Zigzag

A Life of Reading and Writing, Teaching and Learning

Tom Romano
To Bill Strong

Emeritus Professor, Utah State University
Writer of intellect, grace, and insight
Friend and Kauaian companion for my words
Contents

Prolog You Won’t Want to Skip vii

Part 1: Growing Up, Taking Shape

1: My Father’s Voice 3
2: The Place 5
3: Neighbors 12
4: Home Office 20
5: Phone Call 24
6: Surrealism 26
7: Argument 30
8: Solace 33
9: The Visit 37
10: The Greatest Book 39
11: Church Teaching, Church Learning 42
12: The Danger of Countenance 49

Part 2: College

13: Wayward Beginning 61
14: Making the Grade 65
15: Exam 68
16: Enter Whitman 74
17: Milton 79
18: Coming to Teaching 82
19: Living Literature 90
Part 3: Teaching in High School

20: Moral Outrage 95
21: Over the Hump 101
22: Thriving 106
23: Zeal 112
24: Menagerie 117
25: Soaring 124
26: Making Plans 128

Part 4: UNH

27: Giants 135
28: Meltdown 144
29: Final Assignment 149

Part 5: Reentry

30: Reentry 157
31: Clearing the Way 163
32: Publication 168
33: The Way I’d Like to Teach 174
34: Of Whitman and Friend 177
35: Multigenre 180
36: Clear Decision 185
37: A Good Run Done 187

Part 6: UNH Reprise

38: Indiana Tumble 193
39: Digging In 195
40: Pure Pleasure 201

Epilog: Almost There 205

Works Cited 207

Gratitudes 211
sat outside a motel entrance on a sunny Saturday morning in Texarkana, awaiting my ride from an associate of the North Texas Writing Project. In the parking lot a multigenerational family unloaded its van. Adults and children milled about, talking and stretching, the father piling luggage onto a wheeled cart. The stack grew high and heavy. One of the children—a girl about seven—insisted on pushing the cart into the motel lobby. The father wasn’t inclined to let her. She made her case, he countered, they jousted, he relented. She took the cart's handle and pushed, leaning in, grunting—not a budge. Her father gave the cart a shove, and the girl was off, straining against the weight to keep the cart moving as it veered this way and that, she frantically adjusting her balance and positioning.

“Stop zigzagging!” her mother said.

Behind her, the grandmother called, “She doin’ the best she can.”

There’s my life, I thought, and jotted the bones of the incident in my journal.

I am not a natural-born teacher. I am not a writer of ease and facility. I’ve done a lot of zigzagging to get where I am: teacher of writing for thirty-seven years, writer of essays, sketches, book reviews, poems, and occasional books. Sometimes my writing and teaching work, and I gain publications and strong teaching evaluations. Sometimes they don’t work, and I get rejections and feelings of regret from poorly taught lessons. I have to rethink, replan, revise. Adjusting my balance and positioning is ongoing.
The scene in that motel parking lot represents two extreme views of teaching and learning. One values performance above all else: Standards must be met, period. Benchmarks must be set, every performance tested, measured, and judged. No zigzagging! The other view of learning values growth and development. Its watchword is approximation. Teachers who value approximation know that learners will be more accomplished tomorrow than they are today. Amid darkness, these teachers find light and use that light to illuminate possibility. They believe that if learners participate in good faith and keep an eye on the teetering load while moving toward the destination, they will accomplish things they can be proud of. They will be doin’ the best they can.

This memoir is grounded in experience and emotion. Specific people, times, places, and incidents combined to create indelible moments that have stayed with me for years. Reading and writing—those flip sides of the literacy coin—often rounded those indelible moments. My life as teacher and writer evolved from them. Sometimes I knew the meaning of an experience I wanted to render. Sometimes I didn’t. Only through writing did meaning come clear.

