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Re-Starting a Writing Life: Building a Home without a Bulldozer

Emily Isaacs

When they bulldozed my house straight to the ground, making room for a humongous house with just two bedrooms but three garages, a greenhouse, and who knows what else, I thought it was sort of funny. People said that it would be sad to lose my childhood home, that it would be traumatic. But I don't like being sentimental; without sadness I eagerly told the story of my childhood home being bulldozed, carted away, and piled up in a landfill to anyone who would listen. This was a pretty good "guess what my mother told me" tale to tell. I really didn't feel I had lost a home.

Perhaps that's because I come from practical people and therefore knew it was a good and practical thing that the house was gone. It had been hard to sell the house I grew up in, a 1950 pre-fab contemporary that bore the scars of middle-class parents raising four children—cracked linoleum and wood-paneling scarred by four children practicing forming letters and numbers in the soft wood compound. My parents had bought the house because they liked it, but also because it offered my father an easy commute to Boston and was located in this town with, as they say, "good" schools. As real estate values rose, this middle-class home gradually became part of a town with million-dollar homes and a bizarre mix of the very oldest of old money and the very newest of new money. So this contemporary that was no longer contemporary wasn't very attractive to prospective buyers. All this is to say that my mother was understandably worried about selling the house, and so I was worried too. When the house finally sold, I was relieved. It was time my parents got out, not only because they needed to and had a home in the country to move to, in a more "regular" town, if I dare use that term, but because they, and by extension, I, didn't fit in anymore.

And so then when I received the call from my mother that the house had been bulldozed, it seemed fitting: my parents didn't fit in that town anymore and it wasn't my hometown anymore either.
I suspected my jocularity would fade when I actually went to where the house had been. But still I didn’t cry, as I thought I might have. Instead, I walked around the lot, trying to remember where my room had been, trying to explain to my companion what it had looked like. I kept looking for keepsakes, but the construction crew had been neat and efficient. In the backyard I found my brother’s and my old basketball, which I thought about taking and perhaps should have, but it was flat and worn. The bocci ball I found was cracked, and the only real evidence of the destruction—the crumpled up remains of my bathtub—couldn’t be easily lifted from the site. So I took pictures and drove away, a week later ending up in my apartment in New Jersey where I’d moved ten months earlier to take my first full-time teaching position.

This all brings me to this strange but familiar depression I’m in. It’s not a special depression, but one I think many academics experience during summer “vacation.” Finally, you’re not exhausted, you’re not racing through papers, class preparations, and meetings. You have your own time. “I can’t wait to get to do my own work,” we all say to each other as we plod through final papers. When nonacademic friends and family members ask us how our vacations are going, we are defensive: “It’s not vacation! I’m writing!” I’m sure this proclamation is true for many people, but for me, much of vacation is neither vacation nor writing. It’s lying down and thinking. For hours and hours that somehow add up to days and then weeks and finally months—when suddenly it’s August and facing the failure of no accomplishment, I throw myself back into the grind. But I’m not there yet: it’s still mid-summer and I’m still trying, sort of. I’m not always lying down and thinking. Sometimes when I get the guts to face the computer I find myself in the computer’s solitaire game, hating the fact that this particular game records how many total hours I’ve been in the program since the day I bought my machine. I’m at 117 hours—and counting.

What I have been trying to write is not so very hard to write. It’s really a rewrite. Like most recent doctorates, I have been advised to take a chapter from my dissertation and turn it into an article. It’s not that as I re-read this part of my dissertation that I hate it—no, it seems quite fine, even well written. But those horrible words “so what?” keep going through my head. I can’t get past the fear (or conviction, perhaps) that my article, which is intended to help people teach writing better, is really pretty useless. I imagine my piece adding (at best) to the great pile of mediocre articles that people read and nod at, but which don’t really affect anybody’s teaching at all. It seems so useless, and it’s embarrassing to knowingly participate in uselessness. This is my first reaction,
and on the face of it, quite a good enough reason not to write. But I think my reason for not writing is deeper, less about the objective value of essays on teaching and more about me and that boring old problem of self-doubt.

