to challenge myself to improve. I used a similar process when writing my dissertation, as I decided to reflect on my experiences as a writer and a teacher to explain how I approached my study. I feel I cannot write the most important document of my educational career to date without acknowledging the influences which brought me to this point in time.

As part of my reflection, I ventured into an old file box containing past writing. I intertwine past writing with new vignettes to create a multigenre presentation highlighting key moments in my teaching and writing career. An end notes section containing explanations, similar to the end notes section after the fiction, follows my multigenre journey.
Student Teaching Journal

January 14, 1997

My first official day! What can I say? I’m excited, nervous, and looking forward to what I hope is a good semester. My supervising teachers are both very nice. I’m glad I have the chance to work with two very different personalities. I’m glad that I have the chance to do things gradually. When my mom student taught at a school in Indiana in 1969, her cooperating teacher left the room and hardly ever returned. It’s great to know the way student teaching works has changed.
Marilyn Kepler Bird’s Journal

What of my life will be left for J. to know – feelings, thoughts – who I was – who I am.

Repeating same mistake of previous generations – not leaving any of the “real” person behind. Why I did/lived the way I did – Regrets? Changes? Life lessons?
Elementary School Dreams

Someday I would like to be a famous author.

The Pig With One Pink Eye

A Book By Jenny Bird
Lesson Plans

You have been made principal of Chaminade-Julienne for a day.

What rules would you keep?

What rules would you eliminate?

How do you deal with students who cause trouble?

You can spend your next birthday doing anything you want.

How would you spend the day?

What people would you want to spend the day with?

What presents would you like to receive?

What food would you eat?
June 19, 2000

I’m a recovering overachiever. The workshop hasn’t even started and already I’m writing. What can I say? I love to write. I’ve heard about OWP for years, and I’m so excited that I’m actually getting to do this!
Multigenre Literary Analysis Projects (Jen’s section):
Projects that combine the creativity of multigenre papers with the structure of literary analysis enable students to enjoy developing a final product that is informative and enjoyable.
Announcement

We interrupt this paper to bring you an important public service announcement. The author of this dissertation constantly refers to her lack of sleep. It is meant as a humorous illustration to show how immersed she has been in research over the last few months. Real insomnia is not a laughing matter. If you are experiencing difficulty sleeping for reasons other than choosing to spend time on research for doctoral classes, consult your doctor immediately. We now return you to our regularly scheduled paper.
August 24, 1999

Finally, I am on the other side of the desk. In the eyes of students each year I see excitement, nervousness, and confidence. People who I will hopefully share my love of reading and writing with for the next year.
Journalists Deserve Respect

by Guest Columnist Jenny Bird

Every day hundreds of journalists work hard to bring the news to the average citizen. However, the average citizen often abuses the right to free speech and abuses the journalists who report the news. Reporters should have a right to get a story without having to deal with obstinate spectators.

(The article continues with several examples).
Act IV: Literature Snapshots

I once again use end notes to illuminate issues related to writing and research. Each section in the end notes corresponds to a creative multigenre piece and contains a theoretical foundation explaining the literature and life experiences I used for inspiration.

End Notes for “Student Teaching Journal”

With my student teaching journal, I projected confidence but felt terror at the prospect of teenagers actually depending on me for learning. Such learning moments occurred throughout my Miami University education.

Before I learned about writing, teaching, and curriculum, I needed to make the decision to become a teacher. It wasn’t an easy decision. Grumet (1988) believes, “the literary narrative that is autobiography resembles the social event that is curriculum: Both function as mediating forms that gather the categorical and the accidental, the anticipated and the unexpected, the individual and the collective” (p. 67). My educational autobiography connects to the curriculum I learned in my classes, as I received my bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees from Miami University.

I didn’t take my first education class until the second semester of my first year of college. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a teacher. In fact, I didn’t really think about it until I realized it was almost the end of my freshman year and I had yet to declare a major. Education is my family business. I often joked that my family had enough teachers to open our own school. I really wanted to be a writer, but I didn’t know what I could do with just an English major. I decided I might as well pick up an education degree. At this point, teaching was my “fallback career” if I couldn’t make a living as a writer. I
identify with hooks (1994) when she writes, “but the dream of becoming a writer was always present within me. From childhood, I believed that I would teach and write. Writing would be the serious work, teaching would be the not-so-serious-I-need-to-make-a-living ‘job’” (p. 2). I took teaching seriously, but I loved writing more. I agree with the statement by hooks, “writing, I believed then, was all about private longing and personal glory, but teaching was about service, giving back to one’s community” (p. 2).

I needed to make sure that teaching was something I wanted and that I wasn’t just automatically following in the footsteps of my family members. I took education classes. I worked as a camp counselor during the summers. I was a resident advisor in the college residence hall where I lived. I liked making a difference in the lives of other people. I realized education really was a fit for me.

My student teaching experience was okay, but I always thought I could have done better. Once I stood in front of a group of students, I knew I needed to know more than I had learned in classes. I made mistakes. I learned from my mistakes. I learned from my students. My students learned from me. My education classes taught me valuable information, but they could not teach me everything. Some elements of teaching can only be learned in the classroom.

My Miami classes, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, gave me confidence in my writing abilities because I realized the importance of being a writer as well as a teacher. Writing is an important part of the English classroom. Greene (1995) feels, “curriculum has had to deal with ambiguities, with relationships; it has often opened the way to transformations and unexpected possibilities” (p. 90). To help uncover some such possibilities, Greene encourages writing. She explains the value of
the National Writing Project as “one of several programs around the country that focus on the encouragement of ‘freewriting’ and the relationships between reflective reading and being motivated to write. These programs have led to the encouragement of journal writing by teachers as well as their students” (p. 105). In addition to examining what teachers teach, Greene looks at how they teach. She writes about teacher educators and attitudes as she explains, “given the social scientific orientations of many of us as teachers and teacher educators, we have focused on large conceptualizations, both interpretive and functionally rational; we have centered our attention on historical and social developments affecting aggregates of human beings over time” (p. 191). Greene effectively connects the fields of teacher education, curriculum, and writing; I became immersed in all three fields during my career as an educator.

**End Notes for “Marilyn Kepler Bird’s Journal”**

My mom wrote constantly. The dream of getting her writing published eluded her, but mainly she wrote simply because she loved to write. Reading this excerpt I included from her journal touched me deeply. I can probably trace my decision to share the real me in my dissertation to reading her words. Years from now and long after I am dead, a Miami University librarian will pull my dissertation from the shelves of King Library, dust it off, and know the person I was.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) believe, “we may think of our own education through curriculum situations in terms of theory and practice” (p. 89). My mom once told me that the two things she wanted to give me were roots and wings. The curriculum of teacher education, if done correctly, should provide the same things. Educators should
have roots (theory). They should know about their fields and why they became teachers. Educators should also have wings (practice). They should develop the confidence to take risks in their classrooms or other educational settings.

It is impossible for me not to bring myself to my research. I guess technically it is possible, but boring. Richardson (1997) argues, “people organize their personal biographies and understand them through the stories they create to explain and justify their life experiences” (p. 30). As part of my life experience, my mom died in the middle of my research. My favorite line from the play Our Town by Wilder (1938) is when the character Emily asks the Stage Manager, “do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?” (p. 100), to which the Stage Manager replies, “no. The saints and poets, maybe – they do some” (p. 100). The saints, the poets, and my mother. My personal life was shattered, yet I needed to continue with my professional research. Still, my outlook on professional research had changed because of my personal experiences. I was no longer as concerned with how others, whether they were colleagues at Miami University or elsewhere, viewed my ideas. I needed to do things my way. I did wonder, however, if I wrote too much about my mom and what happened to her. Then I realized I would give anything to be able to write a different dissertation, one where my mom was still here.

Richardson (1997) asks, “How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write? How does what we write affect who we become? These are timeless and timely questions” (p. 1). I cannot ignore the fact that my personal circumstances are going to influence my professional writing, but I can find the right balance. I have obligations to the teachers I interview when reporting their stories. Nash
(1997) believes, “while shared commitments are certainly important, they do not always have to take the form of a strong solidarity or commonality” (p. 92). It is my responsibility to tell stories without influencing teachers’ decisions about writing or allowing my role as a researcher to interfere with a community of writers.

Heard (1995) believes, “synchronicity draws recognizable patterns on a sometimes chaotic universe. Writers need to pay attention to these synchronistic moments and events” (p. 104). As a researcher, I need to make connections and put everything into a final product in an attempt to bring order to the chaos. Narrative inquiry helps me bring order to the chaos of an evolving field experience as well as my evolving life. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, “in narrative inquiry, people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories” (p. 43). While I gather the stories during my research process, I continue to live my own story and learn something about myself in the process. I use my narratives, as well as the narratives of other teachers, to provide a space for sharing stories. Florio-Ruane (2001) observes, “to be a learner about self and other in ways that foster transformation is quite a different matter. Both the ‘I’ and the ‘thou’ are changed – enriched – in such encounters” (p. 153). Writing helps create a space for sharing stories. Stories can transform education.

**End Notes for “Elementary School Dreams”**

I attempted to recreate a drawing I completed in elementary school, although the computer could not recapture the elegance (at least in my mind) of silver crayon on green construction paper, designed by a child who truly believed anything was possible.
I still haven’t lost my creativity and the desire to know what authors think. After attending an education summit for Miami University’s Department of Educational Leadership, I invented my own fictional summit featuring the topic of teachers writing with students. I used comments from various experts on teaching, writing, and research and turned them into a conversation. I thought it would be fun and informative to pretend that all of the authors were in the same room sharing their convictions about teachers writing in their classrooms. By creating an author summit, I learned that teachers who are also writers experience the writing process as they teach it. They take their own advice as they teach students how to become better writers. They become immersed in a writing community and dive into writing pool instead of standing on the edge.

Me: Thank you all for attending today. We’re here to talk about teachers writing in class with their students. Let’s start with the teachers. What do you tell your students?

Maureen Barbieri (1995): “I had explained our curriculum for the year. We would write every day on topics of our own choosing, and yes, I would write with them” (p. 18).

Linda Rief (1992): “We take at least thirty minutes each Monday for silent writing. I begin my writing with the students during this time” (p. 30).

Me: You provide great examples of using writing in the classroom. What advice do you have for teachers who are uncertain about writing with their students?

Donald Graves (1994): “Writing is a craft. It needs to be demonstrated to your students in your classroom, which is a studio, from choosing a topic to finishing a final draft. They need to see you struggle to match your intentions with the words that reach the page” (p. 110).
Jane Kearns (1997): “Students do not see teachers write enough. They see us talking, reading, viewing, reprimanding, ordering, conferencing, and sometimes listening. They need to see us writing” (p. 83).

Ruth Shagoury Hubbard (1996): “When teachers write and share how they write with their students, they are able to provide more than the overt activities that make up the skill of writing – they can share their own inner processes as well” (p. 47).

Dallin Malmgren (1994): “A teacher of writing who doesn’t write with students is just faking it. Learn by doing. A teacher who writes will appreciate the difficulty of each assignment and learn firsthand which ones are effective and which aren’t” (p. 9).

Louanne Johnson (1998): “Even when I have a cooperative class, I do every assignment with my students. Working with them keeps me on track and makes them feel important” (p. 193).

Leila Christenbury (1994): “Teachers of writing should write. Yes, that is you, too” (p. 197).

Constance Weaver (1996): “A teacher can model with the entire class how to edit a paper. One way to do this is to share a piece of your own writing that you have edited, or that a copy editor has edited for publication” (p. 88).

Nancie Atwell (1987): “Teachers do not require student writers to do anything they don’t do themselves as writers. They draw on their personal knowledge of writing when conferencing with students” (p. 283).

John Gaughan (1997): “Sharing my struggles with writing helped to create the atmosphere of trust students need to write honestly and subsequently boosted individual students’ confidence” (p. 7).
Don Murray (1968): “The writing teacher cannot afford to hide behind the myth of his own good writing. He should do assignments with the students and have his own papers dittoed and criticized by the class” (p. 21).

Me: All of you have provided a great framework for why teachers should write with students. But what if teachers have difficulty writing? Do you have any suggestions?

Natalie Goldberg (1990): “We need to learn to accept our minds. Believe me, for writing, it is all we have” (p. 53).