I want you to understand and maybe even experience my development as reader, writer, teacher, and learner. I hope you learn something, as I have. Sometimes, to my chagrin, that learning will be counterlessons to how I have proceeded. I’ve orchestrated incredible flub-ups that I hope you avoid. I’ve made rash decisions and gross miscalculations. I’ve often missed what should have been obvious. I hope, too, though, that you learn something directly from my experiences. Maybe my stories will move you to write your stories. That’s high achievement for a writing teacher. We would both benefit.
I’d learned a great deal from that first year of teaching and directing plays. I’d learned that the classroom is a social situation different from the beerjoint and the bowling alley and the dorm, where a certain degree of civility in speech and subject matter was necessary to getting on with the business of teaching and learning among students with different manners, sensibilities, and religious faiths. I’d learned that uttering certain words in the classroom could be explosive, the repercussions traveling through the student body and out into the community, often becoming unrecognizably transformed (e.g., William Faulkner was fucked up—if indeed my principal had been leveling with me and not offering me something so outrageous that I’d gladly reveal some other transgression).

The problem I had defining appropriateness in reading and writing for high school students came out of my own reading and writing. One of my personal goals was to read as many modern American novels as I could. I loved Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. I admired James Dickey’s *Deliverance*, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and a new fiction writer—Harry Crews. I embraced new journalists like Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, and Truman Capote. The characters those authors depicted often used slang and profanity. The authors wrote of topics that school shied away from: sex, war, racism, murder, drugs, social inequity.

I sought to write fiction and kept a journal in which I wrote about the life I had lived in my father’s bar and bowling alleys, the characters I’d met there, the experiences I’d had in high school. I tried to write the truth honestly and vividly. My limited, little world of experience
was valid. I wanted to follow Whitman’s dictum to sound my barbaric yawp, not to press my finger to my lips and keep silent about all that I knew of humanity. I wanted to keep learning about people, all people, not just those living proper lives with proper speech and proper experiences. That’s what the writers I admired did.

I asked my students to write honestly, too. They did a lot of narrative writing in those days, case studies and childhood remembrances, as Ken Macrorie described in Writing to Be Read (1975). I wanted students to write about what they knew just as the authors we read had done. I wanted my students to respect their subject matter, as Milton White had wanted us college students to do.

“Mr. Romano,” said one of my students, “does that mean we can write swears?”

“Well,” I began—talk about tricky territory—“in capturing a character’s speech, you might find you need to use slang or profanity. Be judicious in your own narrative voice, though, and keep it clean.” And yet I knew that literature was rife with profane narrative voices.

When I began to teach at Edgewood High School, I ran into the librarian, Ms. Comstock. In the library there were a lot of no’s: no loitering, no talking, no gum chewing, no checking out of controversial books unless you were eighteen or had a signed note from your parents. And just in case you intended to read any questionable book while in the library, Ms. Comstock kept such books in her glassed-in office on a separate bookshelf almost out of reach. Who decided if the book was questionable? She did. On the shelf were The Grapes of Wrath, The Catcher in the Rye, For Whom the Bell Tolls, The Bell Jar, and many more.

In spring of his senior year, in my Basic Skills class, Randy was miffed because Ms. Comstock would not permit him to check out The Catcher in the Rye. “I’ll be 18 in a couple weeks,” said Randy. It was one in the afternoon, and his five-o’clock shadow had already appeared.

My classroom copies of Catcher were checked out. I offered him Salinger’s Franny and Zooey.

He declined.

A couple weeks later, Randy sat in his usual seat by the classroom door, reading The Catcher in the Rye. He didn’t look happy.

I stopped by his desk. “You got the book.”
“Kinda.”
“Kinda?”
“Look.” He handed it to me. I leafed through. On each page, words and phrases were blackened with a permanent marker. Almost every page had at least one defacing—a bastard here, a goddam there, a Chris-sake every once in a while. In the part where Holden recounts his meeting with Sonny, the young prostitute, the page was blackened plenty.

“And you know what?” said Randy. “All that marking doesn’t do any good anyway.” He took the book from me, separated a page, and held it up to the light. I’ll be one phony bastard if the filthy words weren’t plainly visible!

“I’m eighteen,” said Randy. “I can vote. She still made me bring a note from home. And then I get this!”

Ms. Comstock had spent a lot of time going through every page of the novel, blacking out every word, every scene she deemed offensive, improprietous, licentious. I wondered if she had enjoyed this last reading of Holden’s quest to protect others from the bad things in life. What irony! Ms. Comstock and Holden had common purpose.