As I lie in my bed, self-absorption occasionally gives way to some thoughts about my students who can’t write. They too are wondering, who would want to read what I write? What good does it do? How is what I write going to possibly be of interest to anyone else? I have noticed that a sizable minority of my students are, like me, in tears over not writing. They want to be “good girls and boys” and write but don’t seem to be able to, despite their desperate desires to be good and do their work. I see those students as lacking a sense of what Peter Elbow might call voice, what David Bartholomae might call a sense of entitlement, what lots of teachers call self-confidence, and what I think I want to call a sense of belonging, a sense of having a home.

What do I mean by having a home?

What I’m discovering is that writing requires a sense of belonging, a sense that we come from somewhere, that we belong somewhere. I’m trying to get at something larger than “audience.” Compositionists have been talking about audience for years—how important it is for a writer to have an audience who cares, who is interested. When I was writing my dissertation (at those best stages) I could write because I had a legitimate place from which I could write; I wrote as an expert of sorts. I was always greatly comforted by the fact that I did case-study research—in this kind of research you are assured of having some kind of exclusive expertise. No one else knew the participants like I did, had the volumes of interview transcripts and observation notes that I had. There wasn’t another person who could write what I could write—the responsibility and “right” to write about these teachers lay exclusively in my hands. I had, as Tillie Olsen, Faulkner, and others have said, my own very clearly defined and visible little postage stamp. My research data was my locale, my own world.

Somehow, the crisis I’m in now must have to do with not having my own postage stamp, my own turf that I can claim as exclusively mine. I can’t write my piece now because there’s no evidence that I am uniquely qualified to write it. My mind is filled not with what I have to say, but with flashes of other compositionists who have already said what I have to say and have said it better. Since I have never had and probably never will acquire that awesome, marvelous yet repulsive sense of self-confidence that drives some people to write and send off their work to editors without a backward glance (much less a 10-week sojourn on their bed “thinking”), I have had to develop other strategies.

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The year I finished my dissertation I thought I had developed these strategies; lying in bed this summer makes me wonder.

When I'm sitting with those students of mine who are filled with conviction that they have nothing to say, I am at my empathetic best. I lean toward them, relying on my ability to make people feel valued, on my ability to speak from my heart about my genuine desire to hear what they have to say and to get their unique perspective. It is those students with downcast looks, tearful eyes, and constant apologies that they are wasting my time who strike me deepest. It is their words that I am really hungry to read. I am thinking of Jonai, who struggled so hard to write more than two pages. I praised her a lot—in her abbreviated way she was so analytical, so insightful. She was sharp, and her classmates knew it. When we talked about her writing, students were quick to speak about what they liked, about what they learned, about what they thought "worked" in her papers. So we did the right thing: we complimented her, we took her writing troubles seriously. And at the end of the semester she got an A. Yet despite all this, I am getting this horrible thought that when Jonai enrolls in freshmen composition next semester she will feel no more confident, no more able. She will struggle with the same sense of impossibility. She will once again have no home to write from, to write to.

I know this because, like so many basic writing teachers, I identify with Jonai. Like Jonai, I am smart, perceptive, and have received an enormous amount of support. My best teachers—and I really had quite a few of them—did what I do: they held my hand, they pushed, they praised, they believed in me, they liked me, and they liked my writing. Of all this I am sure. The last three years were particularly wonderful for me. I had a dissertation advisor who made my classmates envious of me and to whom I am so grateful. She was committed to my writing, to my ideas, and to me to such an extent that I knew she was essentially there with me when I was writing. I knew she was the receptive audience for me. In many ways, she was the home from which and to which I was writing. Actually, it's not quite right to place it all in and on her. My writing space in my room on Graves Avenue was physically situated in a small space, but I realize now that it was a place crowded with people who believed in me. There were my nonacademic friends and family members who were impressed that I was writing a dissertation and who were sure I would finish; there were my director and another faculty reader who had become invested in seeing me through to the end; and then there were the case-study participants. Those three women sat in there too—oddly, I didn't feel pressured by them to "say the right thing" or to come to any particular analysis. The versions of
themselves that were in my home writing with me only sort of wanted
to read what I had written about them, but mostly they were curious
about my writing because they were curious about me, my brain, my
thinking, and what kinds of things I had to say.