Don Murray (1996): “The writing muscle must be exercised. If we are not in the habit of receiving writing, none will be delivered” (p. 17).

Georgia Heard (1995): “As I walk, I write. Words circle my head. I speak lines out loud to see how they’ll sound” (p. 32).

Natalie Goldberg (1986): “It’s also good to know some local people who are writing and whom you can get together with for mutual support. It is very hard to continue just on your own” (p. 80).

Julia Cameron (1998): “Valuing our experience is not narcissism. It is not endless self-involvement. It is, rather, the act of paying active witness to ourselves and to our world” (p. 50).

Don Murray (1998): “Put rear end in chair every day and keep it there until the writing is done” (p. 19).

Natalie Goldberg (2000): “Writing is an immediate mirror: it reports back to you. You can’t fool anyone, especially yourself” (p. 218).
Ralph Fletcher (1993): “There are poems, plays, stories, articles, novels everywhere, right under your feet, just waiting to be written. Open your eyes and the rest of your senses” (p. 162).

Anne Lamott (1994): “Take the attitude that what you are thinking and feeling is valuable stuff, and then be naïve enough to get it all down on paper” (p. 113).

Me: Thanks for the practical advice that can help teachers with their own writing. Some of you have done research related to teachers and students writing during class. What did you learn from your scholarship?

Linda Miller Cleary (1991): “If teachers write with their students and permit students to respond to that writing, it helps provide a feeling of community that will lessen the feeling of threat that students can feel in letting others respond to their work” (p. 191).

Ruth Vinz (1996): “It is not difficult to state that the teacher of literature should be a practicing writer” (p. 100).

Nancy Welch (1997): “Through writing and reflecting alone and with others, we believed participants could denaturalize and demystify their practices, beliefs, and institutional contexts, making them available for examination, critical questioning, and creative play” (p. 123).

Me: Thank you for sharing your opinions and participating in today’s summit.

Teachers as writers add their own voices to a writing workshop, thus leading by example and encouraging students to effectively find their own unique voices and ways of expression. Fletcher (1993) explains, “voice in writing has to do with a unique personality on paper” (p. 77). The writing seminar that helped me find my own unique writing voice was Miami University’s Ohio Writing Project. Lamott (1994) states, “and
the truth of your experience can only come through in your own voice” (p. 199). By writing in my own voice and not trying to be someone else, in life or on paper, I discovered people wanted to hear what I had to say.

End Notes for “Lesson Plans”

I recreated one of the lesson plans that used writing prompts I designed for my high school classes. The lesson plans only describe the prompts. The following scene describes what happened when I used the activity in my classroom.

My students listen intently. I am discussing the latest writing assignment with them. Instead of merely telling them, I am showing them. I place my writing on the overhead projector so that it illuminates the screen. Some days when I do this, I am in the middle of a draft. Other times I have a nearly finished product to show them. We are writing and learning together; this is why I feel it is important to share my writing with my students. If I ask them to write, I write, too. I feel modeling and sharing experiences with students becomes an essential part of the writing, teaching, and learning process for all of us.

Teachers often wonder where they can find the time during the day to write. The hectic world of high school often offers little time for reflection and discussion, let alone writing. When I ask my students to silently write during a class period, I take out my notebook and write a piece of my own. I strive to create a community of writers. By the end of the year, all of my students have shared at least one piece of writing by choice.

I also read my writing aloud. I admit that when I write with my students during class time, the prose is not as good as when I type a final draft of something on my
computer. This does not worry me. My students need to see that I am not a perfect writer, that good writing is a process.

Romano (1987) argues, “in a classroom full of opinionated teenagers, the last thing a teacher wants to feel is more vulnerable. The job is tough enough” (p. 39). Romano illustrates how his own writing journey also transformed his students. He explains, “the teacher, they saw, wrestled with the same problems they did – a comforting fact for a learner” (p. 40). I agree with Romano’s statement, “writing is learned only through participation. Teachers who write and share their words assume a humane, participatory stance toward learning and teaching the craft of writing” (p. 43). Sharing my writing in class is not safe in the sense that I become vulnerable to the critique of others. Teachers often want to remain in control and do not like feeling this way. For me, my personal risk is worth it when I see students succeed.

When teachers share their writing, students see the writing process, not just a completed piece of prose in a textbook. Atwell (1987) describes her journey with teaching writing and transforming curriculum. She elaborates, “I started out as a creationist. The first days of every school year I created; for the next thirty-six weeks I maintained my creation. My curriculum” (p. 3). Atwell then describes how her perspective and teaching methods changed through the years. She reflects, “these days, I learn in my classroom. What happens there has changed; it continually changes. I’ve become an evolutionist, and the curriculum unfolds now as my students and I learn together” (p. 3). One of my biggest successes with integrating teaching, curriculum and writing occurred when the seniors I taught wrote multigenre papers. I started by showing my seniors drafts of pieces I had written based on the novels Rebecca and The Kitchen
God’s Wife. Some of them joked that if they were giving me a grade, it wouldn’t be very high. Nevertheless, my work inspired my students to write creative pieces of their own. The papers they turned in were the best I had seen during my teaching career. Even though I endured jokes about my writing, I inspired my students to write.

Despite the success of creative writing projects in high school classrooms, some educators believe in more traditional forms of writing. Tchudi and Tchudi (1999) state, “there must be – there are – middle grounds in all this, positions that allow a teacher to place appropriate emphasis on skills and processes to help kids compose successfully in recognizable and conventional discourse forms” (p. 138). Some teachers may consider knowing how to write a five-paragraph essay important for assessments such as standardized tests. Other forms of writing can achieve the same objectives, often increasing student engagement in the process. Allen (2001) asserts, “although each student who participates in the process has different experiences and learns different things, consistently multigenre projects have helped our students build skills, have extended our curriculum in meaningful ways, and have helped our students value themselves and one another” (p. 8). Thus, creativity has a place in formal research.

End Notes for “Ohio Writing Project Journal”

I wrote this journal entry on the first day of my first Ohio Writing Project seminar. Even though I didn’t know it at the time, my research story actually began almost five years ago on that day. One of the things I enjoyed the most about my first OWP seminar was the opportunity to teach a writing lesson to other teachers. All of us exchanged ideas, allowing the lessons to create a space for professional development and
shared learning. For three summers I participated in the Ohio Writing Project and shared ideas with other teachers. I found myself strongly identifying with the goals of the program. The goals included encouraging teachers to write and providing resources for teachers to take back to their classroom. The goals also challenged teachers to discuss their teaching methods and the curriculum of their schools. At the end of the summer of 2000, I learned from my colleagues, shared my teaching methods for developing community in the classroom, designed the curriculum for the new junior English class I proposed for Chaminade-Julienne High School, and wrote a novella. I felt and experienced the connection between teaching, learning, writing, and curriculum.

Because of OWP’s commitment to helping teachers become better writers, teachers, and curriculum practitioners, I thought it would be an excellent place to conduct the research for my dissertation. First, however, I needed to gain access. Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) explain, “the organization of the research setting may also influence the effort to secure access” (p. 29). Occasionally great coincidences happen on the researcher’s road to gaining access to a site. One of Chaminade-Julienne’s English teachers happened to be teaching a summer OWP seminar called Teacher as Writer. The topic? Encouraging teachers to become writers. Exactly what I needed. My former colleague granted me access to the seminar.

I looked forward to working with my former colleagues at Chaminade-Julienne again. Even though all of the English teachers would not be participating in the summer seminar, they would provide a network of professional colleagues with whom I could share resources and ideas. I have been impressed with C-J’s English Department ever since I became a part of it. The teachers desire to create a space for learning and
conversation. It was a wonderful feeling to have my friends and colleagues attend conferences with me and watch my presentations. Each of the English teachers at C-J values creativity and empowering students; such values are revealed in their teaching. Teachers new to the department are mentored and guided, causing them to feel part of the English department family. During my years at C-J, I felt respected and gained confidence because of the constant support from my colleagues. Now that I was a researcher instead of a teacher, would I be viewed differently? Mertens (1998) suggests that researchers can achieve success by “accommodating yourself to the routines of the informants, establishing what you have in common, helping people out, displaying an interest in them, and acting like a person who belongs (and being yourself)” (p. 178). The last part of the statement resonated with me. I needed to keep remembering to be myself throughout my research journey.

**End Notes for “NCTE Presentation”**

I recreated the conference program from the National Council of Teachers of English presentation where I first shared my ideas with a national audience. Most people loved it, although at the time I felt like I failed because several people walked out of the room. Maybe they just had to use the restroom, but I thought they hated my ideas. During the presentation, one of my colleagues complimented me for being a gambler with teaching activities. I learned I could take a professional risk and survive, even though my parents would disagree based on the tearful phone call they received immediately after my first national conference presentation.
When I design writing activities, I take risks and encourage students to do the same. I reached the conclusion that if I do not take a risk with my dissertation, then I will feel like a hypocrite. How could I tell my students it is okay to take risks if I am not willing to do so myself? When a writer tries something new, there is a risk it will not be seen as academically worthy by other scholars. That is why it is important for writers to develop rationales for how they present their research. Ellis (1997) asks the question, “How do I tell my story this time? It depends on what I am ready to learn about myself and the world around me, what my purposes are, and who I think my audience will be” (p. 119). As a writer, I think about my audience and do not want them to be bored. On the other hand, I cannot overly obsess about my audience because I will be too afraid to write anything. Lincoln (1997) argues, “the choice of audience, the conscious imagining of those who might read our work, will have some influence on who we are in a text” (p. 41). Maybe this is true. There is information I wouldn’t share in an academic text that I would in a personal text. Why?

Where is the fear?

That I won’t be taken seriously as an academic researcher?

That I will share too much of myself with my readers?

I tell my students to “just write.”

Now I will do the same.

Writing frees me

To break down the walls

I impose on myself.
When I took Margo Sacco’s education methods class as an undergraduate at Miami University, she emphasized the importance of writing rationales for what we teach. That way, if someone challenged an activity, a teacher would have a theoretical foundation for how the activity fit with the curriculum. Sacco (1994) states, “educators should know why they teach literature and why they teach what they teach to defend literature” (p. 69). The same can be applied to writing. Another education methods class I took was taught by Tom Romano. I wrote my first multigenre paper for the class and discovered I loved working with creative writing styles in addition to completing research. Romano (2000) defines the concept and explains, “a multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images, and content” (pp. x-xi). A multigenre paper can include poems, skits, artwork, photographs, and fictional scenes. Romano (2004) elaborates, “a multigenre paper is about a single topic but is composed of many different genres that hang together” (p. 34). The key to writing a successful multigenre paper is unity; the genres must fit together in order to paint a complete picture for the reader. Multigenre papers also include notes at the end to help the reader understand why the writer chose certain genres over others.

Romano (1995) argues, “the multigenre research paper recognizes that there are many ways to see the world, many ways to show others what we see” (p. 130). Gaughan (2001) concurs with the statement by adding, “multiple genres act as multiple lenses” (p. 21). I wondered if it would be possible to write a multigenre dissertation, even though it involved taking a risk and creating a new style of dissertation. Morenberg (1997) believes, “one characteristic of an effective writer is that her stylistic choices fit her
content: the way you say things affects what you say” (p. 244). Max Morenberg was another Miami professor who taught me how to develop my own style as a writer and grammarian while maintaining acceptable rhetoric.

Just because a format may be nontraditional doesn’t mean it lacks a solid theoretical foundation. The research field of narrative inquiry provides a foundation for creative ways of presenting educational research. Romano (2000) argues, “theory about narrative thinking provides scholarly underpinning for multigenre writing” (p. 18). Narrative inquiry fascinated me instantly. Here was a discourse that supported the telling of stories as research. I had to know more. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe, “narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines” (p. 121). By telling the stories of others, I am also telling mine. Although I have numerous stories to tell from my life, the stories I tell in a narrative research project need to have a purpose. Lacey (2000) explains, “what distinguishes narrative from other forms is that it presents information as a connected sequence of events” (p. 13). In other words, narratives cannot be simply a series of random stories thrown together. Lacey adds, “narrative’s emphasis on causality can also be demonstrated by using the discourse of linguistics” (p. 14). This framework leads to the statement by Romano (1995), “each genre offers me ways of seeing and understanding that others do not. I perceive the world through multiple genres. They shape my seeing. They define who I am” (p. 109).