Her censorial zeal, I learned, had even greater reaches. Ms. Comstock sent me a note, announcing that the library had purchased a number of books about film. She thought I’d be interested. I was.

One book was a beautiful little thing, oblong in shape to accommodate the dozens of movie stills it used. The text was visually appealing and full of pertinent information about the development of film as an artistic medium. There were little surprises now and then. The authors had used the margin on the right side pages, for example, to demonstrate how the eye perceived motion out of a series of still pictures. A human figure—two inches high—appeared there. On the page behind it, the human figure appeared again in the exact location but in a slightly different position. This progression continued for thirty pages. When you flipped them, the human figure moved fluidly. It was a simple and dramatic demonstration of “persistence of vision,” that basic principal of the human eye that enables film to work.

The book presented a problem for Ms. Comstock, though. For the human figure, the authors had gone into the history of film and used an image from the nineteenth century, one of photographer Eadweard
Muybridge’s studies of motion: a series of photographs of a nude woman descending a stair and turning around. Ms. Comstock was intrepid. She fixed the nudity with her trusty marker. On every page she gave the unclad woman a matching black bra and miniskirt. Muybridge had reached for art. Ms. Comstock achieved risqué pop. The ensemble was actually quite sexy.

Ms. Comstock was good at passing on catalogs to faculty and urging us to order materials and media we could use in our classes. She sent me a catalog from Caedmon, a company that specialized in recordings of authors’ voices. There I ran across an LP titled “Hemingway Reading.” I was so excited. I had been a Hemingway devotee ever since a college professor had sent us to the stacks of the old Alumni Library to read two Hemingway short stories that had knocked me on the seat of my pants. In my American Literature class I taught “Soldier’s Home,” “The Battler,” and “Big Two-Hearted River.” We saw a superb documentary on Hemingway, narrated by Chet Huntley. During my master’s degree work, I had taken a Hemingway seminar and read just about everything he had published, save his journalism. Yet I had never heard his speaking voice. I told Ms. Comstock to order the record.

A couple weeks later, I was summoned by the superintendent. Ms. Comstock, he told me, deemed “Hemingway Reading” inappropriate for teenagers.

I was nonplussed.

“She says it’s pornographic.”

“Pornographic? I can’t believe it.”

“She doesn’t want the record in her library.”

“You mean the school library, not her library.”

“An obscene waste of taxpayers’ money,” were her words. She’s going to destroy the record.”

“Oh, not that,” I said. “I’ll buy it.”

I left the superintendent’s office and stopped by the treasurer’s desk, where I forked over the money for the record.

“I’ll call Ms. Comstock,” said the treasurer. “I’ll tell her you’ve paid for the record and will pick it up.”

On the way to my classroom, I stopped by the library to retrieve “Hemingway Reading.”
Ms. Comstock was all business. She retrieved the record from its holding cell on the banned bookshelf in her office. She placed it in a brown paper bag.

“I’m sorry about this, Ms. Comstock. I had no idea.”

She raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips, and handed me the bag.

That evening after supper, after reading my daughter a picture book and putting her to bed, I placed “Hemingway Reading” on the turntable and sat down with a glass of wine. This would be pleasure, plus I was curious to learn what had offended Ms. Comstock. In the liner notes on the album I read that Hemingway had been wary of being recorded. I understood why. The author of the burly physique, of the fiction about bullfighting and boxing, fishing and war, of the “Hemingway Code Hero,” had a voice squeaky as a parakeet’s. I wasn’t sure I wanted students to hear it either. I replaced disappointment with sweet irony and listened for what had offended Ms. Comstock.

Some minutes later my stereo speakers squawked with voiceless, bumping static. This was no parakeet; it was a Pterodactyl. I leapt from my chair, spilling wine, and rushed to the turntable. The needle slid wildly across the record. I lifted the LP off the spindle and brought it over to the light.

What the hell?! The fourth track on the LP was slick as an ice-covered pond. My mouth hung open. Not only did Ms. Comstock possess a black permanent marker. She also owned a single-edged razor blade. In her battle against impurity, she had scraped off every ridge and groove of track four of “Hemingway Reading.” On the flip side, two more tracks had been scraped clean. At last, what Hemingway most feared had happened: the ol’ misogynist had been emasculated by a woman.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.