What’s so terribly upsetting now is that as soon as I left my old
home on Graves Avenue I found myself back where I started. It seems
terrribly cruel and unfortunate that Jonai and I and so many others have
not gotten sustenance from all that hard work and all that constructive
giving and support from others. I’m afraid that the homes we are given
by our teachers and others that support and love us are only temporary.

What I have to do is find a home, build a home. I think I have to give
up the notion that it will ever be a completely solid home to write both
from and to and somehow accept that my life as a writer will always
involve building new homes filled with people who enable me to write.
I have to accept that as my childhood home was bulldozed; so are all our
homes bulldozed, eradicated, no longer there to support us. This view
of writing runs counter to most of what I have been brought up to
believe—that learning is cumulative, that practice makes perfect, that
every experience is a building block. I teach from the building block
theory; I provide students with the building blocks of writing—
rewriting to find what you have to say, drafting, rewriting to develop
ideas, and so on—and then after they’ve written five essays I send them
off saying they’ll be able to do this again and again whenever they face
a writing task.

I very much hate the realization that I, we, have to start from the
beginning again and again. So no wonder I am depressed. I’ve not only
lost the ability to write, but I’ve lost a theory I’ve been invested in my
whole learning and teaching life. I was brought up to believe in building
blocks. First you learn to add, then you learn to subtract, multiply,
divide, and so on. I like the building blocks theory. But I don’t think I
believe it anymore, or at least not the way I once did. The old writing
home is bulldozed and all I seem to have now is a few lousy tools to
rebuild a home from which to write. That’s a far cry from being able to
take my home with me.

So what now? How can realizing that writers always have to re-
build a home help my students or me? Do I tell my students that they
will always have to start again at ground zero? Do I pretend that this
humbling is ennobling? That this humbling, or should I say devastating
sense of having no home to write from, connects all writers, puts us in
a common home of sorts? This seems farfetched and not at
all comforting.
And then the obvious hits me: I have written something. I have written an essay! Perhaps not the essay I thought I should write—as my students think they should write an essay reflecting on their educational experiences because this is the topic that I’ve assigned—but it is an essay. I started writing this because I was desperate to end the lying on my bed, playing computer solitaire, and hating myself. So I’m left with one little building block, I guess: that we have to write the essay that is inside us at the moment. Ironically, despite all that I’ve learned in graduate school and from composition texts, the only building block I really have to take with me, to my own writing and to my classrooms, is what I learned in my first graduate class in composition, the principle and practice of freewriting.

Forgive me, please: had I realized that I was writing an ode to freewriting surely I would have stayed in my bed. Freewriting seems so egocentric, inconsequential, so very far from the hard work of writing. It’s not what my people in that old bulldozed house taught me about doing the good and practical thing. The good and practical thing I learned from them is to plan—to identify a problem in the field, build an argument, and use the research you’ve already done to create a solid argument that can speak to others. I now want to give up not just that old childhood home that I know doesn’t fit me anymore, but also some of that ideology and training in what is good and practical. It’s still somewhat loathsome to type out the words, but I’ll do it: freewriting is a good and practical thing to do because with freewriting we find and build our writing homes. In using freewriting to find what is inside of us, we also actually find others to write to and from. In writing this essay I didn’t have the community that was with me in my home on Graves Avenue, but I found Jonai and the other student writers and colleagues I’ve seen struggling with writing. This other community provides me with another set of people to interact silently with, in my mind, in my home. I am able to write, then, because they provide for me both an audience to write to and a place for me to write from.

Emily Isaacs teaches at Montclair State University. She thanks Sharon Lewis and Bob Whitney, her then-new colleagues, for telling her they wanted to read an essay about her being bulldozed.