Therefore, the structure of linguistics, the creativity of multigenre writing, and the stories shared through narrative inquiry are all connected. Romano (2004) believes, “our very personalities shape our voices and determine how and what we put on the page” (p.
6) For me, this meant writing a multigenre dissertation with a foundation in narrative inquiry that explored the topics of writing, curriculum, and the teacher education methods that enable changes in classrooms.

Announcement

I first realized my dissertation might be interesting when I included this piece in an early draft. Several readers admitted they laughed out loud. Over the past few months, narrative inquiry has occupied my mind. Sometimes it occupies my mind so much that I have difficulty falling asleep because of the ideas swirling around in my head. I envisioned the following dramatic scene as a confrontation between me and the theorists I have been reading.

It is Monday morning, 1:38 am. Our heroine, continually obsessed with discourses and theory, has been drifting in and out of sleep.

**Theorists (in unison):** Jenny…Get up!

**Me (groggily):** What? Not again! I finally fell asleep! Can’t all of you just leave me alone for a few hours?

**Theorists:** But you weren’t thinking about us for a few hours. We were worried.

**Me:** I may never sleep again. Okay, now that I’m awake, explain yourselves. What is narrative inquiry?

**Clandinin and Connelly** (2000): “For us, life – as we come to it and it comes to others – is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (p. 17).
Richardson (1997): “Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; it humanizes time; and it allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions and to alter the directions of our lives” (p. 27).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000): “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (p.20).

Florio-Ruane (2001): “Narrative is imposed on the bits and pieces of experience to create a coherent sense of meaning spanning past, present, and future” (p. 145).

Connelly and Clandinin (1988): “From the point of view of curriculum the idea is that the curriculum a person has experienced is found in that person’s overall past record of experiences in private life as well as in professional life” (p. 20).

Lyons and Kubler LaBoskey (2002): “We define narrative practices preliminarily, as intentional, reflective human actions, in which teachers and their students, or researchers and their colleagues, interrogate their teaching or research practices to construct meaning, interpretation, and knowledge of some aspect of teaching or learning through the creation of narrative(s)” (p. 6).

Connelly and Clandinin (1988): “Narrative is the story of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (p. 24).

Me: Telling stories fits me perfectly. I have been telling stories for years. Narrative inquiry gives me a way to discover meaning in the stories I listen to and hear. This is great! Now if only I could sleep…………

I wanted a humorous, yet factual way to illustrate my thoughts from months of research. One night I actually dreamt about theory. I admit I was worried. Do all
doctoral students dream about theory? The previous scene is a reworking of my dream that also incorporates factual information from each of the theorists.

Narrative inquiry does not simply involve telling stories. Why do I tell and retell certain stories instead of others? Why am I interested in some stories and not others? What is the meaning behind the stories? What are the implications of sharing stories with other people? How do I tell the stories I want to share? Which moments do I want to relive and which do I want to forget and why? At the end of the novel *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald (1925) writes, “so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (p. 189). The stories of our lives continue moving forward, but the past will always be with us. That is why it is important to reflect on our experiences.

*Narrative Haikus*

Play with tense and time

Delve and let your voice be heard

This order makes sense

Ideas in my head

Want to watch *Friends* and *ER*

But theory won’t leave

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) believe, “the process of coming to know ourselves as practicing teachers is difficult. So much of our personal practical knowledge is tacit, unnamed, and, because it is embodied in our practice, difficult for us to make explicit.
Furthermore, teaching provides little opportunity for reflection” (p. 33). Even though I wish some things about Miami’s Teacher Education Program had been different, I still learned valuable lessons and applied them to my teaching. The strongest thing I learned was the importance of teachers reflecting on their teaching. My professors encouraged my classmates and me to think critically about what we learned and take the time to reflect. What worked? What didn’t work? What could/should/would be different the next time? Why?

Starting with the semester I took my undergraduate methods classes, I have taken the time to reflect on my teaching. For over ten years my reflection time has been between the television shows *Friends* and *ER*. I don’t watch any of the shows between them, so I use the time to think about my week of teaching. I congratulate myself on my successes and evaluate why certain activities may not have worked. I truly believe that the reflection and self-evaluation have made me a better teacher. At the end of each school year I feel like Codell (1999), who writes, “of course, I cried. There was so much I wanted to say. But the sands of the hourglass fell, and they left me, single file” (p.185). While I feel sad when losing each group of students, I can also feel confident that I have helped shaped their futures. A colleague once complimented me on my self-confidence in the classroom; my confidence is a direct result of my reflection time. My self-confidence has also allowed me to share my own writing with my students.

*End Notes for “Teaching Journal”*

I include a journal entry from the first day I had my own classroom. It was actually my second year of teaching, but my first year of teaching I was a long-term
substitute following the lesson plans of another teacher. This time around, everything would really be mine. I remember looking at copies of student schedules and thinking that my name was listed as the teacher, therefore I was the one responsible for over one hundred students. The revelation was both exciting and scary. I continually had to reinvent myself and my lessons based on evolving circumstances. The same applies to narrative inquiry and my research design.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, “narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of continual reformulation of an inquiry than it does a sense of problem definition and solution” (p. 124). Even though my research had the potential to take different directions once I arrived at the Ohio Writing Project seminar, I needed a basic plan. I also intended to be flexible in order to accommodate other questions and circumstances that emerged throughout the duration of my research.

Beane (1997) argues, “using themes that link personal and social issues promotes the integration of self and social interest, a marker of social responsibility in a democratic society” (p. 50). By telling stories about their own experiences as writers, I hoped teachers would examine how their personal issues influenced the social issues of creating community in their classrooms. Marshall, Sears, and Schubert (2000) explain, “through biography as curricular text we can see how individuals reconstructed themselves and their work, including the need to reread past decisions and changes” (p. 199). Teachers’ own stories could potentially shape the curriculum of their writing classrooms.

Once I began my research, I made changes as situations developed. I discovered that being part of the research seminar as a participant observer felt like walking on a tightrope. If I took notes as I observed other teachers, I did not devote my full
concentration to the activity. If I did the activity, I did not take as many notes. Finally, during the third day of the eight day seminar, I found a balance between my two roles.

In qualitative research, researchers need to adapt to emerging circumstances. I reminded myself of this constantly during the writing seminar. Gay (1996) advises researchers, “you may tend to get frustrated at times because you cannot do everything the way you would like to because of real or bureaucratic constraints. Don't let such obstacles exasperate you. Just relax and do your best” (p. 84). I originally intended to provide OWP participants with a resource guide compiled of past OWP writing ideas. I eliminated the resource guide and its corresponding question because, from the start of the seminar, teachers shared new ideas about teaching writing with colleagues. To introduce a resource guide would be overshadowing the creative ideas of the teachers. To me, it was worth eliminating one of my research questions in order to better fit in with the community of writers.

Beyer (1996) explains, “the belief that significant educational and social change is possible has been fueled by a number of forces – both theoretical and practical” (p. 16). I believe both theory and practice are necessary for educational change. Throughout my research, I frequently observed connections and conflicts between theory and practice.

End Notes for “News Article”

During my sophomore year of high school, my journalism teacher asked to include one of my articles written for class in the school newspaper. I noticed the jealous stares of my classmates, since sophomores typically were considered too young to be on the newspaper staff. I had the opportunity to become the paper’s editor my junior and
senior years, but turned it down and quit writing articles. The thought of the entire school critiquing my writing seemed too much to deal with at the time. For the last two years of high school, I questioned my decision. I couldn’t go back and change it, so I had to live with it. I include an excerpt from my news article because I easily saw the connections between journalism and research while completing a case study for my dissertation.

Teachers learn from their colleagues when attending the Ohio Writing Project, but the real challenge involves sharing the new information with students during the school year. The curriculum influences teacher’s decisions. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) write, “teachers often tell stories about the ways they have learned from their curricular milieus” (p. 210). I completed my case study for this project at Chaminade-Julienne High School, the school where I spent four years teaching English.

My role at C-J became somewhat of an unusual one. I was not there every single day like I used to be when I was a teacher, but I was still part of the community and knew a significant amount of what happens in the school. Heifetz (1994) argues, “leadership is both active and reflective. One has to alternate between participating and observing” (p. 252). Observation led to participation as I saw situations unfold around me and felt the need to do something about them. Naturally, some people were suspicious. Who does she think she is leaving academia and sharing this knowledge with us without getting paid for it? What are her motives?

My motivation involves helping teachers by making their lives a little bit easier. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) believe, “program implementation may be done in heavy-handed ways or in very subtle ways” (p. 148). My goal was not to implement a specific program, but to provide teachers with resources to make their own decisions. I became
pulled into the school’s curriculum redesign, even though the process would not be complete by the end of the academic year. I shared my curriculum knowledge with teachers, hoping it would make a difference. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, “when narrative inquirers are in the field, they are never there as disembodied recorders of someone else’s experience. They too are having an experience, the experience of the inquiry that entails the experience they set out to explore” (p. 81). I discovered the creativity I applied to writing at the Ohio Writing Project applies to curriculum design as well. As writers, we take risks. We try ideas and evaluate them to determine whether or not they work. The same process also applies to creating and implementing new curriculum plans.

It is difficult to decide when to walk away, both from writing and from research. The Ohio Writing Project will continue to provide writing seminars for teachers every summer and professional development during the academic year. The stories teachers share are their own; by sharing such stories community is created during a summer seminar and taken back into each teacher’s classroom for the academic year. The classroom applications of teachers sharing their stories can be astounding if teachers consider such a choice. Some teachers opt out of the sharing process, while others elect to apply concepts learned at OWP and turn their classrooms into high school versions of OWP seminars. One OWP participant recently published a book, thus showing students writing does not have to end with a paper turned in for a grade. I view myself as a writer and a curriculum planner, willing to share my stories and hopefully help the Chaminade-Julienne community with curriculum redesign. I may not know the lasting influences of my creativity, but I am proud of attempting to implement change.
Act V: Jen’s OWP Portfolio

Throughout my dissertation, I refer to both the writing I completed for the Ohio Writing Project and the curriculum design I assisted at Chaminade-Julienne High School. Here, I share examples and additional critique. I present a series of snapshots, which Fletcher (1993) describes as “deliberately removing the element of time and providing the reader with snapshots of a particular world, place, or character” (p. 126). You have just finished reading the theoretical foundations of my research and writing; I now present OWP in practice.

Writing through the Pain

I never wanted to write about what happened to my mom, but I felt I had to or it would keep me from writing anything else. At the Ohio Writing Project seminar, all of us were encouraged to share our writing with the large group and receive feedback in the form of anonymous notes. My essay about my mom was the hardest thing I have ever had to write, but I needed to tell the story and wanted to share my mom’s life with others. I include the writing I read aloud and the reactions of the other teachers.

Memories of Marilyn

Saturday, November 22, 2003. My dad had recently endured unexpected open-heart surgery. My mom, overwhelmed by this unexpected turn of events, asked me to come home for the weekend to help her. I vividly remember how happy I was that Friday morning as I drove the hour from my apartment to my parents’ house. The next day, Mom asked me to stay inside with Dad, who couldn’t be left alone, while she worked in
the yard. I walked outside to ask her about dinner. Found her. Face down in the side yard. Yelled for Dad. Called 911. Tried CPR. Watched paramedics put Mom on a stretcher while Dad clutched his heart. Rode with a policewoman to the ER. Met Grandpa and family friends. Saw look on doctor’s face. Screamed. NO! GOD NO! MOMMY!!!!

I felt fortunate to have a close relationship with my mom, especially when I listened to stories some of my friends told about not wanting to speak to their mothers. Mom died too young, but she truly lived each moment she was alive. To her, life was fun and shouldn’t be taken too seriously. She was always telling me, her serious, studious daughter, to lighten up and enjoy life. She didn’t worry about what other people thought of her.

For Mom, each shopping trip was an adventure. Shoe shopping was a chance for both of us to try on new pairs, including ones we may not even like but wanted to see how they looked. Each month we completed what Mom called “the magazine hunt,” where Mom and I attempted to guess which bookstore would have the new monthly magazines first. I remember once we went to Books and Company three times in one day as part of “the thrill of the magazine hunt.”

When we walked through a park the month before the horrible heart aneurysm took her life, Mom made me stop. The two of us sat on a park bench, watched nature, and truly appreciated our surroundings and the fact that we were lucky enough to sit on a park bench on a fall Sunday afternoon. Taking walks was another one of our favorite things. We would talk about anything and everything. Sometimes the conversations would be fun; other times they would be about problems in our lives.
Mom’s favorite toys were puppets. She always said that it is impossible to be sad or upset when you have a puppet. Her two favorites were a yellow cat named Buttons that was the best dollar I ever spent at the dollar store, and an eagle named Beaker that she gave me in honor of teaching at a high school where the mascot was an eagle.

Mom would take the long way around when driving to places. The journey, and the things you saw on the trip, meant just as much as the destination. On numerous summer car trips we would crank the windows down, turn the radio up, and enjoy the ride.

Once I called Mom to tell her of an academic accomplishment. By the time I got home, there were cupcakes (store bought of course, because Mom hated cooking) on the table. I would arrive at my apartment at the end of a rough day only to find a funny card and a note of encouragement in my mailbox. Somehow she always seemed to know just when I needed a letter.

I don’t want to live in a world without Mom, but I have to. Mom’s life and mine are forever connected. I want to believe she is still here in whatever way she can be. At certain moments, I feel Mom’s presence. I do not attempt to seek a rational explanation for why I feel her here. Instead, I want to believe she is still part of my life. Knowing her, she wouldn’t have it any other way. I know that the day I receive my diploma, Mom will be watching and saying, “that’s my girl.”
Reactions

You did a great job of zeroing in on the death. You also bring forth the little anecdotes which make the relationship between you and your mother clear and interesting and positive. Write one! This ought to be an important piece for you.

You made me appreciate how lucky I am to have my mom and dad in my life still. I think I’ll write about them now too. Beautiful piece.

Thank you for sharing something that is obviously hard for you to talk about. It is a nice tribute.

I definitely think you should put together your vignettes about your mom. This is a great, albeit difficult piece, but so strong and well-written. In putting your pieces together, I’d think it would be best that this is not to be the anchor piece – just as you have it written – the collection is about you, about your mom and person she is, not merely her unfortunate death. I love that you focus on her life. Thanks for sharing!

Thank you for sharing such a personal piece. Your courage inspires me to take chances with my writing and sharing. Thanks!

Thanks – it may take awhile but this is a good step towards your growth and grieving. Keep working – the work is what gets you through.

Thank you for sharing your story. I can’t imagine walking outside and finding your mom dead. That’s a lot to go through at any age. It’s evident that she’s still with you despite the physical absence.

It’s tough throwing the piece of you out for people to listen to. Sharing those feelings and events are so risky, and I appreciate you giving your story to us.

Holy cow! It takes a lot of courage to be able to share something so powerful especially so soon after the event. Your mom would be proud of you for sharing (without crying).

Thank you so much for sharing this with us. It is so brave. Magazine hunts – what a wonderful detail. The series of short phrases at the beginning are so powerful – the choppiness is great at showing your experience. Thanks.

I love the memories you capture with your mom. They made me feel like I knew her in a way. That must have been difficult but also liberating to write. Thank you for sharing.

Your piece about your mother was moving. You provided a vivid description of your mother. It was an honor to hear it.
I can’t imagine living through the tragedy that you did. I’m sure that she would be so happy with how you described your relationship. Do you plan to add more – or start something new about your mom? Nice job.

Thank you for sharing your beautiful story with us. It would be so difficult to meet this head on with a pen. Thanks for sharing such a personal story. Will you write more memoirs about her? I loved the fragmented thoughts you included when you discovered her! Great job!

Memories are hard to write. I appreciate your effort to put a life on paper. I’d like to hear more of this when it is finished.

I like how you captured the frenzy of tragedy in those short choppy images. Great opening description. You might want to drop the “life as I know it.” Just start the action?

Wow! You have such strength and courage! I am amazed that you were able to write about your mother so soon and read it without breaking. I’m certain that she is proud of you and your courage in a difficult time. Thanks for sharing.

The short, simple (fragmented) sentences about the beginning really accentuate the emotion – the fragmented information, etc. There is a wonderful balance between showing your mom’s attributes and personal reflection about her.

Awesome example of powerful writing that is honest, pure, raw. You are brave to confront it, make sense of it and share it with us.

I was proud of myself for sharing such a deeply emotional essay with the class. I also confess I felt relieved no one gave me any detailed criticism. I found the strength to share a personal piece of writing, causing several teachers to say how much they admired my courage. They were impressed with the details I provided without crying during my reading. Lamott (1994) writes, “there is still something to be said for painting portraits of the people we have loved, for trying to express those moments that seem so inexpressibly beautiful, the ones that change us and deepen us” (p. 192). One of the reasons I felt comfortable sharing an intensely personal experience with people I hardly knew is because OWP instructors make a commitment to establish community in the classroom.
Readers know that while they may receive suggestions, no one will make fun of their writing. I appreciated the positive reception of my audience when sharing my mom’s story. The writing other teachers shared was just as personal as mine. As a group, we laughed, cried, and learned extensive information about our colleagues. The intense expression of emotion indicated the class had become a community of writers.

**Research Journal Notes, Part I**

My haiku poem sums up my feelings when returning to the Ohio Writing Project.

*Writing here again*

*I am forever different*

*Searching for comfort*

You will notice similarities between the fictional story and the following passage.

*I walk up the stairs to the second floor classroom where the seminar will take place. I recognize the classroom as one I have been in before, perhaps for one of my undergraduate English classes. A familiar voice calls my name. I see a woman with whom I had taken a previous Ohio Writing Project seminar and stop to chat.*

*All of us are sitting in a circle. One of the Ohio Writing Project secretaries has already stopped by to provide us with nametags. Looking around the room, there are eighteen women (including myself) and seven men (counting the two instructors) who will be participating in the seminar. All of the participants are white. There is a combination of elementary, middle, and high school teachers. I am the only person working on a Ph.D. The rest of the participants are either completing their first graduate degree or taking the seminar for professional development. There is a large age range, although at*
least half the participants are younger than I am. At 29, I actually feel old around some of them.

After the instructors open the class during the “Teacher as Writer” seminar, it is time for personal introductions. When it is my turn, I tell the class about my dissertation. I inform everyone I will write observation notes about the experience, but I will not describe individual participants when discussing the group activities. I also distribute permission forms and a list of questions phrased as writing prompts. The class is larger than I originally expected and will have fewer breaks for interviews than I anticipated, so the writing prompts are a way to get the most number of people involved. I thank everyone in advance for their cooperation.

Name___________ School ____________ (These items are for my records only)
Pseudonym______________ (Choose a first name other than your own)

How do you feel about being a writer? How do you use writing in your classroom? When your students write, what are you doing (writing, observing, conferencing, etc.)? How does writing help you empathize with your students more?

Have you ever showed students an example of your own writing? If yes, what? Why? Did it work? What would you do differently next time?

How has being a teacher who is also a writer influenced the experiences of your students? In what ways have students been influenced by you either sharing your own writing or writing with your students?

What is your biggest success story involving writing, teaching, and/or curriculum?

If you need more space, please use the back or attach another sheet of paper. Please return this survey to me by Thursday, June 29. Thank you for your help!
Dear Colleague,

I, Jennifer Bird, would like to request your participation in my dissertation study, entitled Writing A Teaching Life: Stories From Teachers As Writers. The purpose of the study is to describe how teachers use their own writing in their classrooms and how they view themselves as both writers and teachers. The expected outcome is to determine whether or not teachers who are also writers share the writing strategies they personally use with their students. The contribution to the field of education that this study will provide is to illustrate the positive examples that occur when teachers share their own writing with their students in a classroom setting and contribute to the writing curriculum by creating and using their own texts as examples.

If you agree to participate, I promise the following:

- You will be assigned a pseudonym from the beginning of the study. Your name and the name of your school will not be identified in my dissertation.
- Questions asked will deal with teaching, writing, and curriculum.
- You may end participation in the study at any time with no consequences.

If you want further details about the project, you may call me at (513) 529-6825. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in research, you may call my advisor, Dr. Tom Poetter, at (513) 529-6853 or the Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship at Miami University, (513) 529-3734.

Signing on the line below means you understand the study and your role as participant and that you give your informed consent to participate.

I, the undersigned, hereby indicate willingness to participate in the study.

_____________________________________ (date) ____________________
I was pleased I changed my original plan and started with a short survey to gain interest for my project. The survey led to conversations with the 7 individuals who agreed to participate in my study. I confess I was disappointed more people didn’t want to discuss writing with me, but 7 people out of 24 seminar participants (not including myself) means that almost a third of the group wanted to participate. I found out later, as I transcribed my own data, that having 7 people involved instead of 24 made the paperwork easier to manage. The people who did want to participate were very enthusiastic about what I was doing for my dissertation.

Research Journal Notes, Part II

Each day we would write, share our writing with others, and return to our chaotic lives. Having over two hours of writing time during the day gave OWP participants an oasis of serenity before returning to the demands of everyday life. A lot can happen in a day; therefore, we need writing time to process our experiences. Some of the participants, myself included, continued writing on our own in the evenings. First, however, we needed to conquer the computer lab. Typically, a day proceeded like the following passage from my research journal.

Everyone scatters during writing time to find their own private writing corner. Today I am in the computer lab. More people have chosen to write in the lab as opposed to the classroom, so I am listening to my fingers click on the keyboards along with everyone else’s. Occasionally someone will say something, but for the most part the writers are focused on their work. My computer is causing me problems as it asks for passwords that don’t exist and shuts down whenever it feels like it. I push myself to work
through my frustration. If I give in to it, then I will only make things worse. By being a participant observer in this process, I have given up on the fact that I can be a detached researcher. I start a piece about my mom, but it is too difficult to continue. I decide instead to revise a novella that I completed during my first summer at OWP. It will give me the opportunity to work on something fun. I spend some of the writing time completing handwritten pieces in my green spiral notebook, but complete most of my writing in the computer lab. One day I take one of my mom’s old bright green disks to the lab as a way of having her with me. The disk isn’t compatible with my computer system at home, so my computer and I make an unanticipated visit to the computer place to fix everything. Mom is no doubt laughing about the entire incident.

Discussing Reading through Poetry

Class discussions during the OWP seminar often revolved around the required reading, *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott. I enjoyed the book and read it all before the seminar started. Some days the discussion took place with the entire class as a large group; other days we split into small groups. Overall, the teachers liked Lamott’s style of writing.

One day each of the small groups wrote a found poem, using lines from the text. My group’s poem was quite interesting. For the poem, we took each line from one of Lamott’s sentences. For example, the title “Witticisms and Shimmering Insights,” was based on Lamott’s (1994) line “you may want to fill the page with witticisms and shimmering insights so that the world will see how uniquely smart and sensitive you are” (p. 104).
Witticisms and Shimmering Insights

Reality is unforgivingly complex

We are born astride the grave

You do not need to have a complicated moral philosophy

What helps in life

What hurts

Spiritualize hysteria

Write what’s important to you

My discussion group consisted of two men who taught high school English and one woman who taught elementary school. I liked the fact that my discussion group and my peer group were comprised of different people. It gave me the opportunity to get to know more teachers in the seminar. During the OWP seminar, I needed to find a balance during class discussions. As a participant, I wanted to contribute extensively to the discussions. As an observer, I needed to listen to what other teachers had to say. Somehow I was able to do both.

Guidelines for Peer Groups

There were three other women in my peer group. All of us were high school English teachers. Some days we met outside; other days we found an empty classroom. We read our writing aloud in front of the small group and offered praise and suggestions.

Before the first meeting of peer groups, the instructors wrote the following guidelines on the board.
Everyone shares

Everyone comments

Words of praise

Suggestions

Communicate needs

Thick skinned / thin skinned

Writing remains yours

Whatever I wrote, my peer group was very supportive. I tried to provide the three women in my peer group with the same support when they read their writing. All of the pieces I shared with my peer group had something to do with what happened to my mom. I did not revise any of the pieces I share with my peer group, which is why I include only my two favorite examples instead of all seven.

In addition to the poem I wrote about my dad and the narrative/list about my mom, I wrote about my mom helping me move, a friend who sent me a nice email when learning about the tragedy, my childhood home which will soon be for sale, my mom’s encouragement of my writing, and a dream when Mom and I meet to talk and she assures me we will see each other again because there is life after death.

My peer group encouraged me to keep sharing stories about my mom. During the seven days peer groups met, I shared a different piece each day. I include several examples of what I shared and a summary of my peer group’s response.
The Call I Wanted to Make

Tonight there is a phone call I won’t be able to make. I can call everyone else I know, but my thoughts will linger on the person who won’t be answering, the person I need to be there, the person I couldn’t wait to call after the first day of OWP each time I went. Mom always loved “to do” lists, so perhaps I will spend the time with what to do and what not to do this evening.

To Do:

- Cry
- Play with cat
- Call someone
- Play around with a fiction story where the characters are miserable
- Play around with a fiction story where the characters are happy, then fight the urge to kill them off out of spite
- Do something completely unproductive, like ponder whether Carter and Abby should get back together next season on ER

Not to do:

- Feel guilty about anything I do that is taking care of myself
- Let anyone else tell me what to do
- Tell anyone related with me to quit adding more problems to my life, or do it anyway and still not feel guilty
- Stop writing
- Stop believing in myself and that I can deal with anything
Dad’s Don’t Cry

Dads don’t cry
Or so he says
As he hides his tears
From me
From everyone
From the world
Dads don’t cry
Or so he says
As he works twelve hour days
To hide from the pain
To deal with the grief
He is dealing with it
Or so he says
Because Dads don’t cry

Response

My peer group liked my poem and said I was good at writing poetry, which surprised me because I don’t think of myself as a poet. When I shared the narrative/list with them, I noticed tears in their eyes. They wanted to know more details about what happened to my mom and encouraged me to keep writing about her. Goldberg (2000) states, “I believe that this is a primary commitment a writer makes to her writing, an essential commitment she makes to her reader: a willingness to be open to encounter, to
experience – and to the suffering this may bring” (p. 86). Peer groups make the commitment to share with each other and provide open and honest feedback.

**Prompting Writing**

Heard (1995) argues, “memories darkened by ages of forgetting are still inside somewhere hiding, waiting for the right smell or touch to unlock them” (p. 86). Writing prompts serve as a warm up to unlock memories and help writers get started.

*Example: What if you were someone else?*

*My written response: Trust me, these days I would really like to be someone else.*

Someone whose life is a lot less chaotic. Why did my dad have to pick the week before I started my research to move? It wasn’t easy packing up my childhood home. I know he is just trying to do what makes him happy, but it doesn’t help my stress level any. The stress didn’t cause my stomach problems, but it didn’t help either.

I didn’t share that particular response with anyone in the class. One thing I like about OWP is that writers are encouraged to share their work with others, but never forced to share.

I liked the idea of discussing how the media portrayed teachers, which caused me to incorporate the idea into the prompt I designed for the class.

“However you don’t know what to do, choose the hardest thing. Because nine times out of ten that’s the right thing to do.”

From *Boston Public*

How do you feel about the portrayal of teachers in the media? In what ways do movies and television shows positively and negatively represent teachers?
Writing as Healing

My piece for the class anthology was the essay about my mom, “Memories of Marilyn.” Looking through the anthology, I am not the only person who writes about the death of a loved one. The anthology contains pieces about the birth of children, failed relationships, school problems, and personal dilemmas. I skimmed anthologies from other OWP seminars taught by different instructors and discovered the writing was just as intense and personal.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) argue, “generally speaking, people think of the hidden curriculum as falling in the area of attitudes and values” (p. 154). Encouraging teachers to share powerful personal pieces becomes the hidden curriculum of the Ohio Writing Project. Goldberg (1990) insists of writing, “it’s not therapy: it’s the root of literature, direct connection with your mind” (p. 69). Several teachers indicated they found the writing process very therapeutic, as they expressed fears about the upcoming school year and described events in their personal lives. In a way, writing about issues during a summer seminar helps teachers focus more on their classrooms during the school year. The Ohio Writing Project provides an outlet of expression often missing in the hectic pace of a typical school day.

Research Journal Notes, Part III

Reflection is another important aspect of OWP. I found the time to think about why I write. I wrote the following observations in my research journal.

I wanted to be a writer for as long as I could remember. I even have a picture that I drew in elementary school when the teacher asked us what we wanted to be. In
purple marker on green construction paper there is a stick figure drawing of me sitting at a desk and holding a pen. The caption reads, “I want to be a writer.” For years I fought for that dream, but now that I have it, it seems hollow and empty. I guess it is because the one person I want to share my success with isn’t here to share it with me. It doesn’t help that I have been feeling alone a lot these days. Writing can be a very lonely profession, even as I sit in a computer lab surrounded by people. Their computers and lives are probably working. I want to keep writing not only because my mom believed in me, but because I believe in myself.

**Presenting Lessons**

For the seminar, each person designed a handout and shared an activity that showcases teaching writing. The presentations took place throughout both weeks of the seminar. My presentation features a description of my “greatest hits” teaching high school English. When designing my handout, I reworked sections of a book chapter I wrote (Bird, 2004). Incidentally, when creating my handout I eliminated the academic theory that originally appeared in the chapter. The teachers in the seminar want practical ideas, not theory. I also didn’t mention that I have had my work published. Publication is the dream of almost every teacher in the room; I guess I didn’t want to brag or draw unnecessary attention to myself. After my presentation, I received written notes as feedback from the other teachers. I include a copy of my presentation and the written comments I received from OWP participants.
In-School Field Trip (n.) Walking around the school to make observations that reinforce themes from works of literature.

Example: During the play Our Town, the Stage Manager allows Emily to relive a day in her life. My students and I took an in-school field trip to discuss events from their daily life they may not notice by rushing through the school day. In-school field trips allow students to connect to the literature they read. My seniors made a personal connection to the novel Siddhartha because they were preparing to leave for college, similar to how Siddhartha was preparing to leave home. We took a walk through the quiet hallways as students thought about what they would miss when they left. They wrote down their observations and compared their reactions with classmates’ reactions. My students learned from the experience and did not see the lesson as merely a chance to get out of class and walk around the school.

Background: The inspiration for this activity came from a scene in the movie Dead Poet’s Society. John Keating, an English teacher, gets his students out of the classroom and into the hallway for an important lesson about poetry and life. He connects their experiences to the experiences of students who attended the same high school years ago. The students don’t know what to think, since they have gone from one lecture to another in other classes. Most classes are a combination of lectures and notes. Mr. Keating makes them stop and think.
Media Connection (n.) Connecting contemporary media, such as television shows and movies, to classic literary texts.

Example: In the epic poem *The Odyssey*, Odysseus attempts to return home while encountering numerous obstacles. In the movie *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly attempts to return home while encountering numerous obstacles. Students make a media connection between both texts by completing a comparison/contrast essay. By observing how television shows and movies use similar themes as classic texts, students become more enthusiastic about the original works of literature. Media connections to contemporary media may only occur after reading the classic, not as a substitute for the original text.

Background: I discovered that sometimes students don’t think classic texts relate to their lives. It may be difficult for them to find resonance in a work of literature that was written a hundred years ago or longer. The first time I taught the epic poem *The Odyssey* to freshmen, students complained of confusion and boredom with the plot and language. As I read about Odysseus and his journey, I noticed a lot of similarities to Marty’s journey in the movie *Back to the Future*. I decided to assign a comparison/contrast essay requiring students to connect the journeys of the two main characters. We watched the movie during class while students took notes. Soon they were flipping through pages of the epic poem to find similarities and differences. Adding a contemporary movie allowed additional insight into the original work of literature. Making media connections also works when using the movie adaptation of a work of literature. When my students read a novel and watch the movie based on the novel, I require them to analyze why certain details may have been changed when the novel was made into a movie.
**Modernize The Classic (v).** Taking an existing classic text and updating it for a current era. Students read the original text, then write a new version. Changes may occur as long as the basic plot and theme remain the same.

**Example:** My students decided to modernize the classic *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Despite numerous adaptations to fit the world of today’s teenagers, the themes of the story remained the same. My class performed *Burger Hack* for other classes to rave reviews. When students modernize the classic literature, they gain a deeper understanding of the original text and have fun throughout the process.

**Background:** I first thought of the concept when working with a very talented and creative junior class. After reading the play *The Glass Menagerie*, I had the idea that maybe it could be rewritten and adapted for modern times. Students split into groups to rewrite the script. They volunteered to act, direct, produce, bring in music and props, and critique. All of this was accomplished during class time so I could supervise and give suggestions. What made this project even more exciting was that none of the students were involved in drama classes, but they developed an appreciation of the theater throughout the duration of the project. I invited teachers to bring their classes to the production that was performed at the beginning of the school day. I was expecting a few classes and felt overjoyed when half the school arrived in the auditorium to see our production of *Forsaken Dreams*.

I have found that creating a classroom production allows students to work with each other, learn from each other, critically analyze the original text, and have fun in the process. I love the enthusiasm behind the projects. It is enjoyable to see the result of weeks of hard work and receive the compliments of other students and teachers.
Reactions

I really like the way you adapted the classics. I would like to try this. Thanks for the great ideas.

I like the idea of showing classics and their timelines. Good job.

Great ideas to help students make connections to literature. I am always looking for cool ways to do this. Thanks!

I like the idea of modernizing the classic. The kids seem like they get a lot out of it.

The media connection idea is great. Kids are plugged to TV/film in amazing ways. I’ve used *Horton Hears A Who* to teach the quest.

An in-school field trip is a great idea! I bet the kids love it. I will definitely use this. Thanks!

*Your Odyssey – Back to the Future* connection is great. I wish I taught the *Odyssey* so I could use it—I’ll have to consider media for the literature I do teach.

Making connections is a valuable skill students need in order to comprehend a text. I like how you are immersing your students in the literature to build the bridge between the text to themselves. Thanks.

I love the rewrite idea, great work to assess their true comprehension. Also, the field trip sounds like a writers dream and a good exercise to display people’s awareness of surroundings.

Creative ideas – it’s nice you have enough time to do #3 right!

Bravo! I think it’s fantastic to use that rewrite/production as an exam – talk about “authentic assessment”!

Wonderful! I’m getting ready to teach *Our Town* for the first time, and I love the in school field trip. I really like your comparison of *The Odyssey* to *Back to the Future*. 
When I teach 1984, I assign a “media connection” – by the end of the novel, they turn in a 1 page. compare/contrast, connection, etc. between novel and media connection.

**Great ideas here. I will be stealing these from you!**

I love the in-school field trip idea! Our school is really cutting back on “real” field trips (budget reasons, of course). The in-school idea enables them to get out of the classroom but doesn’t cost as much...Thanks.

The inschool field trip is cheap and easy. What a simple yet real way to get different writing. This is a must do for my second graders. Thanks!

Wow! Thanks for sharing your ideas. I especially liked the in-school field trip. I am confident that my 3rd graders would love this! Thanks again!

It’s great to get students to make a personal connection with the school environment (in fact, the very one I teach in). You also have a good use of film to connect The Odyssey and Back to the Future. Modern media is important in the English class. I have seen the results of “modernize the classic” in person. You have a great collection here.

Teachers loved the idea of the “in-school field trip.” Due to budget cuts, some teachers could not take their students on real field trips. Teachers wanted to use the in-school field trip as a way to take their students out of the classroom and provide them with additional external learning experiences. I was impressed how teachers of all grade levels became excited about the idea, thus indicating I invented a universal concept other teachers can implement. Teachers also liked the other two ideas and thought of their own media connections to connect television and movies with the literature they teach.

Several teachers mentioned they intended to try rewrites of literature and productions with their classes. Goldberg (1986) believes of writing, “it is an opportunity to write down, without thinking, wishes at the periphery of our perceptions” (p. 59). By writing and sharing wishes for their classrooms, teachers help other teachers and their students.
All of the teachers had excellent handouts for their presentations. The activities encompassed all grade levels and several different subject areas. The teachers were very enthusiastic during the presentations and felt excited to share ideas with colleagues.

**Research Journal Notes, Part IV**

In addition to conducting research at OWP, I also visited several classrooms of OWP teachers. When a class studied poetry, I wrote a poem. When a class studied drama, I wrote a skit. I include a few examples.

*Inspiration and expression*

*Use music, art, and images*

*To create a community of writers*

*Sharing poems*

*Teacher and students read their work*

*Pens out*

*Notebooks open*

*Write on*

Students became inspired by the teacher’s constant reminder to “write on,” causing me to use the phrase in my poem. I observed the teacher recreated the same writing community with students that existed with teachers at the Ohio Writing Project.

*Students hurry into the classroom. The teacher prepares his notes. The researcher sits at a desk in the back of the room, instantly recognizing some of the students she taught two years ago as sophomores.*
Students: Miss Bird’s here! How are you? Don’t let her leave!!

Researcher: Hi everyone. I’m back.

Teacher: Let’s finish our discussion of A Doll’s House. We’ll begin with debates.

Two students debate the topic of whether or not the main character should have left her husband and children.

Teacher: We have heard both sides. I would now like to hear responses from the rest of the class. What do you think?

Numerous students participate and respectfully continue the debate. There is just enough time at the end of class for the teacher to take a picture of his community of learners.

**Moving On**

On the last day of the seminar, each person shared one final piece of writing. After all of us shared our writing, we were asked to share some of our favorite lines that other people had written. My piece was quoted a lot, which really made me happy. We also received our class anthologies which contained a sample of everyone’s writing. Soon the day and the seminar ended, sending all of us our separate ways. I decided to write a humorous essay and haiku poem especially for the occasion.

**Confessions on the Edge of 30**

Teacher As Writer

Poems, Stories, and Narratives

As we just write on
I can identify with Jennifer Garner’s character in the movie 13 Going On 30. Most of the time I am a confident, accomplished adult, but other days I just want to play on the swings.

At 29, I never imagined I would have to redefine my life. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. My mom should be here for another 30 years. I would have been 60, she would have been 90 and still giving me advice.

She was also a teacher, and I try to remember all the things she taught me. The most valuable lesson was that I should never be afraid to let people know the real me.

So who am I anyway? Here are my confessions.

I bought Debbie Gibson’s most recent CD. My students often teased me about this, until one of them confided that she also bought the CD. Eventually my students learned to deal with the fact that the 80’s were alive and well in my classroom.

Several years ago Kirk Cameron visited Chaminade-Julienne. It was nice to see him, but I would have been happier if Michael J. Fox had shown up instead.

Last week I read a “where are they now” article about the stars of the Saturday morning TV show Kids Incorporated. After 20 years, I still know all the words to the theme song but I can’t remember where I parked my car.

When I was younger my dream was to be a figure skater even though I couldn’t execute a salchow jump if my life depended on it. If it’s not an Olympic year, I get my figure skating fix by watching the Olympic skating scenes from the movie The Cutting Edge.

I will eat the icing off a piece of birthday cake first. It really is the best part.
My cat Lucy is part of my family. I don’t own her; she owns me. When she follows me around my apartment yelling, I swear she is trying to hold a conversation with me.

I never get tired of spending time with Jay Gatsby. Deep down, we’re all reaching for a green light off in the distance.

No one else is ever getting my baseball card collection. My dad laments the day he let go of Mantle and Maris before their time. I’m not doing the same with Larkin and O’Neill. Someday the Reds and Bengals will have a great season and I will laugh at the fair-weather fans who neglected the teams during the bad times.

For the same reason, the kid who mows my dad’s lawn is not getting my classic Atari 2600 no matter how much he wants it. So what if the graphics are Jurassic? Sometimes you just have to play Mousetrap and Asteroids.

No matter what people say about Spiderman or Superman, Mary Jane and Lois Lane are the real superheroes. It’s easy to fight evil with magic powers, but more difficult when you don’t have any.

I am the same person I always was, except I now refuse to watch horror movies. After living through death and terror for real, I don’t need to see it on television.

I am my mom’s legacy. She was proud of raising a confident, unique woman who is not afraid of her individual quirks.

No matter what anyone thinks.
Beyond OWP

Rereading the following essay, I’m happy I didn’t share it. Several times during the seminar, like when writing this essay, I wondered if I acted like the teacher Katherine Watson in the movie *Mona Lisa Smile*. Did I want people to find their own ideas of teaching or to think my ideas the best?

To OWP Participants

It stunned me this summer when some of you mentioned that you did not write very much. I guess I thought all OWP participants shared my desire to complete individual writing and share it with students. Perhaps the seminar “Teacher As Writer” inspired you to change your minds. For those of you who still have excuses (and not just OWP teachers, but all English teachers), I present arguments why you need to be both a teacher and a writer.

Some of you say that as new teachers, you are close in age to your students. You want to be seen as an authority figure, not a friend, and worry that sharing too much of yourself will mean students won’t take you seriously as a teacher. Kearns (1997) writes, “I don’t know any teacher who has ‘mastered’ teaching but we improve as we constantly evolve” (p. 7). So you can take comfort in the fact that the veteran teacher down the hall still makes mistakes and continues to learn. Each year I asked for a different teaching schedule in order to learn something new. Graves (1994) argues, “when children and teachers can laugh together because both are taking risks in a secure and structured environment, writing moves ahead” (p. 130). If a teacher preaches writing and doesn’t practice, students may feel afraid of making mistakes. They view the teacher as an
authority figure whose purpose is to seize a red pen and bleed corrections all over their papers. The focus of an assignment becomes the grade, not the writing process. Cleary (1991) explains, “students became good-grade junkies, and as they begin to work for teachers, they stopped writing for themselves” (p. 67). As a former good-grade junkie, I can attest to the stress of wondering about the outcome of a paper. Too often I refused to take risks with my writing because I worried too much about the consequences.

Speaking of grades, another concern of yours has to do with grades. Writing that follows a formula lends itself to easy grading. Rief (1992) argues, “I am only one responder. The best evaluator/respondent is the writer” (p. 127). I teach my students the writing process and show them how it works by developing my own writing in front of the class. I have found that when students learn the writing process and feel comfortable with mistakes and revision, their grades are actually better. Great, you may say, but what about state proficiency test? Don’t they expect a certain kind of writing? Romano (2004) writes, “many teachers felt – with the encouragement of model essays from the state office of education – that students would do well on the tests if they used the form of the five-paragraph you-know-what” (p. 60). In some cases there may be a time and a place for a five-paragraph essay, but it cannot be the only type of writing students complete.

So you tell me you still fear personal writing? Is it academic? When teaching at a female academy, Barbieri (1995) questions, “Should writing be used as therapy for the girls to work out their developmental issues? I wondered what parents and colleagues would think” (p. 21). I learned from OWP that many teachers find writing therapeutic. Some of my students, both male and female, have worked through issues when writing,
but my classroom curriculum does not simply involve students writing personal experiences in their journals. Instead, the curriculum focuses on sharing personal narratives and allowing students to pick topics they feel passionate about in order to write better papers. When I share my writing, I do not share every detail about my personal life with students. I may write about a humorous experience from my college resident assistant days or a lesson I learned when running in a high school track meet. The point of showing students your writing is to show them that their teacher is a writer. The purpose is not to burden your students with too much personal information that should be discussed with family or friends, not in the classroom. I pride myself on being a role model for my students; sharing my writing skills gives me the opportunity.

But, you scream, I’m just too busy! Just yesterday there were midterms, parent phone calls, a fire drill, an unexpected assembly, and I am just not feeling well. It is true the high school day proceeds at a hectic pace. Some days I felt like I didn’t even have a chance to sit down and catch my breath because I was in constant motion. Romano (1987) argues, “but despite the demands of my job and the impossibility of writing with my students each time they do, I must and can show my students I write” (p. 48). Teaching can be demanding, but there can be time for writing. From here, you have the choice of what to do in your classrooms. Whether you write with your students or not is an individual decision, but please consider it.

**Curriculum Connections**

Numerous teachers attending the Ohio Writing Project seminar expressed their frustration with standardized tests consuming creativity in the English curriculum, since
several schools faced curriculum redesign because of the upcoming Ohio Graduation Test. When visiting Chaminade-Julienne High School, I had the opportunity to share curriculum ideas when members of the English Department asked for my curriculum redesign suggestions. In addition to observing several classes, I became a participant in the curriculum planning process. I felt happy to help, especially since my ideas could potentially make a difference in the lives of hundreds of students. I wish I could say that my ideas helped teachers, students, and administrators, but the results of my suggestions remain unknown as I write this.

Regardless, I feel proud of myself for attempting to do something. Several OWP teachers mentioned that after participating in seminars, they feel their voices have value, both in their classrooms and in their schools. It is another example of how the Ohio Writing Project’s influence often lasts beyond a summer for some teachers. I include my curriculum designs as examples of connections between curriculum and writing.

**Curriculum Integration**

Several years ago, a “Book of the Semester” idea was proposed in order to integrate the curriculum at C-J. Student and faculty focus groups liked the concept, but concerns arose about getting the money to purchase books and adding yet another text to an already overburdened curriculum. The ideas listed here apply curriculum integration to existing curriculum concepts. The following suggestions are intended to spark discussion and are purposely left as an outline. The intention is for teachers to create their own innovative ideas related to the topic and not use this document as an instruction manual they are required to follow.
Teachers devote two weeks during the academic year where all classes will discuss a variation of the same topic. Classes remain independent of each other and teachers will still give their own assignments to students and complete their own grading. One sample topic involves discussing the Vietnam War. Suggestions follow for each subject area.

**English:** Juniors read *The Things They Carried*. Freshmen and Sophomores read short stories and poetry in their literature books by Tim O’Brien and other authors who write about Vietnam. Seniors read selections from the World Literature book that discuss the concept of war from an Asian or European perspective. Writing concepts could include O’Brien’s argument of fact vs. fiction, while speaking topics could involve students interviewing family members who were alive during the war.

**Note:** My background is in English and I do not claim to be an expert in any of the other following subject areas. Teachers are free to expand upon ideas and add their own.

**Social Studies:** Students discuss the history of the Vietnam War and the culture of the United States and other countries during the time period the war took place. Connections could also be made to current events.

**Math:** Students discuss ratios of soldiers who served compared to soldiers who died in the war and the probability a person had of being selected in the draft. Calculations could also be made of the distance soldiers had to walk or the weight of the things they carried.

**Science:** Students discuss the concept of digging tunnels and what scientific knowledge soldiers needed in order to make sure the tunnels did not collapse. Studies could also be completed involving the medical practices used during the war.
**Religion:** Students discuss the ethics and religious views related to war. Connections may also be made to current or historical events.

**Health:** Students discuss the stress level during the war and the impact on families of having a loved one at war. Activities on stress management may also be used.

**Physical Education:** Students play a game of dodge ball and discuss their reactions to the game.

**Art and Music:** Students study art and music of the Vietnam Era.

**Life Skills:** Connections could be made with the state of the economy at the time of the war, the food the soldiers ate, and the computer technology soldiers used.

As you can see, the possibilities are endless. It would be the faculty’s decision whether to complete curriculum integration that involves the entire school or start with curriculum integration by grade level. (For example, sophomores would discuss *The Great Gatsby* and the Jazz Age, while freshmen, juniors, and seniors would have different topics). The project should involve input from all of C-J’s teachers.

**Theme Units**

This concept also involves curriculum integration, but allows teachers to have even more flexibility. During a week decided by the faculty, all teachers agree to teach a lesson related to a certain theme, such as the American Dream. The content of the lessons would be decided by department chairs and individual teachers. At the end of the week, C-J could host a guest speaker who would speak about the week’s theme.
Class Crossovers

Two or more teachers in different academic departments may also agree to complete a crossover lesson for a certain period of time. For example, one year the English and Science departments each assigned research papers to juniors. The teachers collaborated so that students completed either one large project for both teachers or two smaller projects, one for each class. Decisions about grading were made by the teachers involved in the project.

Other class crossovers could revolve around a text. For example, the play *Inherit the Wind* has been taught in Social Studies, English, and Religion classes at different times during C-J’s history. Students could read the play in one class and complete activities related to the play in the other classes. Teachers would need to make the activities different enough so that students do not feel bored discussing the same thing in three different classes. Team teaching a lesson may also work if, for example, an American Literature and American Studies class meet during the same class period. Teachers would bring their classes together to discuss one concept. In the future, the master schedule could even be set up to accommodate more class crossovers.

Jen’s Keys to Curriculum Integration (RICE)

- Reflection
- Innovation
- Collaboration
- Evaluation
Sample Curriculum Integration Scenario

Beane (1997) argues, “curriculum integration involves four major aspects: the integration of experiences, social integration, the integration of knowledge, and integration as curriculum design” (p. 4). Teachers take time to reflect on their teaching “greatest hits,” the activities they love that work well with students. During a department meeting, teachers share their ideas with each other. Brainstorming takes place on how to potentially implement different ways of assessment other than the standard exam. Portfolios, projects, and presentations are possible options. Teachers then take the ideas back to the classroom and study student interest and performance to determine how well the activity worked and if it should become a permanent part of the curriculum. Once departments have met and discussed curriculum ideas within their departments, teachers can meet with colleagues from other departments to share ideas. It is important for school administrators to allow time during faculty meetings for curriculum sharing. Beyer (1996) believes, “combating this sense of loneliness and isolation is sometimes quite difficult, especially in the early years when teachers are trying to develop and find opportunities to express their own voice” (p. 20). Faculty members must fight isolation from other teachers in order for curriculum integration to succeed.

The Curriculum Board Game

While curriculum integration needs to involve collaboration by teachers, working together can create challenges. Marshall, Sears, and Schubert (2000) state, “we believe that the essence of curriculum studies lies in the way each educator internalizes fundamental questions of what curriculum is and should be – and the attendant whys,
whens, and wheres of its enactment” (p. 3). Each teacher possesses a vision for the curriculum; often, however, visions conflict with each other. Grumet (1988) argues, “the development of curriculum requires multiple interpretations” (p. 174). So how can teachers integrate multiple interpretations into a department curriculum? As I pondered this question, I started thinking of board games which enable participants to have fun while still taking turns. This led to the invention of “The Curriculum Board Game.”

Detailed rules for playing “The Curriculum Board Game” follow on the next two pages. The rules are not inflexible; the department chair may change the rules to fit the needs of the department. The purpose of the game is to provide all teachers in an academic department with a voice in planning the curriculum. Teachers will be less likely to complain about a curriculum if they contribute to it instead of having it imposed on them. Another advantage is that teachers have a visual of the curriculum that is easy to manipulate, without a lot of writing items down and crossing them out as changes are made. Finally, there is an element of fun to the curriculum planning process that may not be present in a traditional discussion. Granted, “The Curriculum Board Game” will probably not be entertaining as most current popular board games. It may, however, provide some stress relief for teachers and lead to new ways of thinking about the curriculum.

Playing The Great Curriculum Board Game

*Number of players:* The number of teachers in an academic department. This activity is too large to be completed with the entire faculty, although each department is encouraged to share the results of the game with other departments and administrators.
Materials needed: Post-it notes, poster board (although a chalkboard, several sheets of paper taped together, or the floor may be substituted for poster board if necessary).

Before the game begins: Write each part of the curriculum on its own post-it note. For example, write “The Great Gatsby” on one post-it note, “research paper” on another, etc. This task should not be left to one person (unless it is a college student observer who wants to contribute to the process or a student assistant who is bored).

Rules of the game: Divide the poster board into four equal sections (one for each grade level). Arrange all the post-it notes on the poster board to reflect the existing curriculum. For example, since The Great Gatsby is currently part of the sophomore curriculum, place that particular post-it note in the space reserved for grade 10. After all of the post-it notes are arranged, game play begins.

1. When it is his/her turn, each teacher looks at the curriculum board and chooses one of the following options:
   a. Leave the curriculum board as is with no changes.
   b. Move a post-it note from one grade level to another. For example, a teacher can move The Great Gatsby from grade 10 to grade 11. A good reason must be provided for the change.
   c. Remove a post-it note from the curriculum board, thus eliminating it from the curriculum. Again, a good reason must be provided for the change.
   d. Write the name of a text on a blank post-it note and place it on the curriculum board, thus adding it to the curriculum. As always, a good reason must be provided for the change.
2. Each teacher will have a chance to interact with the curriculum board without interruptions or comments from other teachers. Discussion will take place after everyone has had a turn. The department chair has the right to limit the number of post-its moved or impose a time limit on the teachers for making changes.

3. After each teacher has had a turn, discussion takes place about the changes to the curriculum board. Do the changes make sense or are teachers pursuing individual agendas that are not in the best interest of the department? Additional changes may be made to the curriculum board, but this time teachers need to reach a consensus. Teachers may not like all of the changes, but can negotiate compromises.

4. The game ends when all of the teachers are reasonably content with the curriculum changes. All changes must be approved by the department chair. The department chair also has the right to make the final decision if two or more teachers cannot agree on a curriculum change.

5. The post-it notes, as arranged on the curriculum board after all of the changes, reflect the revised curriculum.

Who knows? Maybe my curriculum game will become the latest trend in education.
Curriculum Problems and Solutions

As schools change, it becomes critical for educators to continually reflect whether or not a school’s curriculum meets the needs of teachers and students. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) explain, “curriculum inquiry is a process in which teachers read and study curriculum materials in the same way that they would read and study potentially interesting texts” (p. 151). In order to implement curriculum change, teachers need to examine the current curriculum and determine the best ways to introduce new texts and modify existing elements of the curriculum. This is not an easy task. Wagner and Larson (1995) explain, “students learn because of the quality of interaction with the teacher and the challenges of the curriculum” (p. 53). With all the other issues on a teacher’s mind, including mandatory state testing, everyday interruptions, and interactions with
administrators, time slips away and frequently leaves little space for curriculum planning. It is essential for administrators to allow both time and space for teachers to discuss curriculum issues. Even if this does not happen, teachers can still discuss several key questions that will lead to curriculum reform. Each question has a theoretical foundation and a practical application.

Curriculum Challenge #1

Theoretical Foundation: Heifetz (1994) suggests, “to discern the larger patterns on the dance floor – to see who is dancing with whom, in what groups, in what location, and who is sitting out which kind of dance – we have to stop moving and get to the balcony” (p. 253). Teachers often need to step away from a situation in order to view the larger picture instead of just the small details.

Practical Application: Consider visiting a colleague’s classroom, not to evaluate, but instead to facilitate the exchange of ideas.

Curriculum Challenge #2

Theoretical Foundation: Starratt (1993) believes, “those aspiring to leadership need to go through an intense disenchantment with their institution, with their society, and with themselves” (p. 157). Some elements of the curriculum that worked before may not work now for various reasons.

Practical Application: What parts of the current curriculum are not working? Why? What is the best solution (move something to a different grade level, eliminate it entirely, etc.)?
Curriculum Challenge #3

Theoretical Foundation: Beane (1997) argues, “curriculum integration centers the curriculum on life itself rather than on the mastery of fragmented information within the boundaries of subject areas” (p. 18). Often, students receive a fragmented approach to learning due to distinctly separate subject areas.

Practical Application: What parts of the curriculum can be integrated with other departments? What is the best way to accomplish curriculum integration?

Curriculum Challenge #4

Theoretical Foundation: Beyer (1996) believes, “teaching is seen as a moral calling that necessitates alternative forms of pedagogy and curriculum. Novel approaches to evaluation, and reconceived forms of teacher preparation” (p. 10). Too often, teachers continue to teach the same thing year after year without questioning what they truly want to teach.

Practical Application: Design a curriculum “wish list.” What works of literature, writing assignments, and other activities would be exciting and fun to teach? How can existing activities be modified to make them more interesting for teachers and students?

Curriculum Challenge #5

Theoretical Foundation: Marshall, Sears, and Schubert (2000) argue, “today, the curriculum field finds itself stretched between global issues of culture, power, and identity and local issues of long division, HIV education, and evolution” (p. 222). Students often have popular culture on their minds when they attend classes.
**Practical Application:** What are the best ways to incorporate modern technology and media literacy into the curriculum?

**Completing the Challenges**

It is important that teachers use the curriculum challenges in whatever way best fits their school and department. The questions themselves may be discussed aloud during a faculty meeting, given to teachers for individual writing reflection, or both. Regardless of the method implemented, teachers need to have a voice in curriculum development. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, “the teacher is part of the curriculum and therefore part of the establishment of the goals in the first place and part of the ensuing achievement” (p. 29). Teachers will feel more ownership of the department curriculum if they become part of the planning process. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) continue, “administering the curriculum meant the narrative living out of a personal philosophy of education” (p. 196). In creating a curriculum that fits both teachers and students in a school, teachers provide opportunities for engaging and challenging educational experiences.

**Continuing the Challenges**

As much as I enjoyed curriculum redesign, I eventually ended my experience at Chaminade-Julienne. Since I am not a teacher there anymore, it becomes the challenge of the current teachers to continue creating the curriculum they desire in order to encourage and engage their students in writing opportunities. I still like to think I played a part in sharing new possibilities for writing, teaching, curriculum, and learning.
The End of the Road (for now)

By using the theoretical foundation of narrative inquiry and presenting my writing in multiple genres, I personalize my research. According to hooks (1994), “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). Miami University’s Ohio Writing Project, where I conducted my research, promotes the belief that writing teachers should also be writers in order to learn more about themselves and connect with their students’ struggles. Other educators offer criticism of this approach. Lensmire (2000) argues, “workshop advocates have consistently criticized the traditional, controlling, fault-finding writing teacher, and have promoted instead a supportive teacher who finds meaning and who shares the craft of writing with students” (p. 26). Indeed, I have met some excellent writing teachers who do not consider themselves writers. I discovered English teachers can learn from each other while disagreeing about issues such as writing at the same time students write.

For me, however, writing becomes essential for understanding my life. Cameron (1998) believes, “each day, each life, is a series of choices, and as we use the lens of writing to view our lives, we see our choices” (p. 94). Writing helps me become an active learner as well as an active teacher. I reflect on my personal and professional experiences to learn about myself and initiate change.

Critics such as Lensmire (2000) assert, “workshop advocates have drastically underestimated the sort of intellectual, moral/political and aesthetic influence and leadership actually required of writing teachers if they are to be responsible in their work with children” (pp. 26-27). I disagree with the assumption that writing workshop
advocates appear irresponsible and not critical enough of students and their writing. By participating in seminars such as the Ohio Writing Project, teachers learn how to critique their writing and the writing of other teachers. They learn how to respond critically but sensitively, in a manner that will make students want to write again instead of throwing away work in frustration. They also lead by example, modeling their writing and showing students that mistakes become part of the writing process.

Writing continues to help me cope with my experiences. Even though teachers may not admit it, their life stories frequently influence what happens in their classrooms. Beck (2001) discusses a branch of clinical psychology that involves narratives and explains, “narrative therapy teaches people to literally rewrite their life stories, so that they tell themselves the happy truth, instead of the miserable truth” (p. 96). I do not suggest that teachers and scholars should attempt to rewrite their experiences, nor am I using my dissertation as some kind of therapy. Instead, I argue that personal narratives have a place in scholarly research.

I agree with Gordeeva (1996) who writes of her husband’s untimely death, “I’d like to live my life over again backward. I’d like to live in a world where tomorrow would be yesterday, the day after tomorrow two days ago, and so on” (p. 2). Obviously, it is not possible to live my life backward; I move forward, with the hope my words will make a difference in my life and the lives of others. I confess I feel exactly like Quindlen (2004), who writes, “because here is the final thing about having your mother die: You never, ever get used to it. You want her back. Or at least I do” (p. 229). By admitting my feelings, I acknowledge this experience has forever changed me. Then I continue writing.
Epilogue

“What is the last sentence of your dissertation?” The audience member who asks the question waits for a response. The people attending my conference presentation have not read my dissertation, but my topic intrigues them. They have watched me perform a short tap dance (in reference to the fact I always have the option of becoming a tap dancing waitress at a coffee shop), perform part of an original song about writing a creative dissertation, and read excerpts of my writing.

So, they think, how does she plan to conclude such a creative endeavor?

When I read my piece about my mom’s organ donation, several people cry. One woman leaves the room. I later learn she is unable to complete her own presentation because she can’t stop crying. I feel responsible, although I couldn’t have known my presentation would touch her so deeply. I don’t know her; I don’t know if she endured a similar tragedy in her life. She disappears before I can talk to her.

I also receive numerous compliments. Several people tell me I have become an inspiration to them, that they will feel more comfortable taking risks with their dissertations since someone else has done it first. They thought there was only one way to write a dissertation; my presentation challenged them to rethink the dissertation format. They praise my courage.

I know now I have courage.

Courage in my professional life to face the critics who challenge my ideas.

Courage in my personal life to live without my mom.
It will be difficult to let go of this project because it has been part of my life for a lengthy amount of time and I love the writing process. I wonder how many scholars can say the same thing about their dissertations.

There reaches a time, a place, when you have to let go.

Every year, my elementary school held a balloon launch. Every year, I was the last kid in my class to let go of my balloon. Even though I wanted to keep it, I had to let it go or it would deflate. As difficult as it is to release my dissertation, I need to set it free so others can learn from my ideas. No matter what anyone else thinks, I know I have ideas worth sharing.

Fictional writing has a place in factual research. Fiction can highlight facts and add interest to the sharing of research experiences. As a writer, I wanted to keep returning to my dissertation to create new dilemmas for my characters. I also have fun reading my writing, too. I hope it is also interesting to other readers.

OWP is a valuable resource for teachers, if they choose to take the lessons learned back to their classrooms. The Ohio Writing Project provides support for teaching, writing, and innovative ideas. It allows teachers to meet colleagues from other schools and gives them a space to focus on personal writing. Most teachers feel inspired for the upcoming school year after participating in an OWP seminar.

OWP participation does not always equal teaching excellence. During my research journey, I met teachers who participated in OWP but disagreed with its philosophy. I also met teachers who had not participated in OWP but were excellent teachers. I found the best teaching relationships were ones where teachers shared innovative ideas with colleagues, regardless of whether or not they participated in OWP.
OWP encourages teachers to take risks in their writing, teaching, and personal lives. Even though I didn’t conduct any formal research during the lunch breaks, I did hear some interesting conversations. One teacher’s writing confidence translated into personal confidence when asking out a longtime crush after an OWP seminar. That teacher is now planning a wedding. Another teacher found the confidence to confront an administrator and was rewarded with teaching a new writing class. Such stories made me smile, but I wish I heard more of them. I also heard conversations among teachers who, even after OWP, still did not want to take risks because they were afraid of losing their jobs. This is a legitimate fear and it is not my place to judge, especially since I am currently not teaching high school. If no one challenges an existing problem, however, nothing will change.

OWP teachers I interviewed are wonderful role models for their students. Since the interviews, they have published their writing, won teaching awards, and taught innovative lessons to hundreds of students. Most of them plan to participate in OWP again this summer.

Writing can be healing. I made myself write about my life, my mom, my teaching, and my writing. I never intended for my dissertation to be a form of therapy, but often I felt better after tackling difficult subjects and writing about them.

Teachers can make their voices heard and initiate curriculum change. The English teachers at Chaminade-Julienne High School welcomed me back into their community, even though I was no longer a teacher there. They remain determined to create the best possible learning environment for their students, even if it means confronting tensions with the current curriculum and school day structure.
Teachers can learn from their past educational history. Reflecting on my three degrees from Miami University and how the curriculum of teacher education influenced me was a valuable learning experience.

Teachers need to have confidence in the future of education. If teachers share ideas and learn from each other, standardization does not have to overshadow creativity in English and other subjects.

Teachers should continue sharing their stories, both with each other and with their students. As soon as I finish my dissertation, I will learn of more stories. This work may be over, but stories continue. That is the nature of qualitative research.

I feel proud of my dissertation. My final project for my first graduate degree contains statistics, quantitative research, and no voice. I don’t even use the word “I”; I refer to myself as “the researcher” throughout the project. I am proud of the time I spent on it and the quality of my work, but it doesn’t reflect who I am as a person. My dissertation does. I provide my own spin on interpretive qualitative research and complete a project that means something to me.

Most of my doctoral student colleagues love critical theory. Sometimes I felt outnumbered during informal discussions about our dissertations. They told me they were impressed with my recent conference presentation and that my love for my research topic was obvious. That meant a lot to me, to hear my colleagues tell me they respect my work as much as I respect theirs. As my educational journey leads me beyond Miami University, it will be interesting to see how others react to my research. I may encounter criticism, but I feel ready to take a stand.
In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway, the novel’s narrator, forgets his own birthday because Gatsby’s world of festive parties has consumed his time. Fitzgerald (1925) describes Nick’s reflection that, “I was thirty. Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade” (p. 143). I will graduate fifteen days before my thirtieth birthday, but I don’t see the decade ahead as menacing. Instead, I see opportunities for more research, teaching, writing, and learning. I also see my dissertation becoming the first to win Best Original Screenplay at a major awards show (just wanted to see if you were still paying attention after almost 240 pages of reading).

When I started this doctoral journey almost three years ago, I had no idea what awaited me along the way, both good and bad. My dissertation will no longer consume my time; the next journey beckons. No matter what happens, it will be an interesting experience. I want to see what it brings and live that journey with as much heart and soul as I lived this one.

It is one hundred years from now, and Miami University continues to experience major construction projects. Renovation causes the librarians to move the books in King Library to a new location. When they reach the dissertations, they wipe the dust from most of the old ones and pause to look at one that is slightly less dusty. It has been studied by numerous doctoral students who want to know about a certain scholar, the one who was brave enough to write her teaching life in her dissertation. Curious to know how Dr. Jennifer Lynne Bird ended her epic saga, they flip to the last page before the references. A single sentence catches their attention.

This is who I am at this moment in time.
Dr. Bird, you’ve just written an innovative dissertation and defended it! What are you going to do now?

JLB: Go to Disneyworld?

Seriously, what is your next move? In fact, why did you agree to this interview? I thought you already wrote the last sentence in your dissertation.

JLB: “This is who I am at this moment in time.” That was my last sentence at that particular moment in time. This is another moment in time. I’ve experienced more stories since then.

Wait a minute. Your dissertation committee suggested you expand the epilogue with expository writing. This is an interview! Are you trying to sneak in another genre?

JLB: This is expository writing. I know. I taught it. Expository writing provides information, which is exactly what I’m doing.

Let’s talk format. That was an issue for you during your dissertation defense. Is research in conflict with fiction?

JLB: I don’t think so, despite the confusing answer I gave at the beginning of my defense. That was the former valedictorian voice in my head. Did I get the right answer? I thought I left her behind when I graduated high school, but she still surfaces every once in awhile. In this case, there is no right answer. It’s open to interpretation.

So what is your interpretation?

JLB: If the essence of the research is preserved, I can play around with the content in a creative way. But how much can I play around with it? I dealt with that tension when I wrote the dialogue among the OWP teachers. I thought I changed it as much as I could
have, but now I think I could have done more with it. The seven teachers I interviewed supported my project. It wasn’t like they were going to stab me with writing utensils if I changed a few words here and there. My doctoral program stresses the foundations of ethics, power and culture. As the researcher and writer, I had a lot of power to rewrite people’s stories. I faced the ethical dilemma of how far should I go in rewriting the stories. All of this occurred within the culture of my dual roles as a researcher and a writer. When I wrote that scene, I made a writing decision. If I were rewriting the same scene right now, maybe I would make a different decision. Maybe I wouldn’t. Now I can second guess myself, but it doesn’t do any good. I can’t repeat the past. Look what happened to Jay Gatsby.

*Since you brought up a fictional text, how do you feel about writing fiction?*

**JLB:** I’m better at it than I used to be. Sometimes I think that I think too much to write fiction. There are some writers that seem to dash off a novel a month. Some of these books sell a lot of copies, but I can’t see why. I read one of those so-called beach novels and kept thinking, “you have got to be kidding me.” There were numerous typos and the plot made no sense. Yet it ended up on the must-read list in several magazines. Go figure. I knew my writing was better than that.

*A lot of Jenna’s story was based on your own experiences.*

**JLB:** I was rereading the scene where Jenna’s mom died. I didn’t describe it very well, because that wasn’t what happened to my mom. She didn’t die that way. I include the actual description later, and it hits me so much harder than the fiction scene. Maybe I actually made the scene more impersonal by fictionalizing it, but that’s what I needed to do. It’s been almost a year and a half, and I still can’t write about my mom without
crying. In order to get my dissertation finished, I couldn’t relive that day whenever I opened the computer file. I had to go through eight months of therapy just so that moment wouldn’t be in front of me as soon as I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Other scenes, like the one where the hospital staff asked questions about which funeral home my family wanted, really happened but sound melodramatic when reading them within the context of the fiction. Later, I remember thinking, “if other people told me this story, I would think they made the entire thing up because it is so surreal.”

_So what are the differences between Jenny the author and Jenna the character?_

**JLB:** Does it matter? The reader knows from the end notes that the author doesn’t have a sister named Jillian or a boyfriend named Trevor. If the reader wonders if Jenny really likes hot chocolate and lemon muffins as much as Jenna does, it doesn’t make a difference as long as I have told an engaging story.

_And have you?_

**JLB:** I like to think so, but I’m biased. I’ll leave that decision up to the readers.

_Speaking of your readers, you trust them to pick up on nuances. You choose to be implicit instead of explicit in your writing. Can you elaborate?_

**JLB:** I’ll use the example of the peer group conferences that took place during the Ohio Writing Project seminar. In reality, I was in a peer group with three other people. Only one of the four signed a release form to be part of my research. The other two teachers did not want to be involved. Thanks to the legal minds of the university research office, I couldn’t use any direct comments from them in my dissertation without facing legal action against my academic department. The two teachers proceeded to marginalize the peer group process by leaving early most days to go to lunch with their friends. I don’t
think any of us in the group ever had a really good conference. Whose fault is that? Theirs for leaving? Mine for not being more critical of them? The instructors for putting this particular peer group together? Probably all of the above. To illustrate my point in the fiction, I give Cole the role of the two teachers that don’t take the peer group seriously, and Nancy the role of the other teacher in my group that wants to accomplish something. I can’t use her character pseudonym (Molly, Chris, Henriann, or Alyssa) without providing too many details which would reveal her identity I promised to keep secret. I add to the fictional scene by making Trevor concerned about what research he can actually use and Jenna feeling frustrated about her peer group, two thoughts that occupied my mind during the actual OWP peer group sessions. The reader ends the scene thinking that something went wrong with the peer group session and no one received a spectacular conference. That was my goal for the scene. I could write more explanations like this, but then it would defeat the purpose of ever writing the fiction.

So has OWP changed?

JLB: The week after I turned in my dissertation, I received a brochure for this summer’s classes. One seminar connects OWP to writing for standardized tests. I have a difficult time believing that seminar would have been offered several years ago. Numbers at OWP have declined in the last several years, and like any business, OWP needs to appeal to its consumers. Administrators and teachers have become concerned with the new Ohio Graduation Test and No Child Left Behind. Several veteran OWP participants have expressed distaste with the new direction of OWP, but could the National Writing Project and its affiliates, such as the Ohio Writing Project, survive without changing? I think the topic would be interesting for OWP teachers to discuss.
You certainly plan to initiate change. *How is your dissertation transformative?*

**JLB:** I want to provoke discussion. Why can’t a dissertation be something other than what most scholars seem to think it is? Why don’t more people use fiction in research? Who says you can’t use “I” and share personal narratives in a professional document? People may not agree with how I answer the questions in my dissertation, but I have started a conversation.

*You used your dissertation as a way to provide information as well as develop identity.*

**JLB:** I provide information, but also learned new insights about myself. That was one of the original missions of OWP five years ago when I took my first seminar. Connecting identity and information became integrated into my teaching style. In my dissertation, I explain how I took a writing risk because I didn’t want my students to see me as a hypocrite. I also took a writing risk for myself. I don’t think I’ve ever revealed as much personal information in a professional paper as I’ve done in my dissertation. When I tell people about my dissertation, I hear both praise and criticism. Whenever I feel upset about it, I have to remind myself that I chose this. Completing a quantitative study like I did for my first graduate degree would have been less risky, but less rewarding.

*You’ve told other people you had a wonderful committee and an outstanding dissertation writing experience. How do you take that beyond Miami?*

**JLB:** This question takes us back to the beginning. Now what? After my defense, I can think of some things I want to revisit in my dissertation. I will revisit the issues by writing articles, presenting at conferences, and sharing my ideas. Maybe I’ll start my own academic journal. It’s kind of scary, because now that I’ve taken a stand I need to live what I believe. It’s also very rewarding. I want to be an inspiration to other writers.
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